

The Beiderbecke Affair

http://beiderbecke.typepad.com/tba/2006/02/npr_reported_su.html

NOTE: What follows is a blog post that contains an article I wrote about the Penobscot language. Maulian Dana, a Penobscot language instructor whose father, Barry Dana, is quoted in the story, has inserted his objections to the article in bold text. I have responded, also in bold text. – Brendan Wolfe (July 18, 2008)

February 20, 2006

Last of the Penobscot

Brendan Wolfe

NPR [reported](#) Sunday morning on efforts to save the many dying (or, to be frank, dead) Native American languages. It was a good enough piece, and terribly, terribly sad. How difficult it was to hear tribal members learning sentences by rote based on a recording of their language's last native speaker. I mean, think about it: What if, say, George W. Bush were the last native speaker of English, and we all had to learn the language from scratch based on his voice, his inflection, [his words](#). In the end, we all might be speaking a new language, but it wouldn't be English. **We have written accounts of the language as well as very well kept recordings. We have a very positive outlook on the revitalization of our language, so if you have nothing good to say don't say anything.** So who's to say this woman was any more literate than Bush? Or, to put it more respectfully: I imagine that any one speaker possesses just the tiniest sliver of a language's possibilities. Is it even possible to resurrect a tongue from just one source?

BW: I understand that you have written accounts of the language. I've looked at those. And I understand that you have very well kept recordings. And I also understand that these can be the basis for preserving the language in some fashion. The definition of a "living" language is in dispute, obviously. As I'm sure you know, linguists argue that the language can't be living if there are no living native speakers of it. The tribe argues differently. All I'm doing here is pointing to one of the potential drawbacks of learning a language when there are but one or even no living speakers. That's all. As for saying nothing if you have nothing good to say—that's no way to live and you know it. Why else would you have sent me these comments? Certainly they're not full of compliments!

These are the kinds of questions you ask when you're *not* a Native American, when it's not your culture & history slowly going silent. **We are Native and we ask theses questions as well, who are you to presume what we think? Also, history and language are not things that can "go silent" what a poor choice of words.**

BW: I make plenty of presumptions in my life and career and I always appreciate someone like you pointing out when I'm wrong. Okay, not always. But here I do. Thank you.

Anyway, the report left me feeling like there's just so much [more to be said](#) on the history & politics & anguish & bad feelings wrapped up in language loss. So I dug out a story I wrote back in 2001, when I lived in Maine, a report on the [Penobscot Indian Nation](#) and its own struggle to resuscitate a dead (**this language is not dead, and using this word is an insult to those of us who spend our lives learning and teaching it**). language. It was one of the most difficult & most interesting piece I've ever worked on: At the center of it are some pretty remarkable characters:

BW: The word "dead" here . . . well, see above. There is dispute on this matter. We can agree that there are no living native speakers, or at least I think we can. If scientists want to call that "dead" and tribe members and others prefer a different word, that's fine with me. I have no stake in that argument one way or the other. I respect those like you who spend your lives learning and teaching the language. That respect does not imply that we have to agree on everything, and that lack of agreement should not imply any lack of respect.

- An often angry tribal [chief](#) who was once named one of *People* magazine's 50 Most Beautiful People. **This man is my father and you have no right to use one adjective, especially one with such negative connotations to describe him. Reading your attitude makes me angry, and if he talked to you in person he probably felt the same way. Once again who the hell are you to make such assumptions?**

BW: I didn't make the "assumption" that Barry Dana was angry. I interviewed him for a long time. I *saw* that he was angry. I'd have to review my transcript, but I'd hardly be surprised if he *said* he was angry. (Based on the story below, I know he said that his wife accused him of having a chip on his shoulder.) I can't control how you read the connotation of angry. It certainly doesn't assume (or at least not to me) that he has no reason or justification for being angry. Anyway, who am I to make such assumptions? I'm the author of the story! It's the story *I* tell as *I* see it. I tell it as fairly as I can, but in the end it's how I see it. So reasonable people like yourself may disagree about how I see things. That's fine.

- A fast-talking, dyslexic maple syrup-harvester who is one of the language's most passionate & controversial advocates.
- A self-trained, probably crazy linguistic genius who at the end of his life knew more about the Penobscot language than anyone before or since. **Ummm what about the native speakers he learned from, wouldn't they have know more then him?** He also seemed to hate just about everybody but especially the Indians he had lived among for so many years. **Another unfounded value judgment.**

BW: We can disagree on those judgments, but they're not unfounded. Nor are they mine. They come from interviews. They're the opinions of people who knew him and of people who studied the language.

• A self-deprecating (?) languages prodigy from Harvard who does his best to rise above the shame & resentment **There is nothing shameful or resentful in the way we treated Conor or in the way we feel about our language.** and teach the Penobscot their own language. **What an awful way to put this. We worked with Conor and it was a collective effort to try to bring our language back. We are still successful and we don't even have him around anymore. He was a resource to us, not a savior.**

BW: I can't respond to your question mark after "self-deprecating" because I'm not sure what's unclear about that. In my communications with him, he *was* self-deprecating. Moving on: In my work with the tribe or in my study of the tribe or in my interviews with people about the tribe and the language, I encountered plenty of shame and resentment, or at least discussion of shame and resentment (see "chip" mentioned above), just as I encountered plenty of pride and whatever else is the opposite of shame and resentment. People are complicated and they can be more than one thing at a time. I didn't mean to imply that the tribe *treated* Conor shamefully or resentfully, only that he worked in a situation where those feelings were in the mix. We probably disagree about that last observation. Anyway, the sentence you point out, "and teach the Penobscot their own language"—that does emphasize Penobscot passivity in a way that likely isn't fair. I think that to some extent it is true, but to *a larger extent* it probably isn't true. In other words, in my roundabout and defensive way, I'm saying that you're right.

Here's their story . . .

IMAGE: ["Algonquin Sketch"](#) by Lawren Stewart Harris

LAST OF THE PENOBSCOT

At the center of a tribe's quest to save its language is the controversial Frank Seibert.

Richard Garrett isn't the sort you'd expect to find mixed up in the language business. After all, what is it that he says about the written word? "I abhor it. I'm a dyslexic photographer, you know. I mean, don't bother me with that crap."

Nevertheless, this Wellington, Maine, resident and erstwhile maple syrup harvester was, with his wife Martha, who is also dyslexic, the driving force behind something called the [Penobscot Primer](#). You'll find the *Primer* upstairs at the [Hudson Museum](#) on the campus of the University of Maine. It's an interactive exhibit on the Penobscot language, once spoken widely in the Maine woods, and it features native speaker [Madeline Shay Tomer](#) filtering the world through this lost (?) tongue and a knife-edged personality.

The routine went like this: Garrett gave Tomer a photo, Tomer described it in Penobscot. For instance, when presented with a bucolic scene of a woman paddling a birch bark canoe, the elderly Tomer quipped that she paddled like a white woman.

“When I showed Madeline a picture of the outfall from the Lincoln Pulp and Paper Mill—and make no mistake, this is an insult to the Penobscot people, the crap that it pukes into the river,” Garrett remembers. “I figured, Oh well. She’s not going to know what this is. But that wasn’t the case at all.”

Here, Garrett quotes Tomer in Penobscot, words that translate to “That’s the white man’s bad medicine.”

It’s fair to say that Garrett and Tomer were an unlikely couple in the history of linguistic preservation, but it’s a history that depends on such couples. After all, language must travel between speakers to survive. **(Not true, the tribes in California and Florida have revitalized language from writings and recordings only.)**

BW: My only point here is that language that does not travel between speakers (or between writers and their readers) hardly exists. You learn it to communicate, and if no communication exists, it doesn’t really survive. Again, this goes back to the fundamental issue of what we mean by “survives.” Does a recording of a language being spoken mean that language “survives”? A lot of people would say no, plenty would say yes.

Garrett says Tomer giggled a lot. “She was a wonderful person, a superb craftsperson and basket maker, an artist.” His voice catches, though, when he recalls her 1993 death. “I’ve held my dead brother in my arms, and my mother, too. And of course I loved my brother and mother, and I felt deep grief when they died. But I did not feel the same profound, utter despair at witnessing the end of a language. I still remember driving home from Bangor that day. It was like a 90-degree day and my face was cold from the tracks of my tears.”

You see, according to Garrett, Madeline Shay Tomer wasn’t just a native Penobscot speaker. She was the last native speaker. **(Also not true. She was a native speaker but not the last. Richard is not qualified to make that statement and you should not have used that opinion as fact.)**

BW: No one challenged that statement during my research. And I didn’t use it as a fact. I used it as something he told me. There’s a big difference. By the way, I think that Richard’s work *does* give him the authority to make that claim. It doesn’t mean that he’s right and it doesn’t mean that someone else might have *more* authority. It’s my job as a journalist not to hide behind *other* people saying wrong stuff, obviously. But like I said, no one challenged that statement during my research.

2.

Mention Richard Garrett's name to Carol Dana, who teaches Penobscot at the [Indian Island school](#), and her face wrinkles up. **(This is not an objective piece when you start to paint people this way.)** "Oh, don't even go there," she said during a recent interview in her classroom. According to Dana, Madeline Shay Tomer was not the last native speaker at all, and to portray her as such is little more than publicity-mongering.

BW: I'm not sure what you mean by "objective." Her face absolutely wrinkled up. When she said "Oh, don't even go there," she didn't mean, "Don't go there because I might enjoy this conversation too much." Of course not. She meant that she did not have a high opinion of Richard Garrett, and she made that clear both in what she said and in her facial expression. People do that all the time. I'm sure *you* would do it if you heard my name mentioned! If by objective you mean that my personal impressions of what I observe and understand have no place in the story, then this story is not objective. (I wonder if you would worry about objectivity if you agreed with me more.) Anyway, my goal was to be fair, not objective. You may rightly believe that I have failed in some places, but fairness was my goal. It was *not* to pretend that I didn't have impressions or opinions or ideas or that I thought that everyone has or had an equal claim to the truth.

"Everybody's out to make a name for themselves," she said, noting that there are at least "a couple" native speakers left.

So what's to be gained by arguing that the language is dead? "It's like [The Last of the Mohicans](#)," she said. "People buy into this whole idea of 'last of,' even some of our elders, as if our language and culture were something that has been passed by."

Here's a rule of thumb, then. When you're talking about language loss, and all of the cultural and political upheaval that attends it, there are no simple statements. Madeline Shay Tomer was the last native speaker? The Penobscot language is dead? These are statements that demand question marks and provoke fierce debate.

This is no academic debate, either. The Penobscot Indian Nation on Indian Island is working hard to revitalize its language—it's an effort many in the tribe link to their survival as a distinct culture—and such debates have a way of tripping up the process. For instance, how do you improve the health of the language when no one can seem to agree on a diagnosis?



For a blunt assessment, consult [Dr. Ives Goddard](#) (*pictured*), curator of the [Department of Anthropology](#) at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History. "The Penobscot language is extinct," he said by phone from his Washington, D.C., office.

“There are no native speakers. A lot of Native American groups face this juncture in their history and they don’t want to hear that their language is extinct.” **Extinct means there are no more....so how are we speaking this language if it doesn’t exist? Just mumbo jumbo from another scholar who thinks he knows more about us than we do.**

BW: You can certainly take that position, and I’m sure there have been many scholars who have condescended to the tribe in that way. Let me make a couple points, though. His is an important view in that it offers a scientist’s assessment of the language. You can dismiss it and say it’s not relevant, and for you, maybe it’s not. But to provide the full picture in the story, I needed to get his opinion. So just as you had a beef with Richard Garrett and not me on the issue of the last speaker, so you have a beef with Ives Goddard and not me. My second point is this: I think that Goddard means “extinct” in a very specific way. He means that there are no native speakers left. Not that it doesn’t exist in *some* form. You can call this situation “extinct” or you can call it some other word, but that’s what he means. You may not find that observation useful for your purposes, or even particularly fair, but that’s another issue altogether.

Goddard is an expert on indigenous languages. He reports that 50 percent of the languages spoken today—and that’s a conservative estimate, he says—will be extinct in 100 years. Meanwhile, the number of surviving native languages in North America is 175 and dropping fast. Among those still hanging on is Passamaquoddy, spoken by the [Maine tribe](#) of the same name.

According to Goddard, Native Americans want to redefine what the term *extinct* means. “As a scientist I have to be objective. You can stand in front of a classroom and teach kids a few words and say that your language is not extinct, but that would be delusional.” **Shame on him for assuming this is how we are revitalizing. The programs we have crated and maintained are much more than his poor assessment and HE is delusional for thinking he can belittle such a strong successful effort.**

BW: I agree with you. I think he was belittling your efforts.

Most other assessments on the health of Penobscot are more diplomatic. For instance, they all decline to use the E-word. There is this from [Dr. Maureen Smith](#), an Oneida Indian from Wisconsin who is director of the University of Maine’s fledgling [Native American Studies program](#): “I’ve heard that the Penobscot language is dead, but there are people out there who speak it.” Or this from [John Bear Mitchell](#), a native Penobscot who teaches at the tribal school on Indian Island: “Language in this tribe is very, very, very, very low. Scary low.” Says Carol Dana: “The elders say it’s dead, while the younger ones say it’s only dormant.”



Finally, there is this from Carol Dana's cousin Barry Dana (*pictured*), the Penobscot Nation's governor and the one who introduced Richard Garrett to Madeline Shay Tomer: "Basically, we have the language. We just don't have people speaking it."

Governor Dana doesn't like to dwell on such apparent contradictions, however. Instead, he has formed a committee on Indian Island to spearhead what he hopes will be a community-wide effort to revitalize the language. The tribe has just applied for a federal grant that would fund the effort for four years to the tune of a half-million dollars. And, to work as a consultant on the project, it has hired a non-native linguist fluent in Penobscot, Conor Quinn of Portland.

3.

Quinn, 22, who is now [a graduate student at Harvard](#), was only 17 when he hooked up with Garrett and his *Primer*. "Garrett flopped the dictionary in front of Conor and said, 'I want this memorized by morning,'" Dana related. "In other words, 'Conor, we don't have a lot of time this summer to work with the language. So the more you can get done by the time September rolls around, the better off we'll be for funding for next summer.'"

Quinn, according to Dana, was happy to take the challenge literally. "Conor came into breakfast the next morning and threw the dictionary back in Richard's face and said, 'I could only get to page 783,'" Dana said. Within 24 hours, the full 1,200 pages were completely memorized.

Quinn denies that anything like this ever happened.

Of course, common sense tells us that you can't learn a language just by reading a dictionary—especially a dictionary printed in an only recently invented alphabet, a dictionary whose pages are faded Xeroxes of dot-matrix printing, with corrections and addenda scribbled all through the margins. But if Quinn didn't learn Penobscot from the dictionary, neither did he learn it from the dyslexic Garrett ("Working in language," he says, "is like confronting my demons."). No, Quinn learned from the late [Dr. Frank T. Siebert, Jr.](#), a pathologist by trade and by nature an eccentric—some prefer disturbed—recluse.

Siebert is the one who invented that alphabet (**Wrong again, the alphabet is based on the national phonetic system.**) and who compiled that dictionary. (**He would not have**

been able to complete the dictionary if he didn't learn the words from Penobscot elders. Give credit where it is due).

BW: To say that it is *based* on the national phonetic system is not to say that it was not invented by him. It was my understanding—from various sources, some of them Penobscot—that he invented the alphabet. That claim was not challenged by anyone. I suppose we can debate the meaning of “invented,” but I’m not sure why you would want to do that. Anyway, of course he learned the words from Penobscot elders. But *you* give credit where credit is due: compiling a dictionary, using an alphabet that you have [if not invented, then fashioned for the unique purposes of the Penobscot language], is no small task. It’s a *huge* task!

Garrett had introduced himself to the amateur but legendary linguist at the insistence of Madeline Shay Tomer, who suggested that Garrett might find him controversial but interesting. “She thought I could get through his gruffness,” Garrett recalls. “A lot of Native Americans I know call him a curmudgeon.” Quinn had found Garrett because he was a family friend. His first summer on Indian Island, in 1995, was spent working with Garrett at transferring much of Siebert’s material from rough notes onto computer files.

Since the sixth grade, when he taught himself Irish-Gaelic, Quinn had been a voracious devourer of languages, and over the next few years he earned the respect of the curmudgeonly Siebert. And it was this partnership, said Governor Dana, that “probably saved the Penobscot language. . . . Frank basically downloaded the language into Conor’s head.”

So what does it mean that so much of the ailing Penobscot language is invested in two white men? What does it mean that most tribe members cannot understand their legends as told in Penobscot, let alone read them? What does it mean for Governor Dana to acknowledge that Conor Quinn alone “can tell us what our legends are”? (**Wow, this is great word spinning on your part, all I can say.**)

BW: I know you’re being sarcastic, so I’ll resist the temptation to say, “Hey, thanks!” I’m not sure what you mean by “word spinning.” These are legitimate questions and they represent my take on the story. It may not be your take and I certainly accept that. And you can say that Brendan Wolfe is a guy who is not a tribe member, is not a linguist, and is not even from Maine, so his take is worth bupkus. That’s certainly your right. But the story has demonstrated, I think, that a lot *has* been invested in Siebert and Quinn. Perhaps you think that a better story wouldn’t have emphasized that investment and instead emphasized something else, and you might be right. Either way, do you argue that most tribe members cannot understand their legends in Penobscot? When I wrote the story, nowhere near 51 percent of Penobscot could read or write the language well enough to understand the legends. I’m not criticizing that or holding tribe members up for ridicule by pointing it out. I’m asking: *What does it mean?* That’s a legitimate and interesting question. Or at least it’s interesting to me. And it’s my story, remember. Finally, the governor, your father, said what he said. I didn’t misquote him. He said it. So now

I'm asking: *What does it mean?* You can call that word spinning and react to it sarcastically if you want. Or you could engage the issue. You could ask yourself what it means.

To answer that requires a much closer look at Frank Siebert.

4.

Almost universally Siebert has been declared a genius by a section of academia that is notoriously insular and specialized. Ives Goddard at the Smithsonian will go so far as to say that Siebert “learned more about Penobscot than anyone ever will.” **(Not true at all, again he is not qualified to make that statement.)**

BW: You might be right.

The child of old Philadelphia money, Frank Siebert first encountered the Penobscot in 1932. He was 19 and returning with his parents from a vacation in Québec. After convincing them to detour through Indian Island, he met the first of what would become a long line of “informants,” or native speakers, who would teach him Penobscot language, history and stories, all of which had been fostered and preserved inside the tribe’s oral tradition.



While studying medicine at the University of Pennsylvania—apparently at his father’s insistence—Siebert fell into orbit around [Frank G. Speck](#). Speck (*pictured*) was the author of a seminal work of anthropology called [Penobscot Man](#) (1940), and he kept office hours in a converted Gothic chapel he decorated with live snakes and turtles, even a white fox that hid behind a leaking radiator. There were Indian crossbows that he tested against the door, a whole collection of native artifacts, and a floor-to-ceiling library along three walls. Here Siebert began to apply himself to the study of the Penobscot. While tribe members joked that “Speck” was short for “speculation,” Siebert strove for an approach that was even more rigorous than his teacher’s, and less sentimental.

He attended Indian language meetings in New York City and got away with inviting himself to the prestigious summer institute sponsored by the [Linguistic Society of America](#). There he boldly corrected one of the field’s leading scholars and proceeded to write a groundbreaking paper about his theory.

Siebert went on to lead an academic double life—pathologist by day and linguist by night. He married in 1942 and was bitterly divorced in 1964, refusing to maintain contact with his wife or two daughters. By that time, he had spent many years off the reservation,

discouraged by Indians who were suspicious of working with a white man. It was a suspicion that would nag him and his work even after his death. Finally, convinced that his life had been a failure, he returned to work with his main informant, Andrew Dana, Governor Dana's great-uncle.

In an essay for *Maine History* magazine, Goddard described first meeting Siebert while on a field trip with Harvard professor Karl Teeter:

The scene that greeted us was unforgettable. Andrew was in a wheelchair, having had a leg amputated as a consequence of diabetes. (He was later to lose the other one.) Frank was sitting opposite him checking Penobscot vocabulary from a file. Our arrival disrupted the work, and soon Frank, Karl and I were launched into a discussion of linguistic topics. Andrew appeared to doze off. Then, suddenly, as Frank was holding forth about the meaning of something in Penobscot, Andrew perked up and interjected: "Frank, your [schwa](#) is a little low in that word."

The encounter suggests a rich and rewarding collaboration between Siebert and Dana, who had only a sixth-grade education.

Siebert went on to win several important research grants, including a Guggenheim in 1969-70, but following Dana's death his relationship with the tribe and with the outside world began to deteriorate. In December 1987, while he was hospitalized for a broken hip, Siebert's Indian Island office was burglarized and ransacked. In a fit of paranoia, he withdrew from people and even deeper into his continuing work on a Penobscot dictionary and collection of legends. In 1996 he grumbled to a Portland newspaper reporter: "I'd like to be free. Free from shopping. Free from eating. Free from cooking. Free from nuisances and people calling you on the phone."

When speaking of Siebert, who died in January 1998 at the age of 85, most of his acquaintances resort to euphemism. For instance, Conor Quinn described him as "grumpy." Siebert assistant [Dr. Pauleena MacDougall](#), a linguist fluent in Penobscot who is now associate director of the [Maine Folklife Center](#), called him "mean, rude, obnoxious and abusive." Some have reported that Siebert rarely bathed or changed clothes. But James Neptune, curator of the [Penobscot Tribal Museum](#), maintains that he was only "unkempt."

"He didn't care," Neptune explained. "He says, 'I am who I am.' "

"Frank was an old-school German," Garrett observed cryptically. When asked to elaborate, he added: "Let's just say that a favorite quote of his was, 'Poor old Hitler. He wasn't all bad.'"

"Everybody thanks Dr. Siebert, though, for what he did," Governor Dana insisted. "It's just that he himself was a hard man to get along with. He had very little tolerance for people. He loved my great-uncle, Andrew Dana. They were a package deal. It's kinda funny because I almost see Conor and I as being the return of the dynamic duo that's

going to preserve the language. It was Frank Siebert and Andrew Dana, and now it's me and Conor Quinn.”

5.

A character like Frank Siebert can easily distract a tribe from such important business, however, even years after his death.

For instance, before his body was even cold, a battle raged between Richard Garrett and Siebert's two estranged daughters over his estate. Garrett initiated [the lawsuit](#), claiming that when Siebert excised Garrett's name from his will shortly before he died, it was invalid because the old man suffered from dementia. Some inside and outside the tribe privately contend that Garrett's name was only added to the will in the first place through his unfair manipulation of Siebert. In any event, Garrett lost the suit, and Siebert's collection of rare books, letters, maps and treaties—which had been strewn all over his small, cluttered and impossibly dirty home—was [auctioned](#) in 1999 at Sotheby's Auction House in New York City for a whopping \$12.6 million.

Meanwhile, much of Siebert's academic work, including his dictionary and his two-volume compilation of Penobscot legends written both in English and a phonemic alphabet of his own invention, were donated to the [American Philosophical Society](#) in Philadelphia. Publication of this very important material has been stalled, though, in part due to concern over proprietorship. Although the APS is a nonprofit organization, the Penobscot Nation is skeptical about granting rights to material that was partially completed using grant money awarded the tribe back in the 1980s. In addition, there is concern about even the idea of another party copyrighting the Penobscot language.

“Our tribal council is pretty adamant about that,” Governor Dana said. “The language is ours. The stories are ours.”

James Neptune at the Penobscot museum has a photocopy of Siebert's dictionary and doesn't plan on handing it over to some outside institution. His response to the APS: “bullcrap.”

“No one has a copyright on my people's language,” he said.

Richard Garrett argues that the hang-up is all over a misunderstanding. The APS doesn't want to copyright the stories per se, he says, only the phonemic device that Siebert used to put them on paper. Carol Dana insists that that's not the point. In Penobscot oral tradition, ownership of stories has always been respected. “If you wanted to hear my family's stories,” she explained, “you would ask my permission first, and then I would tell them to you.”



[“Timiskaming Youth”](#) (1913) by Frank G. Speck

6.

So can any of this be worked out? Penobscot tribal attorney [Mark Chavaree](#) says the council is looking into it. The APS editor in charge of the Siebert texts, Carole LeFaivre-Rochester, responded via e-mail with a terse “no comment.”

Bad feelings abound. Historically, the Penobscot, much more than their more isolated neighbors the Passamaquoddy, have been forced into close proximity with white Mainers. While their grip on the language has weakened as a result—a fact that is deeply shameful to many Indians **(We can’t be ashamed of something that isn’t our fault. And again, who the hell are you to say these things if you are not Penobscot??)**—their distrust of outsiders has grown. **(Hmm, I wonder why when lies are printed about us.)** For years, it was a hallmark of federal Indian policy to eradicate native languages. Meanwhile, native-speaking Penobscot who attended school in nearby Old Town have reported facing intolerance and pressure to assimilate.

BW: People are ashamed of things that aren’t their fault every day. Shame is a very different emotion from guilt. That said, I believe that this has been shameful to many tribe members. How can I make the claim if I’m not Penobscot? Well, I base it on my interviews and my research and my own observations. I’m a human being and I understand what shame is. One does not need to be Penobscot to know those things. Let me also acknowledge that Penobscot culture is more complex than I, as an outsider, will ever understand. (Most cultures, maybe all cultures, are.) This does not mean that I do not have the right or the authority to ever make a claim about it. (As I wrote above, there may always be people with *more* authority. So let them—you, for instance—make *their* claims and then we’ll have a discussion.) If you disagree with that, then perhaps we can agree to disagree. Regarding “distrust for outsiders”: your response suggests that you agree with me. Finally, something upon which we agree! I don’t begrudge you your distrust of outsiders. You certainly don’t have to trust me. You can challenge every point I make. That’s your right and if I

choose to engage you, as I do now, then I'll end up learning something. I'll probably end up learning a lot. (I ask that you treat me with respect, but that's different from trusting me.) Still, I disagree that I've printed "lies." We can argue facts. We can argue interpretations. We can argue definitions. We can argue whether Carol Dana "wrinkled up her face" or did something else when I mentioned the name Richard Garrett. But I did not *knowingly* print anything that was wrong nor do I think that anyone I interviewed *knowingly* said something that was wrong. You might argue that my intentions or their intentions are beside the point. I disagree. I did my best to be fair. I didn't interview a bunch of people who had just one perspective on this story. I interviewed people with many different perspectives. I didn't claim to have all the answers. I asked people questions and recorded *their* answers. So you can duke it out with Ives Goddard or Richard Garrett, but your fight, in that regard at least, is not with me. Still, here is what I *did* do and what I *will* take responsibility for: I wrote the story. I chose who to interview and what questions to ask and what to emphasize and what to de-emphasize. I chose how to order things and what to tell the reader and what to leave in my notes. All of that adds up to *my* perspective on things. I hope that, based on my interviews and my research, it was fair. You likely don't think so, and while I disagree, I'm a lot further in your direction than I was before you emailed me. So I sincerely thank you for that.

These circumstances are partly responsible for controversies that might otherwise puzzle outsiders: Why can't they agree on whether there are any native speakers left? (**we can, there are. The person who said there aren't was Richard, not a Penobscot**) Or, why would the publications of their legends be anything but a good thing?

BW: Here, I think, you are just plain wrong. There was disagreement among Penobscot tribe members about that and about plenty of other things. The tribe was many things, but a unified front on this issue is not one of them.

"My wife says we have a chip on our shoulder," Governor Dana, whose wife is white, said. "Well, we do, because that chip is a memory bank in which are stored all the past bad dealings between us and non-Indians."

Dana admits that the burden of that attitude has fallen on Harvard linguist Conor Quinn. "So when you see Conor, you see the non-Indian," he said, describing what he figures to be a prevalent attitude among Penobscot. "Uh-oh. What's he here for? What's he really after? And what are we going to get? He's going to get rich and famous and we're going to get nothing."

"All I can offer the Penobscots is Penobscot as analyzed by me," Quinn said. "But the Penobscots eventually would like Penobscot as presented by themselves and to give their own take on it, not filtered through this linguist or that linguist."

Even so, the tribe has instituted a new policy through which they hope to better control their contact with outsiders. The governor said that now any non-Indian who wishes access to Penobscot language, culture, stories or songs for the purpose of writing about

them must go before the tribal council's Preservation Committee and present a statement of purpose. If the committee were to approve the project, there would probably be contracts to sign, Dana said.

No such requirement was made in the preparation of this article, however. And Neptune said he is not interested in such a regulation as it might affect him. "This committee is not going to tell me how I can talk to people," he said, "because it's all history anyway."

What seems clear is that Barry Dana has his work cut out for him when it comes to revitalizing Penobscot on Indian Island. He described how the language meetings have been going.

"We have, or at least I've decided to accept, this constant initial part of the process, which is, 'I need to vent,'" he said. "'So I'm going to come to this language session, but I need to tell you that so-and-so beat my grandfather 50 years ago because he spoke Penobscot.' So we have to still live through all that oppression. And it's usually the first 10 to 20 minutes of the session before we get on to the future discussion."

February 20, 2006 | [Permalink](#)

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Comments

I have to say, your article is quite right on target. Good job, we don't see that too much around here. The thing that goads me though, is that the Preservation Committee isn't there to tell tribal members like James Neptune what to say or do, it was ment for non-tribal members. Poor Jameszee can't quite get through his blinders though. Penobscot Speaker

Posted by: Indian island Member | [May 26, 2006 at 01:06 PM](#)

Well written story save for a few misses. You obviously spent quality time with most of these folks because you've tabbed them well. But who is Ives Goddard to decide what "exactly" is the condition of a language. Usual Anthro-drivel. Also, I don't believe Pauleena MacDougall is a fluent speaker, and just so you know, for what's she's done to this tribe, it's the reason the Penobscot spirits struck down her son a few years back. Her pain shall never end. Connor is an all right guy, just to gooey for a place you need to be thick skinned. Barry was the best chief the tribe has ever had, too bad pettiness got a buffoon like James Sappier in there. Next time you do an article, do one on Timothy

Love and Robert Newell (Princeton Passamaquoddy) and how two men could do so much harm to their own people. Peace, kasi-jun-nisk-wee-noo , Billy Rath

Posted by: [William Francis](#) | [May 04, 2007 at 02:05 PM](#)