

# On the Revival of Printing in the Cherokee Language

by John K. White

IT IS NOW NEARLY 150 YEARS since the efforts of one man, Sequoyah, transformed his Cherokee people into a literate nation. Once as he talked with friends, the conversation drifted to the subject of the whiteman's "Talking Leaves." By making marks on a piece of paper, someone said, the whitemen could send a message hundreds of miles and have it fully understood. They all wondered at the great wisdom of a people who could do such a mystical thing. Sequoyah then took a stick and made some marks in the dust. "Look, any fool can do that," he said, and rattled off a few words, seeming to read the marks he had made. Everyone laughed at that, and the conversation went on to another topic. But Sequoyah remembered the incident. He realized how important it was to be able to put words down on paper. So he began to think about giving his people "Talking Leaves" also. Letting his farm go to weeds and his family depend on relatives for food, Sequoyah built a small cabin where he could work in privacy. For 12 years he labored, obsessed with his dream. Once his wife's relatives succeeded in luring him from his cabin and then burned it to the ground. They hoped that by destroying all his work they would turn him from his folly.

Sequoyah had first attempted to make a sign for a whole word. When, after his years of labor had been destroyed, he could remember only a handful of the thousands of signs he had invented, he realized that he was on the wrong track. He returned to his labors with renewed vigor. He realized that although there were thousands of words in the Cherokee language, they were composed of a much smaller number of syllables repeated over and over in various combinations. Superstitious people, hearing him uttering unintelligible

sounds as he tried to discover all the syllables found in Cherokee, thought he was involved in black magic. He would listen intently to conversation, straining to catch a new syllable; and then would repeat it over and over so he would not forget it. This undoubtedly was very disconcerting to his few remaining friends. But now, at least, he was on the right track. By 1819 Sequoyah had perfected a Syllabary of 85 characters that was ideally suited to Cherokee phonetics. At first, the only person who would bother to try to learn the Syllabary was his 6-year old daughter. When, however, in front of a group of the head men of the tribe, she read off a message that had been dictated to her father, people began to be convinced.

Within a year thousands of Cherokees were able to read and write in their own language. Those who had learned the Syllabary would go home and teach their families, or stop people on the road to ask them if they had learned it. Overnight the whole nation became a school. Young men would travel just so they could send a letter home or to a sweetheart. Cherokee Christians translated parts of the Bible into their language, and these were passed around in manuscript. Cherokee Shamans copied down their sacred songs and formulas that had been passed on by word of mouth for countless generations. By the year 1828 the Cherokee nation had a national press and was printing a weekly newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, in English and Cherokee.

Between 1828 and 1835 the press at New Echota, the Cherokee Capital, also issued a number of portions of the Bible, copies of the laws passed by the National Council, various political pamphlets, 4 editions of a Cherokee Hymn Book, temperance tracts, and re-

ligious documents. Copies of correspondence between the Cherokee nation and the United States Government were always printed in the newspaper. Thus the Cherokees were kept informed of current affairs to a degree not often found in that day and age. The "Current Events" was largely the efforts of the United States Government to force the Cherokee nation to emigrate west of the Mississippi. Cherokee territory had shrunk by 1830 to approximately the northern third of Georgia and small parts of Alabama, Tennessee and North Carolina. At that point the Cherokees refused to cede any more of their homeland. Several thousand people, however, had moved west of the Mississippi of their own accord to keep away from the encroaching white men.

In 1835 a printing press which was to be employed in printing in the Cherokee language was set up in the western Cherokee country. Between 1835 and 1861 this press printed 13,980,000 pages of books, tracts, pamphlets, and passages from the Bible. In the Spring of 1839 the remainder of the Cherokee Nation arrived, about 13,000 survivors of the "Trail of Tears," the Cherokee Removal. A small number of unauthorized persons had signed a treaty of removal in 1835. Against the protest of 90 percent of the Cherokee Nation this spurious document was ratified by the Senate and the emigration of the Indians demanded by the government. The great majority of the Cherokees, unwilling to abandon their homeland, refused to move and were driven from their homes by thousands of soldiers. They were rounded up in stockades and sent in large groups on foot to the west. The Trail of Tears took 9 months, from the fall of 1838 through the winter to the spring of 1839. Over 4,000 Cherokees, mostly children and aged, died of starvation and exposure.

By 1843 the Cherokee Nation had recovered sufficiently to authorize the establishment of another national press. The following year the *Cherokee Advocate* appeared. The paper contained 4 pages of 6 columns each, in English and Cherokee. Publication of the paper was suspended for lack of funds in 1853 and was not resumed until 1870. With slight interruptions it was published from that time until 1906.

With re-establishment of a national press, Cherokee literature flourished. An annual *Almanac* was published for

# CHEROKEE SYLLABARY

## G W Y J S G T D J

D a	R e	T i	Ꭰ o	Ꭱ u	i v
Ꭶ ga Ꭰ ka	Ꭶ ge	Ꭶ gi	A go	J gu	E gv
Ꭶ ha	Ꭶ he	Ꭶ hi	Ꭶ ho	Ꭶ hu	Ꭶ hv
W la	Ꭶ le	Ꭶ li	G lo	M lu	Ꭶ lv
Ꭶ ma	Ꭶ me	H mi	Ꭶ mo	Ꭶ mu	
Ꭶ na	Ꭶ ne	h ni	Z no	Ꭶ nu	Ꭶ nv
t hna	G nah				
T kwa	Ꭰ kwe	Ꭶ kwi	Ꭶ kwo	Ꭰ kwu	E kwv
Ꭶ sa Ꭰ s	4 se	Ꭶ si	Ꭶ so	Ꭶ su	R sv
Ꭶ da	Ꭶ de	J di	V do	S du	Ꭶ dv
W ta	Ꭶ te	J ti			
Ꭰ dla Ꭶ tla	L tle	C tli	Ꭶ tlo	Ꭶ tlu	P tl v
G tsa	Ꭶ tse	Ꭶ tsi	K tso	J tsu	C tsv
G wa	Ꭰ we	Ꭰ wi	Ꭰ wo	Ꭶ wu	Ꭶ wv
Ꭰ ya	Ꭶ ye	Ꭰ yi	Ꭶ yo	G yu	B yv

many years in English and Cherokee. The *Cherokee Messenger*, a bi-monthly religious magazine, was printed, as well as numerous tracts, primers, spelling books, arithmetics, Bible passages, a complete New Testament, hymn books, and other miscellaneous publications. The Constitution and laws of the Cherokee Nation were printed in various editions. Resolutions of the National Council, messages of the Chiefs, even current acts of the legislative council were printed and promptly circulated among the people. As a result, the Cherokees became better informed of their laws and the actions of their public servants than members of any other Indian tribe.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Cherokee Nation was split in two. All progress ceased in the killing and destruction that ensued. At the war's end, the nation was a shambles with thousands of Cherokees homeless and the bitterest hatred between factions. Most of the Cherokee capital, Tahlequah, had been burned to the ground, although the old printing press had been hidden and so survived the war. It took only 5 years to find the Cherokee nation again unified and progressing. By 1870 the *Cherokee Advocate* was again being published, and distributed free to those who spoke only

Cherokee. The school system was revised and work started on a series of textbooks in the Cherokee language. But times were changing. The United States government was no longer interested in the continued existence of semi-independent Indian Nations within the national boundaries. One by one the rights of Cherokee citizens under their own National Government were taken away and placed under United States jurisdiction. An attempt was made to collect money and purchase land in Mexico where Cherokees could retain their national identity. This failed. In 1907 with the achievement of Oklahoma's statehood, the United States Government formally dissolved the Cherokee Nation.

Although there is not now, 55 years later, officially a Cherokee Nation, the Cherokees are still here. There are some 30,000 or so in Oklahoma and 3,000 still in their old homeland in the mountains of North Carolina. They are the remnant of those Cherokees who escaped from the camps and hid in the mountains. Perhaps a third can still speak Cherokee fluently and of these many of the older people still read and write in their native tongue.

Of Cherokee descent through my father's family, I have long been interested in preserving the language. One

important factor, I felt, in the decline of the language was the fact that there was nothing to read printed in Cherokee; the availability of reading material might stimulate interest and pride. It is hard to express the pride that Cherokees feel in having their own written language.

I learned that the most efficient and economical method of printing is by the photo-offset process. In this method, the material is photographed, a metal plate is made from the negative, and this is put on an off-set printing press. The difficulty is in preparing the original copy. Either older material that has already been printed, hand written copy, or a "proof sheet" taken from copy set with printing type, can be photographed.

From a library I obtained a list of book dealers. I chose all those in Oklahoma and any others whose specialty was American Indians. It was not a complete listing, but I sent out letters to 50 or 60 bookdealers asking about Cherokee books. Two dealers had Cherokee material and from one I obtained a set of proof sheets for the book of Genesis printed in 1853 and from the other a small Cherokee hymn book printed in 1909.

In the spring of 1961, under the imprint of Cherokee Phoenix publications, I published a 16-page booklet containing the first 8 chapters of the book of Genesis. This was the first Cherokee language publication that I distributed in an effort to revive interest in preserving Sequoyah's great gift to the Cherokee language. Since the spring of 1961 Cherokee Phoenix Publications has printed *Genesis 1-8*, *The Cherokee Hymn Book*, *The Swiss Peasant*, and reprinted one issue of the old *Cherokee Phoenix*. A newsletter, *Tsalagi Tsineki* (*The Cherokee Speaker*), has been sent to a mailing list that has grown from 12 Cherokees in North Carolina to 175 Cherokees in 8 states (9 of whom get bulk mailings) and about 30 anthropologists and other interested persons.

With encouragement and assistance from the editor of *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY*, by June of 1962 enough money had been accumulated through donations from Cherokees and a generous grant from the American Council of Learned Societies to pay for a new font of Cherokee Type. It was probably the fourth time in history—and the first in nearly 100 years—that Cherokee type was cast. Using sketches and an Italic type face by Eric Gill as a model, Torvald Faegre, a student at Roosevelt University in Chicago, designed the type face. I had chosen an Italic type face for 2 reasons: Cherokee handwriting is frequently written in a slanted fashion and compared with the style of the





guage and a number of parents have said they are teaching their children. This has been the result of Cherokees' passing on by word of mouth the information that books are available. Until this summer, printing has been limited to old Cherokee books available for re-printing or to hand-written copy. The major work that has to be done in the next year is to create a broader base for Cherokee printing. Perhaps a dozen people have given their time and skill so far, but we need a firmer financial footing. A great deal of field work must be done, for that will be the only way to find potential journalists for a new Cherokee literature. Who are those people who are actively trying to keep alive the interest in the Cherokee language? Several people are teaching language and reading classes. How many others are there, teaching informal little groups? What are their needs in the way of text books and readers?

What part will books in the Cherokee

language have in increasing the number of people speaking Cherokee? What kind of material is needed for those people with a limited knowledge of the language? There has never been a Cherokee-English dictionary or grammar published, although there was a scattering of grammatical material in the early 1800's. And of course an obvious question is just what do Cherokees want to read?

Most of these questions have answers; it only remains to find them. Will Cherokee writing continue even when nearly everyone can speak and read and write English? One has only to hear the pride in his voice when a Cherokee talks about reading and writing his own language, to know that it is still a living force.

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*Bibliography and History of Cherokee Printing by Raymond Yamachko*; information on availability of a photocopy or microfilm could be had by writing the Univ. of Oklahoma Library, Norman, Oklahoma.

## Offered

► The Kahn Test of Symbol Arrangement is a personality-culture evaluation technique designed by an anthropologist as a substitute for the use of the typical psychological instruments (such as the Rorschach, TAT, and Wechsler) for use in anthropological research. The test yields a number score and an individual letter pattern reflecting levels of cultural-symbolic thinking typifying individuals and specific culture groups. The test, which takes only fifteen minutes to administer and less than three minutes to score, can be given individually or, in a special format, to groups of any size. An extensive literature of over 25 publications reveals high validity and reliability for the identification of different types of populations.

The test consists of fifteen plastic objects with a variety of colors and culturally significant shapes. All are symbolically significant as described in the United Nations study mentioned in the test manual. The manual gives complete instruction for administration,

scoring and evaluating the test. Fifteen studies are abstracted in the manual which also gives the test's rationale and explains how it can be interpreted. Another manual called the KIT shows how these same test materials can be used for obtaining an IQ level uncontaminated by either educational or cultural factors. The KIT can be given by sign language and even to blind persons. Test materials, manuals and other details are available from the following source:

Psychological Test Specialists, Box 1441, Missoula, Montana, U.S.A. Authorities offering free consultation services on the use of the KTSA are:

*Mental functioning, imagination, creativity:* Dr. Luciano L'Abate, Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, Washington University, St. Louis, Mo., U.S.A.

*Rationale, mental health application:* Father William L. Kelly, Ph.D., Georgetown University, Washington, D. C., U.S.A.

*Personnel selection, group studies:* Dr. J. L. Latham, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas, U.S.A.

*Free copy of up-to-date bibliography, foreign translations of the test, scoring, use with children's groups:* Lt. Larry K. Hill, Box 1559, Lackland AFB, Texas, U.S.A.

## Meetings

► The Society for Ethnomusicology will hold its 7th Annual Meeting at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, U.S.A., November 29-December 2, 1962. Three major symposia will deal with problems of central concern to ethnomusicology. There will also be special events and contributed papers, which will be limited to 20 minutes in length. Those wishing to present papers should send an abstract of 250 words to GEORGE LIST, Maxwell Hall, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, U.S.A.