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# Chronicles of Dr. Frank T. Siebert Jr .

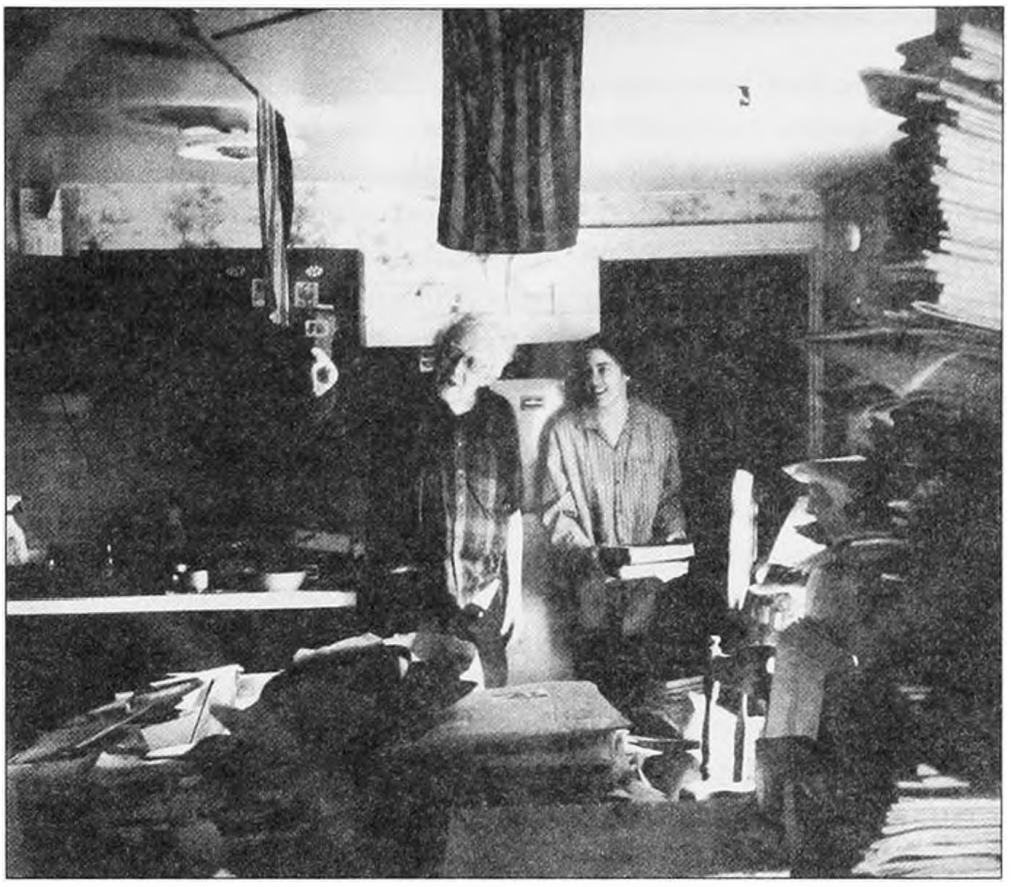
Martha Young

*MARTHA YOUNG*

# CHRONICLES OF DR. FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.

*Martha Young, who has written twenty-two grant applications in the last ten years for educational, research, and community projects, lives in Wellington, Maine, with her husband, Richard Garrett, and, since 1995, has been Frank Siebert's research assistant. She wrote the following account of Frank and her relationship with him. This is followed by a Siebert bibliography that she and Frank compiled together.*

It was with some trepidation that I accompanied my husband, Richard Garrett, to meet Dr. Frank T. Siebert. Neither Richard nor I knew much about Dr. Siebert, except that he wrote a Penobscot Dictionary and we needed his advice. Others led me to believe that this cantankerous old man would be difficult, if not impossible, to work with. My first meeting at Dr. Siebert's home revealed an elderly man "buried in paper" and frustrated with the inevitable societal changes. He was not someone to fear. I found a brilliant man whose life's work filled every nook and cranny. Manuscripts and papers from other linguists were waiting to be edited; files bulged with letters, notes, and important works; medical slides spilled out of boxes; and a mass of



Frank Siebert, Martha Young, and the "Leaning Tower of Siebert." Courtesy Richard Garrett.

periodicals reached for the ceiling. (The latter, referred to as the "Leaning Tower of Siebert," did not fare as well as its Italian counterpart.) When asked about his Penobscot research, Frank produced a stack of composition books. As impressive as this was, it was his keen memory and attention to detail that convinced me of the value of our partnership.

For nearly four years we have assisted Frank in the organization and presentation of his work. He graciously welcomed us into his home, where we have worked steadily. He has become my comrade in our quest to preserve and disseminate his Native American research. A great reward for me has been the historical lessons and other insights that come with Frank as a mentor.

Frank has encountered many distinguished anthropologists, linguists, and ethnohistorians. On July 5, 1935 Frank looked up Leonard Bloomfield in the Chicago phone book, called him, and stopped by his apartment. The venerable Bloomfield was not particularly impressed with the young avocational linguist and their meeting was short. In July of 1939 this would change. Frank was staying with Carl Voegelin while attending the Linguistic Institute in Ann Arbor. He showed Bloomfield his analysis of Algonquian consonant clusters, a refinement of Bloomfield's earlier paper. Bloomfield readily acknowledged Frank's conclusion and suggested that he write it up for publication.

Frank's discovery of the Penobscot Reservation in the Encyclopedia Britanica led to his first visit in 1932, accompanied by his parents and brother. There was no bridge to Indian Island then, and the ferry cost ten cents for a round trip. The ferryman, Pete Glossian, answered Frank's question of where to find anyone willing to teach him the language. Frank and his mother soon found themselves headed into the woods, following a path bordered by honeysuckle and jewelweed. He found his first speaker, Louis Lolar, in a simple home with just a bed, wood stove, and a couple of chairs. That day Frank and Louis worked into the evening, getting the most out of the last rays of sunlight. From this initial encounter, and for the next seven summers, until his death, Louis was patient and meticulous with Frank. A Siebert census of Penobscot speakers circa 1939 showed 98 to 100, including a few that had moved out of state. Half of these Frank considered good speakers.

Andrew Dana became his next informant. Their relationship was mutually warm and affectionate and proved to be productive. Working with speakers does not come without its difficulties, linguistically and socially. One day Andrew asked Frank to drive him and his wife Susie to the Passamaquoddy reservation near Eastport in search of Susie's missing son. Today this trip would take three hours on Route 9, but in the 1930s, foggy Route 1 with all its twists and turns was the only way to get there. At Pleasant Point the boy was easily found, and the four

headed back to Indian Island. Such accounts are representative of the respect and affinity Frank had for his informants. I imagine Frank also made use of the time by conversing in Penobscot.

Frank witnessed the inexorable demise of his Penobscot and Catawba informants. Thus vanished from daily use two languages he would like to have studied further. Ironically, his own knowledge has become the focus of fieldwork and preservation. Frank gets weekly requests to review, edit, and proofread linguistic manuscripts, notes, or other cultural data. The requests for copies of his notes he finds less than amusing. Committed to linguistics of the highest quality, his criticisms may at times seem harsh.

Everyone in our family has received a nickname, including our dog, "rent a pooch." It is this side of Frank that has endeared him to me. Although conservative, his decisions and actions reflect his intelligence, not his bias. I will always remember this time in my life with great sentiment and pleasure. He is a gentleman from a different age. Frank introduced me to the Burma Shave commercials, and I close with this quote from the American roadside: "You can go a mile a minute, but there ain't no future in it, Burma Shave, Burma Shave."

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