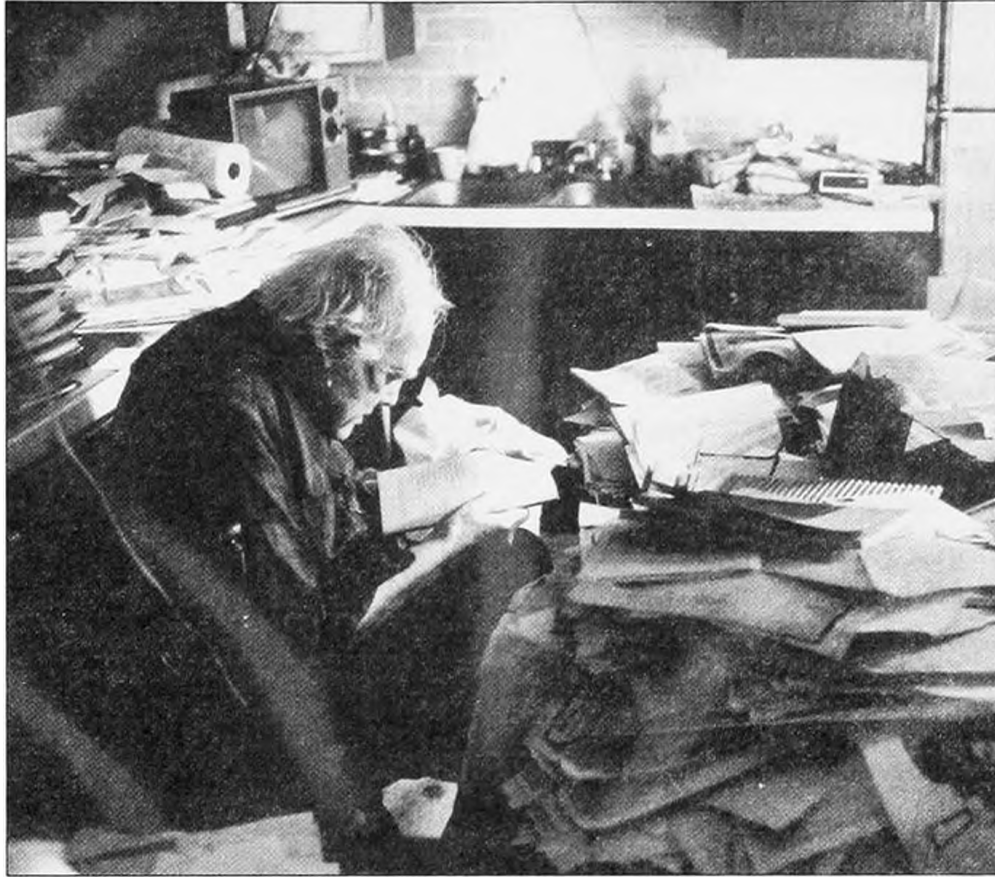


PAUL PROULX

SIEBERT AND HIS CORRESPONDENCE

Paul Proulx is certainly one of the most insightful and prolific of the many scholars who share Frank Siebert's fascination with the Algonquian languages, their histories, and their implications for the reconstruction of the social and cultural histories and prehistories of the Algonquian peoples and their precursors. His description of some encounters with Frank Siebert follows.

My first personal encounter with Frank Siebert came sometime in the early 1970s, when I dropped in on him unexpectedly on my way from Cornell to the Bayfield Road [Afton] Reserve in Nova Scotia (where I was going to collect data for my Ph.D dissertation). I secured his street address after multiple inquiries, knocked on the door, and suddenly the great man was standing there demanding to know who I was and what I wanted. I was taken aback. "I'm a student of Hockett's," I answered. His suspicions were unabated: "Did he send you?" I admitted he hadn't, that I just thought I might drop in as I was in the vicinity on my way to do fieldwork on Micmac. "Fieldwork" proved to be the magic word that opened his door.



Courtesy Richard Garrett.

That day, and in the two episodes of correspondence that followed, Frank revealed a deep devotion to the collection of primary data – a devotion which I’ve come to believe was at least partly rooted in his distrust of all secondary sources (grammars, dictionaries, etc.). Not that he lacked an interest in books. What I still remember most clearly about that visit was my graduate-student awe at the vast library which overflowed from his shelves and piled up in heaps on the floor.

What I began to see that day was a scholar who trusted no scholar, and hence no products of scholarship. He evidently felt that not only were they generally the product of relative ignorance (short fieldwork and the like), they were influenced by the

FRANK T. SIEBERT, JR.

preconceptions of the authors who, full of self-importance, could hardly be bothered to pay attention to the reality before their eyes. His assessment of human nature and the academic enterprise, though undiplomatic, was perspicacious and a salutary caution to the young scholar I was.

Yet, as the years went by and he continued to denounce presumptuous error, these ideas seem to me to have become obsessive in him. Ultimately, I believe he must have become increasingly fearful that he himself would fall into the practices he had so pitilessly denounced. Unable to forgive human fallibility in others, he evidently couldn't accept it in himself. Consequently, his analysis of Virginia Algonquian became his last major published contribution to Algonquian linguistics. What most of his colleagues expect to be his magnum opus, a documentation of the Penobscot language, has not yet been completed. Indeed, not even texts or grammatical sketches have appeared.

I'd like to leave the last word to Frank (quoted from his letters to me):

Frank On Field Work. "A language is never done...you can always learn more about it" (March 29, 1975). On eliciting bird names: "Books with pictures in color help a lot for birds...but are not totally reliable in my experience...must be critically examined on seasons, size, habits, and frequency of each species of bird in the area studied" (ibid.). "There is only one good way to do linguistics in an unrecorded language, and that is to really learn the language a little short of native speaker competence" (October 28, 1974).

Frank On Unreliable Sources. "Over-complicated analyses, with a lot of loose ends and hidden inconsistencies are usually wrong" (October 28, 1974). On poor PhD dissertations: "especially by students indoctrinated with some farfetched bias or preconceptions by their instructors. One cannot tell how good these grammars are unless one has worked on the same language" (November 10, 1979). "There's a lot of unscientific gimmickry in linguistics" (Christmas card, soon after we met). "It seems to

be the style to use 'get rich quick schemes' in linguistics...No collection of any sizable body of Algonquian texts has appeared since the middle '30's" (March 29,1975). "Also, the tempo and emotional state of the times seems to be running against common sense and reason, and against empiricism. Science and truth are not fads" (March 24, 1975). On traps to avoid: "I have wasted entirely too much of my time the past eight years reading linguistic literature" (January, 1975).

Frank On Herd-Think. "I do my own thinking and frequently find myself in disagreement with fads and the majority....To me, fad, current popularities, and philosophy have no basis or business in science at all" (March 29, 1975).

Frank On "The World." "I wish I could work with no distractions or harassments – of finances, inflation, IRS, racists, and built in obsolescence" (Christmas card, soon after we met). Siebert's Law: "For where the money is...there will the crooks and frauds be found" (March 29,1975). "Northern and Eastern Maine used to be quite primitive and unsettled in the '30's, but in the past 15 years has become more like southern New England...too many white people and fewer animals and birds.