

EUNICE BAUMANN-NELSON

A PENOBSCOT ASSESSMENT
OF FRANK SIEBERT

Dr. Eunice Baumann-Nelson is the author of THE WABANAKI: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY. She was born on Indian Island, and she became the first Penobscot to get a B.A., and later got an M.A. in Child Psychology and a Ph.D. in Human Relations at N.Y.U. Later still she received an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of Maine. She served in the Peace Corps in Peru and Bolivia, was the head of the Vassar art library and head librarian at The Museum of the American Indian in New York City. She has long been a student of Native American spirituality and has taught at the University of California, Davis, at Purdue, at Indiana University, the University of Maine, the College of the Atlantic, and the Bangor Theological Seminary. She is now living back where she started, on Indian Island, and teaching at the University of Maine. In the following essay she describes Frank Siebert from her own perspective.

I met Frank in the summer of 1977 when I returned to Indian Island at Old Town after a long absence from my birthplace. People of my village considered him an anthropologist, and it was much later when I learned that his professional training had been in the medical field. He told me he had first visited the island in 1932, accompanying Frank Speck, whose book, *Penobscot Man*, was published in 1940.

I related my memories of Speck's visits to the island with, mostly, the oldest males. I remembered how these men would laugh among themselves after the visits, because they had "pulled his leg." Much later, in reading *Penobscot Man*, I realized what that expression meant, for they had embellished the tales with numerous pornographic twists. I was horrified to recognize that these misrepresentations, appearing in an otherwise reputable book, would forever appear as valid to its readers. I remember that Frank was not overly surprised, and I surmised that he had encountered the same phenomenon in his interviews with the older men from whom he was collecting data.



Frank Siebert and Valentine Ranco. Wells, Maine, November 1995. Courtesy Richard Garrett.

Upon learning that Frank had moved to this vicinity in order to continue his study, I was extremely pleased. For, by this time, I had been into exploring Native American spirituality for some time, and, having gathered much data, had reached the conclusion that a group's language reveals more insights into their *Weltanschauung* than does study of overt behaviors. I pestered Frank with questions. "What is the literal translation of K'tchi neweske?" (this being used by present Penobscots to designate the Great Spirit). He informed me that the correct term was k'tchi hundu. "Are there terms for 'to kill' as opposed to 'murder'?" There is a word for kill, he answered, but not for murder. "How would you explain the fact that there are no terms for 'to have,' nor for 'to be'?"

After several lively discussions on the probable origin of scalping on this continent, I finally located a clipping I had cut out a number of years ago in which a book reviewer reports that scalping was first introduced by the Dutch, then picked up by the English, and, finally, by Indians. I admit to a great admiration and respect for Frank as a scholar. Though familiar with academic communities, I cannot recall having met more than a scanty few who, in my view, fit the definition of a scholar as does Frank. He continues his studies, attends linguists' meetings and conferences, and has papers published periodically. I cannot document it, but I am sure that Frank is the only living person who knows and can speak my ancestors' language.