

*Obituaries*

FRANK THOMAS SIEBERT, JR.

'I'd like to be free; free from shopping, free from eating, free from cooking, free from nuisances and people calling you on the phone!'<sup>1</sup> Frank Siebert wanted to be free from the aggravations of daily life in order to pursue his study of the Penobscot Indians' language and culture, and by ignoring such mundane concerns Siebert achieved great things.

Eagle Scout, Phi Beta Kappa, anthropological linguist, bibliolater, pathologist, Guggenheim Fellow, libertarian; each term suggests aspects of the nature and character of Frank Siebert that existed within him in uneasy alliance. They combined to make him an extraordinarily interesting person. His contributions to learning and the quality of his book collection are major achievements.

Frank was born in Louisville, Kentucky, on April 2, 1912, to Frank T. Siebert, Sr., and his wife Lillie Hamel. Frank Junior's father was an inspector of locomotives for the Bureau of Locomotive Safety of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and his mother was a canny investor in stocks and bonds. In 1917 the Siebert family moved to Philadelphia and then to Merion Station, where Frank grew up. In 1934 he graduated with high honors in chemistry from Haverford College and, from Haverford, went on to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, obtaining his M.D. in 1938. Internship, residencies, and appointments, chiefly in Pennsylvania, took him to a number of hospitals until 1957; when he accepted the joint position of staff pathologist at hospitals located in Bellows Falls and in Brattleboro, Vermont, with a concurrent assignment as a Windham County regional medical examiner. Married in 1956 to Marion Paterson of Pittsburgh, their union produced two Vermont daughters, Kathleen L. Davis and Stephanie M. Finger. In 1964, his life in disarray, Siebert quit

1. Portland, *Maine Sunday Telegram*, March 31, 1996, p. 1A.

his Vermont jobs and fled to Philadelphia, taking his books and research notes with him but little else other than marital, legal, and financial troubles. After four quite desperate years, during which time his automobile (where he kept his belongings) was broken into, and he lost, among other rare books, John Eliot's *Indian Grammar Begun* (London, 1666), as well as some of his linguistic research materials. While a refugee in Philadelphia Siebert established a close relationship with Edwin Wolf of the Library Company of Philadelphia; finally, in June 1968, Siebert moved to Old Town, Maine, the center of the Penobscot Nation, where he lived and worked for the remainder of his life. From time to time he travelled to Philadelphia, with a stop in Worcester, to pursue trails of research. He died on January 22, 1998, in a Bangor hospital.<sup>2</sup>

As an adolescent Siebert became interested in the history and culture of the Delaware Indian tribe, whose language was of the Algonquian family. In the summer of 1931 he visited Algonquian-speaking individuals living in southern Ontario. This was the first of many summers during which, on family vacations, Frank searched out speakers of their native languages in order to capture fast-disappearing vocabularies, grammatical, and phonetic usages. These travels took him to Massachusetts, Long Island, Wisconsin, and Maine, where in 1932 for the first time he visited the Penobscot people in Old Town. Even earlier, however, Frank had begun collecting dictionaries and other reference works on native-American languages, another lifelong mission that was inextricably linked to his research. His first such purchase was made in 1928 for 25¢: Wilberforce Eames's 1904 edition of John Eliot's *Logic Primer*, which interlineated Massachusetts and English texts. Always short of money, when still an intern in 1939 he sold his blood to raise \$6.50 for a copy of the second edition of *Delaware*

2. For extended memoirs, assessments, and bibliographies of Siebert's work, see Ives Goddard, 'Frank T. Siebert, Jr. (1912-1999),' *Anthropological Linguistics*, 40, no. 3 (1998): 481-98; and 'Special Issue in Honor of Dr. Frank T. Siebert, Jr.,' *Maine History*, 37, no. 3 (Winter 1998): [69]-158.

*Indian and English Spelling Book*, compiled by David Zeisberg (Philadelphia, 1806). By 1934 Siebert had joined the Linguistic Society of America, and, although fully engaged in medical studies (1934-39), he managed to attend classes and lectures on linguistics at Yale, Penn, and Columbia. Also, Siebert contributed a number of reviews and notes to learned journals and in 1941 presented a paper in which he clarified a complex Proto-Algonquian linguistic construction that had been proposed some years earlier by the established scholar, Leonard Bloomfield. During the years 1943 through 1952, Siebert did field work among the Catawbas in South Carolina that resulted in another early and important paper, 'Linguistic Classification of Catawba.' During the thirties and forties, he was active on a number of fronts: a member of the Group for American Indian Linguistics of the Linguistic Society of America, a writer of papers on the Penobscot language, and a field worker in the extinct Massachusetts and Virginia (Powhatan) Algonquian languages, as well as the languages of the Arapahos, Micmacs, and several other native American groups.

Siebert did no field work from 1952 until 1962, when he went to Tama, Iowa, to collect Fox vocabulary. In 1963 he returned for the first time since 1941 to Old Town to work with his colleague, Andrew Dana, an old Penobscot speaker. But he had not been idle in the interim; in 1964 he was a participant of the select Conference on Algonquian Linguistics held at the National Museum of Canada. His publications proceeded apace, culminating in 'The Original Home of the Proto-Algonquian People' issued in 1967. This paper proceeded from Siebert's intense use of printed antiquarian works (many drawn from his own library) with his analysis of Algonquian terminology for flora and fauna, whereby he attempted to locate the people's place or origin.

From 1968 until his death his energies were absorbed in his work on his Penobscot dictionary, he alone—like another genius, Wilberforce Eames—being the last master of an indigenous American language of which no native speakers remain. A preliminary copy of his dictionary and grammar, a manuscript of 500

pages, was nearly ready in 1984, but Siebert could not let it go and it remains unpublished. The cost of preparation (and presumably Siebert's own expenses) of Siebert's dictionary was borne by a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation during 1969-70 and a series of grants from the National Science Foundation to the Penobscot Nation between 1979 and 1988. Other fruits of Siebert's work had resulted in an edition of a group of Penobscot legends, prepared with the assistance of Richard Garrett and Martha Young. A first volume will be published by the American Philological Society and will be followed by a second volume containing Penobscot legends with recorded song accompaniments. Siebert's achievements in preserving portions of indigenous American languages, and in the cases of Penobscot (or Eastern Abenaki) and Catawba much more, are remarkable and due in large measure to his fiercely independent mind, his prodigious and exacting memory, and to his extraordinary commitment to his obsession. Ives Goddard of the Smithsonian Institution described Frank Siebert as 'clearly the most brilliant and most competent avocational linguist working on native American languages that there has ever been, hands down.' Prof. Karl V. Teeter of Harvard, however, deleted the word 'avocational' from Goddard's assessment and wrote that Frank was '*the* leading expert on [Penobscot and Algonquian] languages, the dean of Algonquian linguistics.'

At AAS, Frank Siebert was known not so much for linguistic interests, but for his passion as a collector of materials on the American frontier. The record begins with a letter from Siebert to Clarence Brigham of May 1952, in which Frank alludes to a visit to the Society in the summer of 1951. He then goes on to report that he has just obtained a 'humdinger,' Thomas Church's *Entertaining Passages relating to Philip's War* (Boston, 1716), a presentation copy in 'beautiful,' original condition. He proudly informed Brigham that he paid less than \$2,060, the price that this very same copy had brought at the Herman LeRoy Edgar sale in 1920. His letters to the Society were full of bibliographical

queries to us or were responses to our own inquiries for information. He wrote long letters (some of them six, single-spaced, typewritten pages) that included dark observations on American politics and taxation, heartfelt complaints about the ever-rising prices of rare books due to the ignorance of book collectors and to the perfidy of booksellers (with the exception of a few stalwarts, including his competitor, Thomas W. Streeter, or his friend Ernest Wessen of The Midland Rare Book Co.). In 1955 he asked Brigham for help in determining the place of publication of an 1826 frontier narrative, William Biggs's *Narrative . . . while he was a prisoner with the Kickapoo Indians*. Was it printed in Edwardsville or in Belleville, Illinois? Did a notice of it appear in the *Belleville Western News*? In 1971 in response to our news that we had obtained for \$125 the third-known copy of King's *Dab-ko-tah Spelling Book* (Pittsburgh, 1839), he said he knew from which bookseller we had purchased it (Peggy Christian in Los Angeles); he declared it a bargain, but reported that his copy came from Wessen for only \$75. A 1974 letter from him was written by hand, he declaring that 'my typewriter needs a new ribbon' and they continued handwritten until the final one arrived dated November 14, 1988. (Perhaps he never got to the store to buy another.) His letter was addressed to Doris O'Keefe, our rare-book cataloguer. She had written Frank for information on the place of publication of William Biggs's *Narrative*. We had obtained the fourth-known copy of it, a book that Frank prized so highly and that had figured in one of his first letters to AAS. In addition to responding to the query in full with bibliographical references concluding with his own opinion, Frank wanted to know how much we had paid for it; he guessed \$10,000 to \$15,000 (it was \$6,200), and he told us he had paid \$1,000 for his in 1955.

Siebert's research collection was exceptionally fine in content and in condition. Not confined to printed materials alone, it numbered about 1,500 items that covered the northern North American continent and included many genres. Frank owned the holograph journal of a soldier in General Edward Braddock's ill-

fated expedition against Fort Duquesne, as well as other military journals of like interest. Manuscript deeds for Indian lands and other original sources formed part of his holdings, as did a 1786 letter from George Washington concerning the study of Indian languages. Among the printed works were two editions of John Eliot's Indian Bible, as well as Roger Williams's *Key into the Languages of America* (1643), plus 220 other titles listed in Pilling's bibliographies of American Indian languages, twenty-seven Jesuit Relations bound in original vellum, seven Eliot Indian tracts, a set of the 1710 mezzotint engravings of 'the Four Indian Kings,' one of the finest copies known in original printed boards of Lewis and Clark imprints from far-Western mission presses, 110 titles listed by R. W. G. Vail in *The Voice of the Old Frontier*. The list goes on—Pownall, Maxmilian, McKenney and Hall, Catlin (including an original oil painting), Warre, Lewis; captivity narratives of John Norton, the Flemings, Knight and Slover, Mrs. Horne, Mary Kinnan, etc., etc. The collection was sold at Sotheby's in New York in May 1999. As expected, Siebert's sale caused as big a stir as did Tom Streeter's in 1966–69, for it rivalled Streeter's collection in quality, if not in numbers.

The Society had enough sense, finally, to elect Frank Siebert to membership at the April 1986 meeting. He responded by saying he was pleased and honored by it. On our part, we were fortunate to have had Dr. Frank T. Siebert, Jr., as a colleague and member of the American Antiquarian Society. Individuals like Frank Siebert are very few and far between.

Marcus A. McCorison

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