What I Learned on My Sabbatical

Part I. Introduction

“Dogs howl looking up because they are crying for their father whom they never knew.” That detail comes from the account of creation as told by Charles DePoe, a 19th century Siletz tribal leader. The importance of knowing one’s ancestors is repeated as the story of human creation unfolds. After the successful creation of human beings (following two failed attempts--the first results in the creation of dogs and the second, of snakes), First Woman has “sik təmtəm” (to be sick at heart) for the following reason: “She wishes to know who her father was and who her tilixam are.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

A digression is in order. The word tilixam—like the phrase *sik təmtəm*--comes from the Chinuk Wawa language. As used above, tilixam means “relatives.” Part of Charles DePoe’s accomplishment as a storyteller included his ability to tell stories in more than one language. This relative of mine has set forth the process by which he learned the stories he shared with Livingston Farrand over a hundred years ago: “My father’s grandfather told my father these stories so I know that they are true and my father told me before he died.” No doubt, these stories were told to him long before Ki-sa (Dee-ni’ name) became known as Charles DePoe. It seems unlikely that Livingston Farrand’s, who visited Siletz as part of the Villard Expedition in the summer of 1900, spoke any North American indigenous languages. It was lucky, therefore, that DePoe knew English. That’s how Livingston Farrand was able to make his extensive notes in 1900 as he listened to DePoe recite these stories. Farrand’s notes also include frequent use of Chinuk Wawa words and phrases. Because the number of Chinuk Wawa phrases appearing in DePoe’s accounts as transcribed by Livington Farrand far exceed the number of Dee-ni’ words, it seems likely that Charles DePoe first told these stories in Dee-ni’, then learned to tell the stories in Chinuk Wawa, and finally learned to tell them in English.

Charles DePoe, like many others brought under the force of the US government to Siletz, spoke (or learned to speak) a lingua franca at Siletz as a necessity. Siletz, since, the mid-1850s, has been the federally-designated homeland for dozens of indigenous peoples from diverse and distinct linguistic and cultural background and practices; it is the present home of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz. Before Siletz people used English as a lingua franca, they used Chinuk Wawa. And some Siletz families still have members living who speak this indigenous pidgin/creolized language while most everyone remembers ancestors speaking Chinuk Wawa.

Back now to the reason dogs howl. The most forceful expression of the cultural imperative for a person to know and remember their ancestors can be found in the last section of DePoe’s creation account where the plot is wholly devoted to the painstakingly slow solution to the first major problem in the human world: a child is born whose father is not known. This account ends with the happy scene of a child crying, “My father is home.” Instead of howling like a dog, the child can now live his life more happily for he knows—can see and feel for the first time—his father. The imperative to know and remember your ancestors finds ample further elaboration in DePoe’s creation account including the speech of the Creator, Xaa-waa-laa-chi, as he departs the earth with the following final instruction for First Man (aka Mus-le-ma-tsa-me-tsa-ne) and his family: “You and your wife and children shall all speak different languages and be the legends of the different tribes.”

Unlike dogs and snakes, we humans know our ancestors. We know where we come from. As a matter of course, we remember the first humans and their children who live now on this earth.

The importance of knowing ancestors has been carried forward at Siletz until the present. Siletz became DePoe’s home, and for many of his descendants and relatives, it has remained one. A relative of DePoe (yours truly) experienced first-hand in Siletz the importance of knowing your ancestors many decades after DePoe’s death. The place was the old Tribal Council Chambers (found in the current Community Center on Government Hill) and the discussion among Siletz people present centered on a particular Siletz person “who didn’t even know who their own father was.” It was as though a challenge was issued: “Beat this as a reason to pity a person.” Only silence followed. This was the last word—the worst that could be said about anyone. The person in question was, the story went, the product of an illicit relationship that left the child (now an adult) to falsely believe that the husband of her mother was also, in this instance, the father of her mother’s child.

Other indirect evidence of the importance of knowing your relatives and ancestors accompanied my childhood training. My mother, Mary Service Viles, modeled for me the practice of keeping track of your relatives/ancestors. She made a point to remember people whenever they were mentioned by reciting stories concerning them, and she virtually never failed to remember the precise ways we were related to these people and who their ancestors were (and who our ancestors were) and how they were related.

My sense is that Siletz is not the only place where the imperative to “know and remember your ancestors” remains strong. I would, if I had time, consult anthropological sources to verify this belief. This might be a service for my non-Siletz readers. For my family and friends at Siletz, we can simply ask ourselves the rhetorical question, “Who needs proof for what one knows through direct experience and shared narratives from trusted family sources to be true?” We know that tribal people typically gladly entertain an urge to remember their ancestors and to know their relatives.

An urge to better know and remember one’s relatives motivated me in 2018 to pursue research concerning to Siletz family stories. My goal was to encourage good feeling in myself and others by knowing more fully the experience of ancestors and relatives. In the context of traditional values, my objective was to become more fully human.

My sabbatical research, which took place under the rubric “Researching Two Siletz Family Stories,” focused on two “mysteries” in the lives of ancestors and relatives. One concerned my ancestor Julia Skelly whose son was kidnapped by whites sometime in the mid-19th century. My ancestor, it is well documented, always wondered what happened to that blue-eyed son. The other story concerns the origin of the Siletz family name, DePoe. When and how did the Siletz family name “DePoe” originate?

To find out more about both these areas in order to bring knowledge and comfort to friends, family, ancestors, and myself provided my sabbatical research its objective.

Part II. What I’ve learned concerning the case of Julia Skelly’s kidnapped son.

1. Findings: No records were located by me that either explicitly confirm or directly refute the hypothesis that the indigenous male child listed as a member of the William Tichenor household in the 1860 US Census, Rogue River, Oregon was, in fact, Julia Skelly’s kidnapped son. However, the following presumptions and circumstantial evidence suggest that the boy “Dick” listed in the 1860 census living in the household headed up by William Tichenor may have been Skelly’s kidnapped son.

* Port Orford was both where ships docked starting in 1856 to load indigenous refugees and evacuees (aka victims of ethnic cleansing) and where white settlers corralled groups of indigenous people before forcing them to march north to the Coast Reservation.
* Port Orford is located equidistant from Skelly’s ancestral home on the Sixes River and the William Tichenor’s Rogue River household listed in the 1860 US census.
* William Tichenor, widely hailed as founder of Port Orford, was present on the Oregon coast during this period of time.
* WIlliam Tichenor acted as a leader in the ethnic cleansing of indigenous peoples from the southwest Oregon coast beginning in the summer of 1856.
* The place of the boy’s kidnapping was likely at or near Port Orford, Oregon.
* William Tichenor includes in his unpublished diary a discussion of a meeting in the early 1850s on the southwest Oregon coast between Anson Dart, Tichenor, other white officials, on one side, and indigenous southwest Oregon Coast leaders, on the other, where the necessary translation was provided for by indigenous men who had been taken captives by whites as children, and Tichenor specifically noted the wisdom of such kidnapping actions.
* Julia Skelly’s son was likely kidnapped immediately prior to her departure to the Coast Reservation.
* Skelly’s removal to Siletz happened sometime after June, 1856 when the indigenous boy known as “Dick” would have been 3 or 4 years old.
* “Dick” was old enough, therefore, to be facile with language but young enough to be non-threatening and malleable.
* Both “Dick” and Skelly’s son were identified as “Indians.”
* Unlike others listed in the Tichenor household, “Dick” lacks a last name.
* William Tichenor is reported to have kept an indigenous slave—an adult female—later in his life.

While the William Tichenor family is often memorialized in the period 1856 to 1866 in local governmental records, no extant local records reviewed by me made mention of the Indian boy “Dick.”

1. Dissemination of Results. I visited the grave of Julia Skelly on Government Hill in Siletz, Oregon and reported there to her the results of my study.

Part III. What I learned concerning the origin of the DePoe family name at Siletz.

1. Summary: The Siletz family name DePoe was, as early as 1866, a site of resistance to the colonization of this land and its indigenous peoples and has continued to confound, directly and indirectly, colonizing efforts virtually continuously to the present day.
2. Findings include the following:

* An early appearance of the name “Depot Charley” in print in August, 1872 coincided with the jailing of “Too-too-tena Jack’s sister, and her Indian, ‘Depot Charley’” in Corvallis, Oregon.
* The reason for their jailing is that they threatened the life of Thomas Boyle, the US military veteran who had gunned down Too-too-tena Jack a few weeks earlier in Newport, Oregon.
* The historical record makes it clear that the name “Depot Charley” originated in the ten years between the summer of 1856 and the winter of 1866.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Analysis of the way “Depot Charley” was used in printed English prior to 1873 strongly suggests that the name not only failed to convey the racial identity of this person so named but also, in consequence of its neutral racial signification, confounded the colonizing imperative of racial categorization.
* Accounts of the origin of the DePoe family name have appeared in writing since the early 1930s.
* The initial published account of the name’s origin (1933) is based upon the testimony of no less an authority than Robert DePoe (son of “Depot Charley”) and written by no less a paragon of the US journalistic world than Joseph Patterson[[3]](#footnote-3).
* At least seven (7) different theories concerning the origin of the name “Depot Charley” and the transformation of that name into a Siletz family name exist in print.
* The confusion by which the name “Depoe Bay” as a geographical place name has long been pronounced as “Depot Bay” began at the time of the first appearance of “Depoe Bay” as the name of a geographical feature along the Oregon Coast in print in 1892.
* The word “depot” is generally pronounced today in most parts of Oregon as “DEE-poh” but sometimes a person can hear the variant “duh-PO” as in a recent OPB report concerning the Umatilla Military Depot.
* The general pronunciation serves to obscure the French origins of the English word, Depot.
* The historical denominational change from “Depot Charley” to “Charles DePoe” accentuates the French origins of the English word “depot.”

1. Dissemination of Results: As planned, I submitted an article to the *Siletz News* for publication. Five of the points mentioned above find elaboration in this article along with a discussion that provides context for the incarceration of Minnie DePoe (“Too-too-tena Jack’s sister) and Charles DePoe (a.k.a. “her Indian, ‘Depot Charley’”) in a Corvallis, Oregon subsequent to US military veteran Thomas Boyle’s murder of Too-too-tena Jack in July, 1872. After submission, the article was reviewed, proofed, edited and approved for publication which may occur as soon as Fall, 2019.

Part III. My sabbatical research process entailed contacting collections which held materials, searching through the collections, identifying relevant materials and then analyzing those materials. Some of these collections (including the records held in the vault of the Curry County Clerk) required me to physically travel to distant locations and turn pages in actual books and registers. Others, such as the University of Oregon’s digital archive of 19th-century newspaper, required online search procedures. Still other collections, such as the University of Oregon microform center which houses reals of film images of materials archived in distant places such as Washington, DC, required review using projection machines. Some of the materials I located required my payment of archivists in such places as Newport, Oregon, Seattle, Washington and Gold Beach, Oregon in order for them to make duplicates of records in their possession. I also used interlibrary loan to review print sources.

Part IV. Future Research. The sabbatical demonstrated to me that the story of the DePoe family name is a rich one both in terms of historical sources and in terms of providing insight to the present generation concerning the strategies Siletz people used to survive the ethnic cleansing of their homelands and later incarceration at Siletz. Few things would please me more than to extend my research into this topic, and my hope is to apply soon for an unpaid sabbatical leave for the purpose of researching and writing more on the topic of how the DePoe family name originated at Siletz once I am able to make necessary arrangements.

Part V. Final Reflection. In general, this project has been invaluable to my personal growth. It has strengthened in me that cultural imperative to know who your ancestors were and who your relatives are and has connected me more closely to my roots as a tribal person. Because this project has augmented my knowledge of my relatives, it has helped to strengthen me as a person, as a member of my family, as a member of my canoe family, as a citizen of the Siletz Nation, and as a member of the Lane College community, and as a member of the larger community in Eugene. It has made me a more mature, knowledgeable, culturally-connected and grounded person and employee.

This sabbatical has also contributed to the pursuit of knowledge in surprising ways and not so surprising ways.

What wasn’t surprising? It is no surprise that the article scheduled soon to be published in the *Siletz News* (mentioned above and attached as an appendix) answers several questions concerning the DePoe family name and also provides a basis for further research and study.

What was surprising? It is surprising that my skills as a literary analyst proved crucial in this research. My training in the area of carefully parsing the language of authors did, indeed, prove necessary in identifying some of the characteristics of the DePoe family name. As a result, students who aspire to degrees in the rhetorical arts (including English and composition) will soon have another published demonstration from which to learn—or at least, to take encouragement. Students of literary texts of all kinds will be able to consult this soon-to-be published article to see another example of how words—and the use of words—matter historically.

This sabbatical has also given relatives and friends of the DePoe family new reason to hold their ancestors and relatives in reverence and high esteem.

In addition, this sabbatical provides more stories for me and others to draw upon as we continue the work to identify and confound the colonizing practices/strategies that harm our persons, families, and communities.

Most importantly, this sabbatical has outlined the strategies of our ancestors who successfully confounded those colonizing forces. It gives us hope for a better future and means by which that better future might be acquired. In other words, my relatives have provided models for others to emulate, and my sabbatical work has helped to document that work of my relatives and ancestors. In that way, this helps a little to even out the tremendous imbalance that exists in the world of written discussions and analysis of Native culture and history. These words about Siletz ancestors and history come from a citizen of the Siletz Nation, and such written accounts as mine, I will estimate, approximate the percentage of Native faculty teaching in US colleges and universities when compared with accounts written by non-Natives.

May these words of mine help confound settler colonizing strategies and actions. That’s my final restful wish and sabbatical thought.

1. Please consider me quite lucky to have worked at an academic institution that has included for many years college-credit classes in one of my family’s ancestral American indigenous languages. In my view, it is something close to a miracle. It’s rare and it’s a beautiful thing that Lane Community College has done teaching Chinuk Wawa language classes for the last dozen years or so. It occurs to me to run the statistics. “Those who were American Indian/Alaska Native and those who were of two or more races each made up 1 percent or less of full-time faculty” in the U.S. according to a 2019 “Condition of Education” report published by the National Center for Education Statistics [<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_csc.pdf>]. While the number of institutions in the US offering classes in an indigenous language is growing, it remains small: the number, I guess, is that between 10-99 institutions of higher education offer courses in an indigenous language currently. 5300 is the number of total colleges and universities in the US (according to a quick Google search). 99/5300 = 2% chance. The chances of being a Native faculty is 1% (or less) and the chances of a college or university offering a Native language is less than 2%. Those statistics makes my current situation something close to miracle! Statistics for other continents vary, of course, but for easy comparison, European-Americans account for 70-80% of the professoriate. 100% of US colleges and universities offer classes in language indigenous to Europe (5300/5300). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. July, 1856 marked the successful completion of colonizing “ethnic cleansing” efforts along the southwest Oregon Coast and saw the man later known as “Depot Charley” and virtually all his family and relatives evacuated, removed, ejected and expelled from their homelands along the Rogue River (or killed in the process). 1866 is the date on a financial report that lists “Depot Charley, Indian” as a recipient of pay disbursed by governmental agents at Siletz. This 1866 report was published in 1868. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This scion of a wealthy Pittsburgh family with ties to such notable captains of US industry as Andrew Carnegie and Andrew Mellon—before his father’s death in the early 1920s--worked first as “a staff correspondent for the Portland, Oregonian” and then as “one of the city editors of the *Oregonian”* before serving as an ambulance driver during WWI. Portland newspapers published a series of lengthy articles, amply laced with hometown pride, concerning Patterson’s wartime service. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)