

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA # 130

Dearest grandchild,

Today's letter will deal with a famous man named Sequoyia. He was the man who invented an alphabet for the Cherokee Nation. As you probably know, Granny is 25 % Cherokee. Her maiden name was "Coppenger" and some in her family believe they are related to this famous man. Sequoyia spent his life in service to God and his people, and perhaps by reading about him you will be also be inspired to do the same. When you see a problem, God can help you to solve it.

The Bible states: **"My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge"** (Hos. 4:6). How true! Ignorance is like a ball and chain to progress. Sequoyah was definitely a great educator and he did bring knowledge of his people. Even though he had no birth certificate, we know he 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 he was born they called him "Sikwoyi" or "Sequoyah". This means "pig's foot" in the Cherokee language. He was lame in one leg, apparently from birth.

When the whites encroached on their land Sequoyah moved to Georgia and learned to work with silver. Charles Hicks was a wealthy farmer in the area who wrote English. He was the first convert to Christ among the Cherokees. To help young Sequoyah he wrote his name on a piece of paper and suggested that he sign his works like the white silversmiths did. Sequoyah not only learned to write his name, but in 1809 became obsessed with developing an alphabet for his people.

Sadly, 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 over and over 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 leading men of the nation. It is said that Sequoyah and one of his sons were placed a some distance from each other. Sentences were dictated and the writings were carried back and forth by trusted messengers.

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. It was copied hundreds of times and widely distributed among the Cherokees. 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 an agreement with the government. He was promised \$500 in recognition of the benefits he conferred upon his people by the invention of their alphabet. The tribe was also promised \$1,000 to set up a printing press. Unfortunately, the U.S. Government has not been good about keeping promises to Indians. Six years later Sequoyah had received only \$389.75. The tribe received nothing.

Sequoyah referred to writing as “talking leaves”. This was apparently a use of biting satire as he felt that the white man’s words dried up and blew away like leaves when the treaties no longer served his purpose. Also in 1827 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 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 he had done a more valuable service to his people than if he had given each of them a bag of gold. Sequoyah responded that Governor Houston had told him 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. He made it to Mexico, but never made it home. 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, who did what he could to keep his people from perishing for the lack of knowledge.

But what about you and me? When we see things through the eyes of Jesus we never run out of things to do that need to be done. In the upper room, for example, everybody knew that everyone’s feet needed to be washed, but only Jesus took the basin and towel and did it. May God also inspire each of you to see something that needs to be done and do it.

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce