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Frank Speck's Office

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EDMUND S. CARPENTER

FRANK SPECK'S OFFICE

Edmund S. Carpenter studied anthropology under Frank Speck at the University of Pennsylvania and taught at the University of Toronto, the University of California at Santa Cruz, the New School for Social Research, and other institutions. An internationally recognized expert on tribal art, his numerous publications include OH, WHAT A BLOW THAT PHANTOM GAVE ME!, ESKIMO REALITIES, THEY BECAME WHAT THEY BEHELD, and the 12-volume MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL SYMBOLISM IN ANCIENT AND TRIBAL ART. He remembers Frank Siebert at Penn with the regulars in Frank Speck's office.

Frank Siebert was ahead of me at Penn. We met only briefly. But the scene there was so unique, so truly unforgettable, I believe I can write about it accurately, though these events occurred nearly sixty years ago.

Everything centered around Frank Speck's office, if "office" is the right word. Originally built as a chapel, with deep, Gothic windows and an arched ceiling, it later became a meeting hall for some literary group. Speck converted it into an eighteenth-century naturalist's cabinet, complete with live specimens. Its door served as a target for testing Indian crossbows. Darts protruded through splintered panels. Visitors opened that door with caution. A magnificent research library lined three walls, floor to ceiling, with movable ladder. Books, books, books, some rare,

all primary. Many had broken backs. All had paper tabs sticking out. Meeting-house benches flanked a central seminar table. Speck and a young instructor, Heinz Wieschoff, sat at desks. Speck's was cluttered, Wieschoff's clean. Indian specimens filled corners, covered walls, chairs. Snakes and turtles sunned themselves in glass cages. On one occasion, briefly, a white fox, uncaged, unfriendly, hid behind a leaking radiator. Students, friends, colleagues, Indian delegations, visiting scholars, assembled there daily. Many ate there.

Speck enjoyed weekends with ferns & reptiles in New Jersey swamps. He asked Frank Siebert, then in his last medical year, to teach his Saturday morning class on linguistics. Among the four students was Claude Schaeffer, who later contributed much to Plains ethnology. Loren Eiseley was then finishing his doctorate. Loren brooded much of the time. His rugged handsomeness, his tales of frontier exploits (none of which I believed), concealed tight wiring. I collected his poetry as it appeared in *The Prairie Schooner* and elsewhere.

On one occasion, on a trip back from the Nanticoke in two cars, the Penn anthropologists agreed to meet in a Dover restaurant. One car was delayed. The first group decided not to wait. Vladimir Fewkes scribbled a note: "We have the head. Do you have the body? Meet at the rendezvous." He made the waitress promise not to read it. When the second group arrived, they were handcuffed, jailed and detained until the next morning when the father of one of them, a Philadelphia detective, explained.

Wieschoff found Speck's humor puzzling. In Germany, he'd been Leo Frobenius' assistant, with a promising career. When his wife and children refused to leave Nazi Germany, he came to America alone, assisted by funds Speck obtained from Robert Riggs, the illustrator. I could go on: stories, people, field trips. Humor concealed seriousness, including an all-consuming passion for history or nature or language, sometimes all three. A grand scene, a lovely scene. I think of myself as blessed to have known it. I suspect Frank Siebert and I were drawn to that office for roughly the same reasons.