

The Bear Effect



Photo of Bear's Belly by Edward S. Curtis in *The North American Indian*, 1907–30, Vol. 5, Plate 150.

The photograph opposite, of an Aboriginal man named Bear's Belly, was taken in 1908 by the American photographer Edward S. Curtis, who had set out to photograph "the old time Indian, his dress, his ceremonies, his life and manners." Curtis captured more than twenty thousand images between 1907 and 1930 for a project he called *The North American Indian*, a huge photographic study of North American First Nations people, who, he wrote in the introduction, "are rapidly losing the traces of their aboriginal character and who are destined ultimately to become assimilated with the 'superior race'."

I remembered this image of Bear's Belly when I came across the snapshot on this page, among some old papers in my wife's childhood home in Zary, Poland. The photo was taken in about 1958 during a national holiday, by a Mr. Dylinski, a professional photographer who in the 1950s and '60s took hundreds of similar pictures and sold them as souvenirs to people attending holiday celebrations and other events. One of his props was the bear costume, which was made of sheepskin. The little girl in the photograph—my wife's sister, Eva—was five years old. In the photo her body is tense and her face apprehensive. Eva tells me that she was very anxious because the man in the bear costume didn't say a word or make any human sound.

Bear's Belly was an Arikara man who lived in what we now know as North Dakota. In the photo he is wrapped in the skin of a bear that he killed, a requirement of membership in the medicine fraternity he had joined. Before killing the bear, he said to it, "I came looking for you to be my friend, to be with me always." The scars on his chest are the product of a successful vision quest; he holds the viewer's eyes by looking directly into the lens of the camera. A photographic portrait, as the writer David Beers once observed, is the trace element of a transaction made between two people of un-



Eva and the Bear in Zary, Poland. Photo by Mr. Dylinski, circa 1958.

equal power. From this perspective, I find it remarkable that Edward Curtis, a member of the "superior race" who set out to capture Bear Belly's image before "the last opportunity for study of the living tribes shall have passed with the Indians themselves," so perfectly preserved the powerful presence of Bear's Belly in the picture. Unlike the man in the sheepskin bear costume, Bear's Belly is completely visible, entirely there.

—Christopher Grabowski

Christopher Grabowski's award-winning photographs have been exhibited in Canada, Poland, Holland and Germany. His photos and articles have been published in many periodicals and anthologies in North America and Europe. See more at mediumlight.com and at geist.com.