

12-1-1998

## Chief Big Thunder (1827-1906): The Life History of a Penobscot Trickster

Harold E.L. Prins  
*Kansas State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Prins, Harold E.. "Chief Big Thunder (1827-1906): The Life History of a Penobscot Trickster." *Maine History* 37, 3 (1998): 140-158. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol37/iss3/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact [um.library.technical.services@maine.edu](mailto:um.library.technical.services@maine.edu).

HARALD E.L. PRINS

CHIEF BIG THUNDER (1827-1906)  
THE LIFE HISTORY OF A PENOBSCOT TRICKSTER

*Harald E.L. Prins is a native of the Netherlands, where he was trained in anthropology and history. Currently a professor of cultural anthropology at Kansas State University, he taught previously at Bowdoin, Colby, and the University of Nijmegen (Netherlands). From 1981 until 1991 he served the Aroostook Band of Indians as staff anthropologist in its successful bid for federal recognition and land claims settlement. In addition to writing THE MI'KMAQ: RESISTANCE, ACCOMMODATION, AND CULTURAL SURVIVAL, he has produced a documentary film on Mi'kmaq basketmakers ("Our Lives in Our Hands," 1986), co-edited a book on the contact period, AMERICAN BEGINNINGS: EXPLORATION, CULTURE, AND CARTOGRAPHY IN THE LAND OF NORUMBEGA, and authored numerous articles and book chapters on the Wabanaki.*

During his nearly eighty-year lifespan (1827-1906), Frank Loring earned a reputation as one of the most memorable Indian showmen in nineteenth-century New England. Described as standing "six feet and a half in his stockings," he was known as "Big Frank" (Johnson 1861:44). Assuming a professional "Indian" name, he later styled himself "Big Thunder." Under that *nom de theatre*, this Penobscot tribesman has filed into the annals of Maine history.



Chief Big Thunder (Frank Loring). Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum Photographic Archives.

**FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.**

In the course of his intriguing life, Loring garnered a measure of professional success and respect among fellow tribespeople. His posthumous reputation, however, has struck a hard patch. Many have charged him with duplicity, and many dubbed him a fraud. Among his major detractors are well-known specialists on Penobscot culture. Fanny Eckstorm, for instance, pithily dismissed Loring as “an untruthful and untrustworthy old rascal” (Delabarre 1936:117). Frank Speck also asserted that “He was a most unreserved liar and no secret was made of it among the Penobscot” (Ibid.: 128). Perhaps most scathing was Frank Siebert (1941:280) who denounced him as an impostor: “Big Thunder or Frank Loring was a pureblooded white man with a [flair] for folderol,...a mendacious circus entertainer and showman who spent a lifetime in travel and exploitation of his pseudo-aboriginal knowledge.” Although Siebert later admitted that “Big Thunder could lay claim to at least some Penobscot ancestry” (Siebert 1982:91), he never recanted his judgment of Loring as an inveterate liar.

But are Siebert, Speck, and Eckstorm justified in their damnations? And if Loring was a deceiver did that make him a fraud? To fully appreciate this tribesman, we must understand the cultural milieu within which his life ran its peculiar course. Which unique challenges did he face and what were his options?

Loring’s life history provides insight to a crucial period in the American past when Indian communities such as the Penobscot came under state control and could no longer sustain their traditional culture. Unable to survive as trappers, hunters, and fishers, many turned to farming, peddling baskets, and seasonal wage labor as their major means of subsistence. Others pioneered new venues, playing into newly emerging cultural niches within the dominant society. By the mid-nineteenth century, dozens of Indian “doctors,” “chiefs” and “princesses” wandered widely throughout Northeast America staging “entertainments” and selling medicines. Traveling to white settlements on foot, or by canoe, stage coach, steamship or train, these itinerant healers and showfolk found they could not only make ample cash but also gain a name and some fame. Some of the

more adventurous even toured with circuses to distant places. Among the latter, no doubt, Big Thunder was best known. In the course of his career, he could be spotted in the Maine woods, in coastal resorts, and in big cities, such as Portland, Boston, and New York.

Through this sketch of Loring's life as an Indian "showman," I hope to provide some insight into Penobscot survival strategies. Indeed, given the historical fracas of relentless assimilation pressure, I suggest that ambiguous fellows such as Big Thunder were quite effective guardians of "Indian" identity.

#### PENOBSCOT TRIBE (1820s-1830s)

At the time of Loring's birth in 1827, the Penobscot tribal community was quite small, numbering about 350 individuals.<sup>1</sup> Their main village was on Indian Island, a dozen miles north of the city of Bangor. Smaller settlements existed at several islands upriver. Wild game provided them with meat, grease, hides and fur. Fish (especially eels and salmon), berries, nuts, and fiddleheads supplemented their diet. Skilled trappers, they also sold or bartered furs to purchase commodities such as molasses, tea, sugar, tobacco, candles, soap, silk, gunpowder, and shot from white merchants. Traditionally, Penobscot Indians also grew some corn, squash, and beans in their village gardens. From the 1820s onwards, quite a few families expanded their farming to include potatoes, oats, and some wheat. Some even plowed with their own teams of oxen. Others added to their income by peddling crafts and medicines.

Upon gaining statehood in 1820, Maine had assumed Massachusetts' 1786 treaty obligations towards the Penobscots. Although officially wards of the state, Penobscots stayed in charge of the tribe's internal affairs, voting on their own laws and appointing their own leaders. To supervise its official dealings with the tribe, the state appointed an Indian agent. Each fall, he distributed the annuities to which Penobscots were entitled by treaty (corn, flour, pork, molasses, chocolate, tobacco, blankets, red or blue cloth, gunpowder and shot, as well as \$50 in silver). In 1833, the tribe was pressured into selling four townships (144

## FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.

square miles) for \$50,000. This money was deposited in the state treasury, with the annual interest to be paid to the tribe. With additional revenues from state annuities and interest payments, plus their own earnings, most Penobscots were “by no means poor” (Williamson 1846:99).

### LORING’S FAMILY BACKGROUND

In the early nineteenth century most individuals in the Penobscot community were Abenaki, but quite a few had become tribal members by marriage or adoption. One of these outsiders, it seems, was of a mixed Wampanoag-Portuguese heritage – Frank’s father, Saul Loring (Speck 1940:234, n. 15). Saul married a Penobscot woman named Mary [Francis?], said to be “a doctress of the tribe, [who] practiced medicine in Boston and Portland.” They had eight children together. When Frank, the youngest, was an infant, Saul died. A few years later, his mother died in Portland. As a boy Frank helped his older sisters “making baskets for a living” (Boston Sunday Globe 1904). Their early whereabouts are vague but they probably traveled the region to sell their wares. In time, the young Loring, like other transient Penobscot Indians, roamed all over New England and even beyond. In the late 1840s, he married a Penobscot woman. Named Mali, she was about five years younger than Frank and gave birth to at least nine children. During one of Frank’s periodic stays at the Penobscot reservation he must have decided to be registered officially as a tribal member by the Indian agent. From 1858 onwards Frank, Mali, and their growing brood appear regularly on tribal roles and census lists. In the 1880s (and probably earlier) the Loring household was established on Olamon Island. In 1889, after his wife’s death, Frank moved down river and settled on Indian Island. The following year he remarried a widow named Lydia Francis.

Given Frank’s 225 pound weight and 6’4” height, and the fact that Penobscots usually pronounced the name Loring as Lola, fellow tribespeople nicknamed him Big Frank Lola, or simply Big Frank (Delabarre 1936:121). For his professional career, Frank chose the more striking name Big Thunder.

### CHANGES AT PENOBSCOT (1830s-1850s)

During Loring's lifetime, traditional Penobscot culture came under assault.<sup>2</sup> Directly across from Indian Island, the white settlement at Old Town began to thrive due to the timber industry. Logging, hunting to feed logging crews, the log drives, and the damming of the rivers spelled the end of the traditional Penobscot economy. Great changes also took place in the tribal village on Indian Island. At the time of Frank's birth, all homes there were still wigwams built of logs and bark. Soon thereafter, in 1828, the first framed and shingled houses were constructed. Thirty years later a visitor reported, "not a single wigwam remains on the principal island; every family inhabits 'the white man's house,' many sleep on the 'white man's bed,' and possess the most useful of the 'white man's things'" (Lorenzo 1857:230).

In their personal appearance, too, Penobscots changed dramatically. When Frank Loring was born, most tribespeople still dressed traditionally: leather moccasins and cloth leggings, with a moosehide robe or blanket covering a loose garment kept closed in front by a belt. Many women wore embroidered peaked caps. By the 1840s, however, most Penobscots dressed in European clothes: the women in textile dresses, the men in "shirt and pantaloons, like laborers" (Thoreau 1966:10; Lorenzo 1857:231). During one of his trips to Maine, Henry Thoreau (1966:78) observed a small party of Penobscot hunters: "At a little distance, they might have been taken for Quakers, with their broad-rimmed hats, and overcoats with broad capes."

In response to the radical changes in the Penobscot valley, where white industrial development had destroyed their way of life, Penobscot folk began to venture far beyond their traditional range. Unwilling to settle down as farmers or work in the saw mills, they chose a transient lifestyle as artisans (especially basketmaking), peddling crafts and medicine. While woods and rivers still supplied them with much of their needs, cash enabled them to go to local stores and buy commodities.

Not only the hunt, fishery or peddling moved Penobscots to leave the comfort of their villages. When small-pox or cholera epidemics swept through their river valley, they usually sought

FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.

refuge on the seacoast and often stayed away for months. Habitual travelers, small groups of Penobscots ranged widely throughout New England and beyond. In the summer and fall, their tented camps could be found on the banks of the Kennebec, Androscoggin, Saco, or Merrimac and even farther south. From Bangor, a twelve-mile paddle from Indian Island, they went in horse carriages or (from the 1820s onwards) aboard steamships to Portland, Boston and other seaport cities. After 1834 a rapidly growing network of railroads provided new and affordable travel opportunities. Often their tickets were paid for by the Indian agent (Maine Indian Affairs 8 (3):66).

### INDIAN VAUDEVILLE

As early as 1795, Indian tribesmen “drest in the character of warriors” were hired by a New York circus (Vail 1933:169). In 1808, a theater in Philadelphia staged “The Indian Princess,” the first of many plays featuring the Indian maiden Pocahontas as heroine (Hornblow 1919:55). In 1829 a new play, “Metamora, or the Last of the Wampanoags,” was staged at theaters in New York and Philadelphia. Its leading character being the noble red man depicted in James Fenimore Cooper’s novels, this drama met with immediate success and continued to be staged for decades. One year later, dramatist George Washington Custis triggered a craze for Indian plays with his celebrated “Pocahontas; or the Settlers of Virginia” (Hutton 1891:12-13). Meanwhile, it became popular to invite real Indians to act out in theater what they were accused of in the wilderness. In 1827, for example, Chief Red Jacket and some fellow Iroquois performed a “Grand War Dance” in New York’s National Hotel and at Peale’s Museum showing “the manner in which they skulk and lay in ambush and the manner of scalping an enemy” (Ibid.: 170).

It appears that Frank Loring took his first steps in the world of popular entertainment as a teenager under the eye of P.T. Barnum. Barnum, whose career took off in 1835 with exhibitions of freaks and wild animals, soon added Native Americans to his shows. After about eight months with Barnum, Frank had learned the ropes and quit (Boston Sunday Globe 1904). In 1848

he arrived in Boston as scout for a vaudeville company. He had sent a message to Indian Island to recruit some Penobscots for a series of engagements in New York. While awaiting a response, he ran into John Glossian, a young Mi'kmaq from Nova Scotia, whom he hired.<sup>3</sup> Taking Glossian with him, Frank traveled to the Penobscot village, where he procured the services of about ten Indians and also secured "some dresses and outfit" (Johnson 1861:41).

Reminiscing about his adventure with Big Frank, Glossian later recalled: "We also purchased a couple of young bears.... They were...put on the top of a [train]load of goods to carry to the boat for Boston." In time the whole troupe, bears and all, made it to New York City. According to Glossian's memoirs, they hooked up with the vaudeville show: "Our tent would accommodate some three thousand, having a stage and curtain at one end, where we performed." The pay for the twelve Indian actors was not bad – two dollars per day and traveling expenses (Johnson 1861:43-45).

The tented show went on the road and turned south. In Wilmington, the Indian troupe staged "the play of Pocahontas" in full costume. Big Frank was "painted in Indian style, [and] looked extremely savage.... The tall black plumes in his headdress gave him the appearance of being somewhat taller than he really was." (Ibid.:44). After a few months, the show arrived in Albany, where it ran into financial troubles. Not getting paid, the Indian actors quit the company. In the winter of 1854-1855, Big Frank and his troupe passed through Great Falls, near Dover, New Hampshire, where they offered a few "exhibitions" to the public. Some fellow tribesmen camping in the neighborhood decided to join his company and boarded the train for the next town (Ibid.:98-99). The group traveled extensively, "giving concerts at which they, dressed with much 'fuss and feathers,' represented Indian life." Their "war-whoops" caused "great consternation amongst the nervous women and children who attended the entertainment" (Ridlon n.d.).

Pinpointing Big Frank's whereabouts through the years is difficult. Probably, having several young children, he chose the

FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.

Penobscot reservation as his home base. It is also likely that he spent time aboard the famous circus steamer, *Floating Palace*, which staged performances in Bangor in 1856. We catch a sure glimpse of him in the summer of 1860, when he showed up in Warren, Rhode Island. There, with a party of fellow Penobscots, the thirty-three-year-old Loring set up camp for a few weeks (Delabarre 1936:120). Near the campsite stretched a famous neck of land where Sowams, a seventeenth-century Wampanoag village once stood. Better known as Mount Hope, it had been the home of Chief Massasoit and his son Metacomet (King Philip), who was killed in 1676. Big Frank, himself the son of a mixed-blood Wampanoag, told the local white folk of Warren that “the remnant of the Wampanoags [had] merged with the Penobscot tribe, [and] that he was of Wampanoag descent, and was ‘custodian of the national archives’ of that tribe” (Ibid.:119). A few days later, an article in the *Warren Telegraph* noted: “Mr. Francis Loring, an intelligent Indian, and a member of the Penobscot tribe, who has been in this vicinity for several weeks, informed the writer that the tribe had in their possession, and which they carefully preserved among their national archives, an ancient book made of skins, containing many descriptions of important historical localities, some of which are in this vicinity, all of them in the ancient Indian style of signs and picture writing” (Fessenden 1860).<sup>4</sup>

A few years after this Rhode Island sojourn, Loring adopted the alias Big Thunder. It has been suggested that this took place when he and some fellow Penobscot performers staged an entertainment in Brewer, Maine. Arriving on the heels of another Indian show, they would have seen posters and leaflets announcing that the troupe hailed from west of the Rocky Mountains and stood “under the direction of the FAMOUS INDIAN PROPHET Big Thunder.” According to fur trader Manly Hardy, “Big Thunder took his name from the circus program” (Delabarre 1936:121-2).<sup>5</sup>

Although we will probably never know for sure how or why Loring assumed the name “Big Thunder,” the name did have historic resonance among the Wabanakis. Pet $\omega$ kiyik, “thun-

ders” were spirit beings who caused thunder. They were described as “very like human beings: they used bows and arrows, and had wings” (Leland 1884:263).

In the 1880s, Frank Loring and some other Penobscots lived on Olamon Island, about thirteen miles north of Old Town. During the summer months, he and his family camped near Bar Harbor and sold Indian crafts. Come autumn, he sometimes guided wealthy sportsmen on moose hunting trips in the Maine woods (*Old Town Enterprise* 11/10/1888).

Now in his early sixties, Loring also continued to perform in white settlements. Typically, the local newspaper made note of the events: “Big Thunder gave one of his interesting entertainments at the town hall in Olamon last Saturday, and is now taking a tour among the up river towns (*Ibid.*, 12/15/1888). Like other Penobscots, Loring regularly visited the tribe’s head village at Indian Island and attended council meetings.

#### BIG THUNDER’S TWILIGHT

In the Spring of 1889, after the sudden death of his seventeen-year-old daughter Susie, and having earlier lost his wife Mali and several other children, Loring decided to leave Olamon and resettle at Indian Island. The following year, he married a white woman named Lydia Francis, the widow of a fellow Penobscot. Getting on in years and having lost some of his toes to frostbite during a cold winter a few years before, Big Thunder curbed his road life. But his showman’s spirit found a new outlet. He opened a small “museum” with a birch bark sign announcing: “Big Thunder, Indian relics and Indian traditions told” (Delabarre 1936:126). According to a journalist of the day, “In the keeping of Big Thunder are valuable relics of the tribe which have dwindled until when Big Thunder took the oath to keep and guard these.” Among his “treasures” were his old four-foot “warbow which he represented as handed down to him by tradition of his foreparents.”<sup>6</sup> He also enjoyed showing a wampum collar, stone peace-pipe, iron tomahawk, engraved powder horns, and some other curiosities (Anon 1897).

**FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.**

Among Frank's old-time friends was Joseph Nicolar. Elected tribal governor in 1889, Nicolar was said to be "the best read member of the tribe." Belonging to the traditionalist faction of Penobscots known as the Old party, both he and Frank "believed in keeping up the old customs of the tribe instead of becoming too much like their lighter-colored neighbors" (Ibid.). A different sort of historian from Big Thunder, Nicolar spent years recording oral traditions as recounted by old Penobscot story tellers. In the process of writing *Life and Traditions of the Red Man* (1893), Nicolar seems to have dismissed his old friend: "Big Thunder felt that many things which he knew should become a part of the book, but Nicolar...did not gracefully concede to the views of another" (Anon 1897). Still worse, in the preface to his "authentic" Penobscot history, Nicolar (1893:4) stated, "[I] have given the full account of all the traditions as I have gathered them from my people. After forty years of search and study I am satisfied that no more can be found, as the old traditional story tellers have all gone to the happy hunting ground."

Big Thunder must have felt the stab. Denying his claim as a story teller and tribal historian, the book undermined his business. But he regained free rein after Nicolar's death in 1894. Among his tellings were well-known legends about the tribe's traditional culture hero *kəloskəpe*. But, dependent on "story selling," he built fiction on fact and regaled visitors with ever more spectacular tales. As one journalist put it, "To many, 'Big Thunder' is the most interesting character on the island. If you give him a generous tip he will ask you to be seated, offer you a well-filled pipe, and after many long puffs, will tell you of the lost glories of his tribe, of its many interesting traditions." Then, the writer continued, Big Thunder will "turn to his relics, the pride of his people. From a birch basket, centuries old, he will take out...silver bracelets and round breastplates, sent to his tribe by Queen Isabella of Spain;...the first iron axe and tomahawk that cut a Maine pine; an old iron pistol,...necklaces, of bear claws and caribou toes,...[and] the knife with which his tribe took the last scalp" (Anon 1900).

Big Thunder's skills as a public entertainer served him and his community well during his twilight years on the reservation.

For instance, during the 1898 inauguration of Joseph Francis as the new tribal governor, he acted as master of ceremonies and had the honor of administering the official oath of office. Chronicling this event, Montague Chamberlain (1899:2-3) noted:

[Big Thunder's] honesty of purpose, public spirit, good sense and ripe judgement have gained for him the confidence of the whole tribe. He is a man of large and powerful frame, and as he stood in the assembly dressed in the ancient costume of the tribe, his face striped with black paint and red, his head covered with a mass of iron-grey hair on which rested a head-dress of eagle plumes, his appearance was extremely picturesque. And when in a sonorous voice – deep and strong, yet melodious – he delivered his address of congratulation and admonition to the young chief, the effect was impressive....Big Thunder...led a company of men in the shot-horn dance and the snake dance to weird chants sung by the dancers.<sup>7</sup>

Loring's highly visible role in this installation ceremony suggests that he was now the third-ranking member on the Penobscot tribal council, the "keeper of the wampum" and orator, someone who traditionally negotiated treaties (Prins 1996:203; see also Brown 1892:57, cited by Walker in this volume).

Two years later, according to a Bangor newspaper account, the seventy-three-year-old Loring remained in the forefront of Penobscot festivities. At Indian Island dances, typically held twice a week and accompanied by an Indian orchestra of piano, cornet and violin, Big Thunder, now described as "the old chief," did not hesitate to take the lead. Commencing the marriage dance, with his "painted face, yellow and red," he "recalled to them the days of their former glory" (Anon 1900).

In December 1900, Big Thunder traveled once again to Massachusetts. There, at the Boston Sportsman's Show, he met naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton whose wood-lore stories for

FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.

boys and girls were already well known. Seton later recounted that during their meeting the old Penobscot had shown him a rare two-piece compound “war-bow” and told him that it had been in the tribe for over 200 years and placed in his care by the late chief John Neptune (Day 1975:7). Early next month, new tribal leaders were elected at Indian Island. Penobscots chose Mitchell Attean, member of the famous chieftain lineage, as governor and Loring as lieutenant-governor (1901-1902). Finally, Big Frank’s stage role as Indian chief became political reality.

In 1905, approaching the end of an adventurous life, Big Thunder turned his creative talents to writing an “Indian Play.” Under the headline “Big Thunder, Mighty Medicine Man, Chief of the Tarratines,” the *Lewiston Journal* (05/6-11, 1905) reported that his play would be performed by Penobscot actors in Old Town’s City Hall. He must have chuckled with pleasure when he read the passage that lauded him as the tribe’s historian: “It is to Big Thunder that the young Indian, who would know of the greatness of the Tarratines [Penobscots] goes for information. To him, too, go those members of the tribe who wish to retain a knowledge of the customs of the days when the Tarratines ruled Maine from end to end.”

On October 20, 1905, personal tragedy struck Loring yet again with the murder of his son Peter at Indian Island. Now, of his nine children, only his two sons, Newell and Walter, were still alive. Half a year later, on April 7, 1906, Big Frank himself died. Penobscots buried the seventy-nine-year-old tribesman at Indian Island’s Catholic Church cemetery.

Loring’s obituary in the *Bangor Commercial Weekly* heralded his celebrity as Big Thunder. And in the *Old Town Enterprise* (4/14/1906), his death was front page news. “Not since the passing away of ‘Molly Molasses,’” the paper declared, “has the Penobscot Tribe of Indians lost from its midst such a famous personage.... ‘Big Thunder’...bears the record of being the last of the old chiefs of the Penobscot tribe.”

In the summer of 1907, one year after Loring’s death, Frank Speck visited Indian Island and began his long-term ethno-

graphic research into Penobscot culture. Then a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, the twenty-five-year-old anthropologist soon ran into Big Thunder's creative legacy. A quarter of a century later, another "Big Frank" (Siebert) also stumbled on his trail. And the story continues.<sup>8</sup>

#### FRANK LORING - TRADITIONALIST OR OPPORTUNIST?

In Big Thunder's performances, the twins of fact and fiction are often hard to distinguish. Like the legendary trickster of Native American myth, he cannot be explained in clear-cut terms. He reminds me of Frank Paul, a Mi'kmaq tribesman I knew. Known as "the Liar," this Frank had a reputation for telling tall tales. Not surprisingly, his gift for entertainment was keenly appreciated by other Indians. After all, the name of the culture hero in Wabanaki traditions, Gluskap, marks him as one who exaggerates, lies habitually, and tells tall tales (Siebert 1996:736; DeBlois and Metallic 1984:46; Leavitt and Francis 1986:29).

In contrast, non-Indian specialists on Penobscot culture have denounced Frank Loring as "untruthful" and "unscrupulous" (see also Day 1975:8-9). But was he? It is true, as one old Penobscot said, that Big Frank "never could bear to have anyone tell a bigger story than he could. He always had to 'over it'" (Delabarre 1936:128). But some of his tales, once dismissed as fabrications, appear to have had at least a measure of truth. So, why the harsh critique after his death? Perhaps scholars such as Eckstorm, Speck, and Siebert were not geared to appreciate tall tales and practical jokes. Furthermore, it appears that some Penobscots were eager to cut "Big Frank" down to size. But they were not above misinformation and exaggeration themselves. For instance, Siebert was initially misled into believing that Loring was a white man. Speck's major informant, Newell Lyon, was later also discredited by some Penobscots. They referred to him as "that Italian," insinuating that he was an illegitimate son of a promiscuous Penobscot woman ("Big Nancy") and Old Town's Italian priest, Father Eugene Vetromile (Siebert p.c.).

**FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.**

Big Thunder's historical garble was hardly unique. In the nineteenth century, even the most bizarre scientific theories were presented and accepted as fact. Also, museums were not above staging freak shows, and anthropologists helped put "primitives" on display at world fairs. Even today, invention passing as tradition is commonplace in Europe as well as in the United States.

Frank Loring deserves re-evaluation as a cultural survivalist. He understood the importance of his "Indian" identity, refused to walk the assimilation path, took a critical stance toward the dominant culture, was not above creatively fooling the affluent white folk visiting his humble abode and milking them for all they were worth. Widely traveled, this Penobscot showman fully understood the ambivalent racism of Anglo-American society, which repressed Native spirituality and traditional customs while creating cultural space for the invented Indian of romantic imagination.<sup>9</sup> Watching traditional culture being squeezed from his community and unable to take overt political action to alleviate the pressure, he became Big Thunder and engaged in a subversive strategy of creative resistance in the form of theatricals. Resourceful and intelligent, Frank Loring seems to have enjoyed considerable respect among his fellow Penobscots. He not only spellbound his audiences, but also provided interesting jobs and took a prominent role in tribal ceremonies.

Early on, Loring discovered the role of "noble savage" and turned a life of potential doom and misery into one of adventure and celebrity. Undeceived by the popularity of historical melodramas about "the vanishing race of the noble red man," Big Thunder secured a sense of cultural pride in being "Indian" in spite of a white racism that engulfed the Penobscots and other Native Americans of his time.

In sum, Frank Loring lived during a critical time when Penobscot survival trembled in the balance. Transforming into Big Thunder, he became like the legendary trickster figure who made "his successful way through a treacherous environment of enemies out to defeat him...not by his strength but by his wit and cunning. [By] knowing the habits of his enemies, by deceiving

FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.

them, by taking advantage of their greed, size, gullibility, or haste does he manage to escape their clutches and win victories" (Scott 1990:162). As a Penobscot trickster, Big Thunder has dowered us with his ambiguous legacy. Now that the Euramerican imprint on Indian identity seems indelible, the challenge is to recognize the fabricated Indian of white imagination.

#### POSTSCRIPT

In December 1984, Penobscot Rights Protection researcher Glenn Starbird received a telephone call from a tribesman then living in Boston, Massachusetts. In a letter to the author, Starbird reported: "He had happened across a shop in Cambridge called 'Arsenic and Old Lace' which apparently specialized in Occult items. They had a human skull for sale which had a hole in it and was billed as the skull of the 'famous Indian Chief Big Thunder.' The tribal member called me, and told me about it. I told him that as far as I knew Big Thunder's grave had not been disturbed and that the skull was probably not his. I thought he should notify the police but instead he bought the skull and brought it home." Three years later, the skull mysteriously disappeared from his office at the Penobscot Nation's headquarters.

#### NOTES:

I am particularly grateful to the late S. Glenn Starbird, Jr., who generously shared Penobscot vital statistics and genealogical data. Bunny McBride brought valuable data from the *Old Town Enterprise* to my attention, and, with Richard Judd and Willard Walker, offered welcome editorial suggestions. This article is based on my paper "Public Performance and Ethnic Identity: Chief Big Thunder and the Peddling of Native American Culture," read at the annual meetings of the American Society for Ethnohistory, Tulsa, in 1991.

**FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.**

<sup>1</sup>Except the 1900 federal census, all documents confirm Loring's birth year was 1827, perhaps 1826.

<sup>2</sup>In the Introduction to *Penobscot Man* (1940:4), Speck noted: "Until about 1870 [the Penobscots] lived in an atmosphere practically unchanged by European influence, except for the changes wrought by Christian conversion." Obviously, this assertion is wholly without substance in historical fact.

<sup>3</sup>John W. Johnson (1829-1907), born to a white family in southern Maine, was raised among the Mi'kmaqs in Canada and became known as John Glossian. I am completing an annotated edition of his remarkable 1861 memoir soon to be published by the University Press of Massachusetts.

<sup>4</sup>Apparently (if it ever existed), this book was "accidentally destroyed by fire" (Delabarre 1936:123-25).

<sup>5</sup>Eckstorm has surmised it was in 1855. Circumstances, however, place the event a decade later.

<sup>6</sup>Day (1975:12) concluded that Big Thunder's claim "was most probably a hoax" and suggested that it had its origins as a circus bow. Apparently, "at least a dozen reproductions of it had been made" (Day 1975:8; Speck 1940:144).

<sup>7</sup>Speck (1940:167) considered the snake dance (ma'tagi'posi) "the most hilarious performance of all."

<sup>8</sup>Loring's confusing trail can still lead the naive and the Native astray. For instance, some now remember him (erroneously) as "the last hereditary chief of the Penobscot Indian Nation" (*Wabanaki Alliance*, 07/1982:1, 8). Most recently, the University of Maine Press misidentified Big Thunder as "Penobscot Governor" on a newly-added photograph in its re-issue of Speck's 1940 monograph *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe in Maine* (negative #11913, Speck 1997: n.p.).

<sup>9</sup>Cast either as "noble" or as "ignoble savages," Native Americans have been the subject of conflicting ideologies since their first encounter with European newcomers.

LITERATURE:

Anon. 1897 "Belle of the Penobscots." In *Bangor Commercial* (1 2/1 1). M.A. Little History and Biography of Maine Scrapbook, p. 142. (Courtesy of Dave Berry).

Anon. 1900 "Penobscot Belles: Four of the Handsomest Indian Maidens." In *Bangor Commercial* (01/12), p. 2.

Anon. 1906 "Frank Loring" (obituary). In *Bangor Commercial* (01/09).

*Boston Sunday Globe* (1904). In Delabarre 1936:120.

Chamberlain, Montague 1899, *The Penobscot Indians: A Brief Account of their Present Condition*. In *Cambridge Tribune* (02/04). (Reprint)

- Day, Gordon. 1975 "The Penobscot War Bow." *Contributions to Canadian Ethnology*, pp 1-15. David B. Carlisle, ed., Ottawa: National Museum of Man, Mercury Series. Paper No.31.
- DeBlois, Albert D., and Alphonse Metallic. 1984 *Micmac Lexicon*. Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No. 91. National Museum of Man Mercury Series. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada.
- Delabarre, Edmund B. 1936 "Chief Big Thunder: A Problematic Figure in Rhode Island Annals." In *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections*, Vol.29 (1), pp. 116-28.
- Eckstorm, Fanny H. 1940 [Review of] *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe in Maine*. By Frank G. Speck. *New England Quarterly*, 13: 742-47.
- Fessenden, Guy M. 1860. In *Warren Telegraph* (06/02). See Delabarre, pp. 117-18.
- Hornblow, Arthur. 1919 *A History of the Theatre in America from its Beginnings to the Present Time*. Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott Company
- Hutton, Laurence. 1891 *Curiosities of the American Stage*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Johnson, John W. 1861 *Life of John W. Johnson Who was Stolen by the Indians*. Biddeford.
- Leavitt, Robert M., and David A. Francis, eds. 1986 *Kolusuwakonol: Philip S. LeSourd's Passamaquoddy-Maliseet and English Dictionary*. Pleasant Point: Passamaquoddy-Maliseet Bilingual Program.
- Lewiston Journal*. 1905. "Big Thunder, Mighty Medicine Man, Chief of the Tarratines." Illustrated Magazine Section, May 6-10.
- Leland, Charles G. 1884 *The Algonquin Legends of New England, or, Myths and Folk Lore of the Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot Tribes*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company.
- Lorenzo, S. 1857 "Indian Tribes of New England." In *Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, vol. 62 (March): 210-37.
- Maine Indian Affairs, n.d. Unpublished documents and manuscripts. Augusta: Maine State Library (10 vols.)

**FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.**

McBride, Bunny. 1995 *Molly Spotted Elk: A Penobscot in Paris*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Nicolar, Joseph. 1893 *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*. Bangor: C.H. Glass.

Penobscot census reports, 1858, 1870, 1880, 1899, 1900.

Ridlon, G. T., n.d. *Recollections of the Penobscot Indians*. Newspaper (1910?). Author's Collection.

Scott, James C. 1990 *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Siebert, Frank T. 1941 [Review of] *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe in Maine*. Frank G. Speck. *American Anthropologist*, 43: 278-80.

1982, "Frank G. Speck, Personal Reminiscences." *Papers of the Thirteenth Algonquian Conference*, edited by W. Cowan, pp. 91-136. Ottawa; Carleton University.

Speck, Frank G. 1940 *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe in Maine*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

1997, *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe in Maine*. Preface by David Sanger. Orono: University of Maine Press.

Thayer, Stuart. 1976 *Annals of the American Circus, 1793-1829*. Manchester: Rymick Printing Co.

Thoreau, Henry D. 1962 *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*. 2 vols. B. Torrey and F.H. Allen, eds., Toronto.

1966 *The Maine Woods*. New York: Thomas Crowell.

Vail, R.W.G. 1934 "Random Notes on the History of the Early American Circus." In *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, n.s., Vol. 43, Part 1. Worcester: Published by the Society: 116-185.

Wabanaki Alliance. 1982 "Hattie Gordius Remembers." In *Wabanaki Alliance* (July), pp. 1, 8.

Williamson, William D. 1846 "Indian Tribes in New England" [1839]. In *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, III series, Vol. 9:92-100*.