

## LETTERS FROM GRANDPA

# 221

Dearest grandchild,

Today's letter will deal with the great Cherokee scholar named Sequoyah. Granny's father, Claud Coppenger, was a half breed Cherokee and members of the family believe that their ancestry can be traced back to this famous man. The prophet Hosea wrote: "**My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge**" (Hos. 4:6) Sequoyah was a believer in Christ who felt his people were also being destroyed because of a lack of knowledge. Therefore he dedicated his life to educating his people. Sadly, there are still many people today who are being destroyed because of a lack of knowledge.

Sequoyah was born in the 1770's in the village of Tuskegee on the Tennessee River. His mother was a Cherokee named Wut-teh, from the Paint Clan. His father was thought to be a German fur trader named Nathaniel Gist. When Wut-teh gave birth her son was called "Sikwo- yi" (Sequoyah) which means "pig's foot". He was lame in one leg, apparently from birth.

When the whites encroached on their land in Tennessee, the Cherokees moved to Georgia. There Sequoyah learned to work with silver. Charles Hicks, a wealthy farmer in the area who could read and write English. He wrote "Sequoyah" on a piece of paper and suggested that the young engraver autograph his works like the white silversmiths did. FYI, Charles Hicks was the first convert to Christ among the Cherokees and obviously had a great influence on Sequoyah.

In 1809 Sequoyah became obsessed with developing an alphabet for his people. His efforts made him an object of ridicule. Since he had no access to pen and paper, he made his marks upon pieces of bark with a knife or a nail. His wife once burned his barks and his neighbors accused him of necromancy. Undeterred, the Cherokee genius repeated the sounds of his own language until he had identified 86 sounds which he could represent by marks on a page. This labor of love took twelve long years.

In 1821 he submitted his Cherokee syllabary to a public test for the leaders of his nation. It is said that Sequoyah and one of his sons were placed at some distance from each other. Sentences were dictated and the writings were carried back and forth by trusted messengers. It worked! Gradually the Cherokees came to accept Sequoyah's invention as a valuable tool for education. The simplicity of his system made it possible to learn to read in only a few days. It was said that within only a few months virtually the whole nation became literate.

In 1824 a young native convert in the Moravian mission named Atsi, made a translation of a portion of St. John's Gospel into the Cherokee language. These precious words were copied hundreds of times and widely distributed throughout the nation. In 1825, David Brown, a Cherokee preacher, completed a translation of the entire New Testament Scriptures.

In 1827 Sequoyah, and other leaders of the tribe, went to Washington and signed a treaty. He was promised \$500 in recognition of the benefits he conferred upon the tribe by the invention of their alphabet. The tribe was also promised \$1,000 to set up a printing press. Six years later Sequoyah had received only \$389.75. Sequoyah referred to government writing as "talking leaves". This was biting satire. Sequoyah felt that the white man's treaties dried up and blew away like leaves.

It was also in 1827 that the Cherokee council appropriated funding for the establishment of a national newspaper. Early the next year a hand press and Cherokee characters were shipped from Boston to New Echota, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. The first issue appeared Feb. 21, 1828 and was called “Tsa la gi Tsu lehisnunhi” or the “Cherokee Phoenix”. This project was financed by the Cherokees themselves as none of the promised funds came from the government. This was the first Indian newspaper to be published in the United States.

After being forced from Tennessee to Georgia and then to Arkansas, the Cherokees were forced to move again. This time it was to Oklahoma, or “Indian Territory”. Sequoyah wound up with 10 acres of cleared land and three small cabins. A visiting merchant said that he had 2 mules, 3 yoke of oxen, a wagon, and a small stock of cattle and hogs. It was said that during his life he had 5 wives and 20 children. The merchant told him that he thought the ability to read and write was more valuable to the Cherokees than a bag of gold. Sequoyah responded that Governor Houston was even more complimentary and said that it was worth more than a double handful of gold to each man in the nation.

Though advanced in years and in failing health, Sequoyah started out in 1842 for Mexico. He had heard of an isolated band of Cherokees who lived there and apparently wanted them to be literate and also to know about Jesus. History records that he made it there, but never came back. He is thought to have died in San Fernando Mexico though his grave has never been found. May God richly bless the memory of Sequoyah. He dedicated his life to keep his people from perishing for the lack of knowledge. May the legacy of his life inspire us to also give ourselves in service to our God and our people.

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce