In less than seven short years from November 1833 to February 1840, Moses and Eliza Merrill accomplished many firsts:

* They created the first Sunday school for the Otoe Indians
* They were the first to baptize someone in Nebraska
* They were the first to conduct a wedding for white settlers in Nebraska
* They started the first temperance movement in Nebraska
* They were the first to translate hymns and the Bible into another language in Nebraska
* They were the first to receive a teaching contract in Nebraska and started what is today the Bellevue Public School District the first district in Nebraska.

Moses Merrill was born December 15, 1803; the sixth of thirteen children to a Revolutionary War veteran. Moses was converted to Baptist ways by his Congregationalist turned Baptist preacher father at age 13 and baptized at age 17 and licensed to preach at age twenty-five in 1829 while living in Albany, NY. About this same time, he felt called to share the gospel with the Native Americans and he met for the first time Eliza Wilcox.

Eliza Wilcox was three years older than her husband Moses, born June 3, 1800 to a Revolutionary War veteran and people of prominence in New England. She too had a heart for the disadvantaged and helped to open schools and orphanages in New York in the late 1820s. Her passion extended beyond the impoverished around her to the Native Indians.

She and Moses held similar passions and both taught Sunday School at the same congregation. When the New York Baptist State Board refused to appoint Moses to serve the Native Indians in western New York, he fled to Michigan where his brother Thomas Merrill was preaching and teaching in the area. After a few months of correspondence Moses and Eliza were united in marriage and missionary call at Eliza’s brothers home in LaGrange, Ohio June 1, 1830. They returned to Ann Arbor to preach and teach for a year. While there they formed the area’s first Bible Society. When Michigan denied their appeal to recognize their academy as a Baptist school, Moses and Eliza left for English Prairie, Indiana where Moses preached on Sunday’s and together they formed the first Temperance Society in the area.

After a complicated birth of their first born Moses Daniel, Eliza and the baby returned to Albany in the summer of 1831 to recover. Moses remained for another six months before joining her. Later that year the Merrill’s were commissioned as missionaries for the “The American Baptist Board of Foreign Missions” to the Indian Territories. Because of the harsh conditions in the westward territories the Merrill’s painfully chose to leave their son Moses Daniel in foster care in the east while they journeyed west to a yet unknown mission location.

After a very difficult temporary assignment in Michigan filled with death, disease, and travel difficulties, the Merrill’s were reassigned “west of the Mississippi” in 1832. Using carriages, horses, paddle boats, and trains they battled, heat, lack of adequate food, and cholera before finally reaching Shawnee, Kansas (location of Central Seminary west of KC). Upon arriving they were treated poorly by locals who feared their possible spread of cholera (who burned their boat at the dock) and the general resistance of the missionary movement (Calvinistic resistance of people leery of evangelism).

Their passion and determination to serve the Native population was never squelched however. Eliza wrote, “We have moved into a house filled with fleas, and I am so weak I know not how to clean it or prepare meals…Mr. Merrill killed a rattlesnake…It takes a great deal of time to secure food. We have to hunt for it and bring it a distance, and have no cellar, and the heat is intense. ***But one thing is certain, that the Indians will not be converted without the preached Gospel***.”

While in Shawnee, the Merrill’s were encouraged by their fellow missionary coworkers to head up a boarding school that would house 10-12 Indian children. Moses opposed this idea stating on July 29, 1833 in a letter to the Mission Board, “I am more and more convinced of the practicability and utility of village schools…the Board is aware that it is our wish to go into the midst of a village and commence operations…” This is the first clearly stated mission model from the Merrill’s where they articulate their desire not to pull Native Indians away from their context and families but rather enter into their context to share the gospel. For the rest of his ministry Moses always opposed the idea of boarding schools and always emphasized village/community schools. The Merrill’s would have a long relationship with the people of Shawnee, even after moving to Bellevue because they would often return to the Shawnee area for supplies and encouragement from fellow missionary friends.

The missionaries the Merrill’s were subbing for at Shawnee returned in the early fall of 1833. Desiring their posts back the Merrill’s were left with needing to find new missionary work. Upon advice from a friend, on September 16, 1833 Moses traveled for the first time north to an area described as “near the bluffs.” Moses and Eliza never referred to the area as Nebraska, but instead always as “Bellevue,” “the Platte,” the “Upper Missouri,” or simply “Indian Territory.” The journey was difficult and would have discouraged most from returning. For three weeks he battled wet conditions, cold temperatures, malaria, and exhaustion. But upon seeing the area and returning to his wife he felt compelled to return and set up missionary work among the Otoe people.

On November 18, 1833 Moses and Eliza Merrill along with missionary friend from Shawnee, Cynthia Brown arrived in Bellevue on foot. Their personal belongings arrived a few days later. The trio immediately began to build relationships and eke out a survivalist frontier life. Life was difficult for the all who lived there. Steam boats carrying supplies along the Missouri could only travel a few months a year. Mail was scarce. Supplies were slim. The area was filled with mice, snakes, wolf’s, deer, butterflies, along with oak, ash, and cottonwood trees.

The Otoe Indians lived less than a day’s ride from the Bellevue outpost. This village consisted of both the Otoe’s and the Missouiria Indian groups. But most simply referred to the group as the Otoe’s. Individuals from the village made appearances in the Bellevue trading post from time to time. Almost immediately Moses began holding church services for the trading post as well as hosting special services just for the Otoe’s. All meetings were held in the Merrill’s home. (He never officially planted a church). Sermons centered around basic Christian doctrine. The English services brought a manner of “civilization” to the rugged outpost. Conversions and baptisms of both whites and Native Indians occurred as a result of this unofficial congregation. The ministry included Eliza and Cynthia from the beginning. They read scripture, prayed, and sang songs together as a staff and deliberated on best practices and ministry opportunities.

Eliza and Cynthia began a school on their eigth day in Nebraska! Nine students from both the outpost and the Otoe’s attended. They learned English while Cynthia and the Merrill’s learned Otoe. By the summer of 1834 Moses had such a grasp on the Otoe language he had completed translation of his first batch of Scripture. They learned very quickly the best way to share the gospel with the Otoe’s was through singing. He translated hymns to be sung at the school, in church, and along the road. Meanwhile, Moses continued to travel into the Otoe village to build relationships with the leaders of the village. He was invited on hunts, traded for food, and translated huge portions of scripture. He always believed that the gospel should be presented in their native language. Teaching them English was for their ability to trade. For him the gospel had to be communicated in Otoe. By the end of 1834 Moses traveled to Shawnee to have three hundred copies of his first two Otoe books published—readers (scripture) and several hymns.

In the 1830’s Bellevue was called the “Whiskey Capital of Indian Country.” Drunkenness and resulting misconduct was common. Despite his teachings against drunkenness and the fact the government forbade alcohol sales to Indians the problems persisted. Many times both traders and area Native Indians tried to manipulate the Merrill’s to trade alcohol for needed supplies. As strong believers in temperance they did not give in.

In September 1835 the Merrill’s relocated from inside the Bellevue trading post. Their home was constantly filled with guests. Indians, traders, missionaries, travelers or all sorts made regular use of their hospitality. This move also allowed Moses to put into action his firm belief in the “village school” model. On March 9, 1835 at a salary of $500 a year from the government Moses Merrill became Nebraska’s first official public school teacher. He used his role and status to start a school for the Otoe’s in their own village. This honor should be shared with Eliza and Cynthia since they were also teachers at the school. The salary received was high for the time and would allow the Merrill’s to pay a farmer and a house helper to assist in their ministry. With such help Moses felt he could spend more time focusing on perfecting the Otoe language and culture.

The new mission site held a home for the Merrill’s, a home for the blacksmith and farmer, a school building, a work shed, and a study. All were built with roughhewn logs. Despite their traditional skin tents and spring and fall nomadic hunts by 1836 the Otoe’s began to build more permanent dwellings a mere 400 yards from the mission site creating upwards of 30 large houses made of similar cut timber as the Merrill’s mission buildings in addition to their 500 tents. The 16x20 school room was attempted to be the center of the ministry for the Merrill’s. However, in the Otoe tradition homes were the places of teaching and it soon became clear a school house would not be successful and all classes were once again held in the Merrill’s home. They expanded the home to eventually be 42x16 with a fireplace on the west wall and a cellar. Cleverly connected to this structure via fireplace chimney was the actual residence of the Merrill’s, that had two stories, six rooms, a cellar, two fireplaces, plus a stove. This multipurpose facility was home, school house, church, and boarding facility for guests. The home later became home to many Otoe’s as well when in 1838 Moses begrudgingly adopted a modified boarding school method to keep children away from the alcohol and violence in the Indian village.

Daily meals were provided by the Merrill’s for the Otoe students and guests. Dozens of children attended the weekly Sunday schools. Up to 50 men would attend the worship services plus women and children from the Otoe village along with residents of the Bellevue outpost. After a couple years of living in this nice large but fairly sparse home Eliza waited eagerly for supplies to increase the comfort of the home like furniture, blankets, dishes, etc only to be disappointed when the boat carrying said supplies sunk in the Missouri River in 1838.

Throughout their ministry Moses and Eliza along with Cynthia Brown (who eventually married and moved 100 miles north) taught children and adults alike the Bible, Christian Hymns, served as medical team, preached against the use of alcohol, preached against violence, and modeled humility and grace. They made friends with several of the Otoe’s and tried to be the presence of Christ in the context of a culture. For almost seven years they battled harsh prairie conditions, poor food supplies, and poor communication with the east and the mission board. There were challenges around every corner.

The three greatest challenges continued to be the use of alcohol, the leadership structure of the combined Otoe and Missouria tribes, and the poor health of Moses and Eliza.

Traders and trappers made a good living on trading supplies and services in exchange for alcohol sold to the Otoe’s and other groups in the area. Moses teaching against the use of alcohol placed some friction between his Platte Mission settlement and those in the Bellevue trading post. The tension rose to such a level that at one point traders attempted to have him removed from his official teaching position. Also the Otoe’s were regularly abusing the alcohol and getting into deadly fights.

The chief Otoe, Itan, was a friend of Moses. However Itan was a warrior who solved problems violently. During a drunken party some younger Otoe’s kidnapped one of Itans wives. Once they sobered up they promptly returned the wife to her home in the middle of the night. This action did not pacify Itan who eventually killed the two men. Caught in the middle were several other bystanders who were also injured in the gunfire including the best interpreter and four students of Moses and Eliza. Several months later Chief Itan was killed and several younger Otoe’s were fighting for control. They regularly threated the Mission at night where Eliza boldly defended the grounds and all inhabitants each night for a month while Moses was away seeking medical treatment for tuberculosis. She used a savvy mix of tribal politics and threats of shooting any intruders to her advantage. But the struggle left her an emotional wreck for years afterward.

 This issue was compounded when a new Indian Agent took control and sent Col. Kearney and 200 soldiers to fill the power vacuum. The Otoe’s chose not to fight against Col. Kearney and instead fought amongst themselves. This led to an internal alcohol fueled battle that left the Otoe village a heap of ashes. The new Indian Agent ordered the Otoe’s to rebuild their homes or else lose their treaty annuities. So weakened by the internal conflicts the Otoe’s essentially moved into extinction.

Health woes clung to Moses and Eliza. Several different times during their travels beginning in 1831 until Moses’ eventual death in 1840 one or both suffered from bouts with malaria, cholera, and small pox. Compounding these issues were exposure and lack of variety in diet. With so many dangerous diseases racking his body over time, on February 6, 1840 Moses died of tuberculosis at age 36. His wife Eliza was suffering at the same time of exhaustion, fever, and abdominal symptoms. Moses’ last wish was for someone to take over his and Eliza’s mission post to minister to the Otoe’s and help rebuild their village. The Otoe’s dubbed him “Tapoothka” ie “the one who always speaks the truth.” Moses was laid to rest on the east bank of the Missouri River, at that time the nearest “American” soil available and some good ways away from the mission house so as not to be disturbed by those who would desecrate the sight. The movement of the Missouri has since washed away his gravesite.

On August 24, 1840 six months after Moses died, Eliza wrapped up the final ministry matters and details of the mission house and resigned her post as a single woman and mother of three children (one on the east coast and two born in Bellevue). She returned to Albany, NY and was reunited with her eldest son who was now 7. She continued her ministry of working in schools and orphanages as she had done before her marriage to Moses. She later remarried Moses widowed brother, Thomas from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Together their blended family had six children. Thomas sought to create schools in Michigan laying the basic foundations to the University of Michigan and Kalamazoo College. Kalamazoo remained a Baptist school until the 1980s when it became a state college. A mostly unhappy marriage filled with hostile comments and abandonment, Eliza filed for divorce in 1856. She would continue to travel living in Minnesota and Kansas, before permanently living with her son Samuel and his wife Amanda as they pastored in Maine and New York. Eliza died in Rochester, New York on November 12, 1882 at the age of 82, forty-two years after her on true love Moses had died.

The grand adventure that the Merrill’s faced together with help from fellow missionaries and the Bellevue outpost is one great dedication. Some might classify their ministry as unsuccessful. Nothing but a lone chimney remains of their time in Nebraska. The missionaries who came after them never lasted long. The Otoe people eventually succumbed to internal fighting and essentially became extinct. And Moses gravesite has been washed away with the power of a changing river. But through it all Moses and Eliza were faithful to their call to serve witness to the Otoe people in their context and language. Together they did many first’s in Nebraska.

It is no wonder he earned the right to be called, Tapoothka, the one who always speaks the truth.