

# The Miracle of the Talking Leaves

During his boyhood, Sequoia the Cherokee received a leg injury that made him walk with a limp for the rest of his life. But the handicap did not prevent him from enlisting on the side of the United States in the War of 1812—the war from which he returned with a dream.

Before the war Sequoia had been a

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gifted craftsman and silversmith, supporting his family well and keeping the house and garden neatly tended. When he returned his whole way of life was changed, for he came home listening to the voices of the talking leaves.

When had the wonderful talking leaves first whispered to him? No one knows. Perhaps as a child he had seen the white men talk with paper. Perhaps he had seen them go to the talking leaves that other men had made and find there the answer to a problem. Perhaps he had seen soldiers making marks on that thin stuff they called paper. Leaves went out and other leaves came back, bringing news of wives and children and home. For himself there was no news—not one word in two long years—for the Cherokee had no written language.

What a glorious gift such a language would be to the Cherokee! To be able to talk across the miles, keep the records of the people, and set down the old knowledge!

So Sequoya came to his great task. Of course the task was impossible—any student of language could have told him that. Specially trained white people had already attempted to set down the Cherokee tongue, but the language was too complex, too unlike English. However, Sequoya's great strength lay in his determination. He could neither read, write, nor speak English and therefore approached his task with no preconceived ideas.

In the beginning he tried to develop a form of picture writing much like that which handicaps the Chinese today. Month after month he worked, creating a different pic-

ture for every word, drawing the designs on bark with charcoal. The house and garden began to deteriorate, and his friends began to whisper about his obsession. And then one day while he was away his wife collected his hundreds of bits of bark and pitched them into the fireplace.

When Sequoya saw what she had done he took his six-year-old daughter Ah-yoka, left the house, and never returned. He and Ah-yoka established their home in a deserted cabin, and Sequoya started again on the impossible task of making the leaves talk in Cherokee.

Then a wonderful stroke of good fortune befell the outcast, for as he and Ah-yoka were out walking one day, they found a strange flat thing in the grass. It was a book—the talking leaves of the white man.

Sequoya took it back to his cabin and examined it carefully. He could not understand the strange black lines of—what were they? He could not call them letters, for that was a new idea to him, but he noticed that the marks were repeated. Was that it—a sign for a sound? Yes—there were twenty-six signs repeated over and over again, a few combinations of sounds making up all the words!

He began his work again, but this time it was easier—much, much easier. Eventually he identified two hundred sounds—syllables, really—in the Cherokee language, and developed a system for writing them, using some English letters and making up others of his own. With this system he could set down his thoughts, and Ah-yoka, quick to learn, could read them back.

He spent the next several years perfect-

ing his system, weeding out certain syllables that he now recognized as combinations of simpler syllables, and emerging at last with only eighty-six characters. Now it was time to present his system to his people. He got permission to unveil his work at the tribal council.

Ah-yoka was now about ten and almost as skillful as her father at writing. It was agreed that the council would dictate to her, she would set the words down, and Sequoya would then read back what she had written.

As the slim little girl sat down at the table, surrounded by solemn, bronzed faces, Sequoya laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and then left the room.

The moment about which he had dreamed was finally at hand—his personal moment of truth. Years of his life had gone into this work, and now everything depended upon the quick mind of a little girl. Would the knowledge of how much it meant to him make her panic?

The door opened, a hand beckoned, and Sequoya reentered the room. He picked up

the paper filled with the curious markings that had been born in his own mind. Then he started to read—and he read it all.

The tribal council was stunned and silent. The words they had given to the girl had come back to them as if by magic. The leaves could be made to speak in Cherokee!

Then the silence broke and the excitement grew until there was a buzz of sound in the room. The solemn men became very enthusiastic, crowding around to see the strange marks.

The whole Cherokee nation was electrified as the news spread. They begged Sequoya to teach them—and they learned. They learned to read and write, and they became a literate people in a shorter time—within a year—than any other race anywhere.

Sequoya's accomplishment was unequalled by any man before or after him. He is the only person in the entire history of the world to invent, completely by himself, a simple and usable written language—an almost impossible personal triumph for an uneducated Cherokee genius.

## CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. During the war of 1812, Sequoya**
  - A received the injury that made him limp
  - B decided to write the Cherokee language
  - C Both A and B
- 2. The reason others had failed to write Cherokee was probably that they**
  - A had no genuine interest in the problem
  - B were not well-trained language experts
  - C tried to treat it as if it were English
- 3. The story implies that a system of writing that uses a picture for each word is**
  - A preferable
  - B inconvenient
  - C impossible
- 4. Sequoya left home because**
  - A the house had become a ruin
  - B most of his friends had left
  - C his wife had destroyed his work
- 5. Sequoya discovered that in the white man's system of writing, each mark stood for**
  - A a sound
  - B a word
  - C an idea
- 6. In his writing system, Sequoya used**
  - A English letters
  - B marks he invented
  - C Both A and B
- 7. The writing system Sequoya presented to the council contained**
  - A two hundred six characters
  - B eighty-six characters
  - C twenty-six characters
- 8. At the council meeting, the message to be written down was supplied by**
  - A Sequoya
  - B Ah-yoka
  - C the council members
- 9. After Sequoya read the message, the first reaction of the council was one of**
  - A amazement
  - B suspicion
  - C amusement
- 10. The Cherokee nation learned the written language with great**
  - A reluctance
  - B difficulty
  - C rapidity

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