

CADMUS OF THE CHEROKEES

BY ROBERT M. HYATT

ONE BRIGHT morning, in the year 1840, there came down into the Land of Cibola one of the most peculiar expeditions the world has ever seen. It was an expedition in search of knowledge and was headed by Se-quo-yah, that most famous of all Indians. He it was who, some years before, earned the title of American Cadmus, by his invention of the Cherokee alphabet—the first Indian alphabet ever compiled—which feat will forever rank as one of the amazing things in our nation's history.

This queer expedition had started out from the Cherokee Nation in Arkansas. It was the result of a great dream which Se-quo-yah had—a vision of a beautiful future for his savage people, the Cherokee, who had by now, thanks to his tireless teachings, become a more or less law-abiding, moral people.

Se-quo-yah thirsted for knowledge. He sought material for a book he intended writing, a book that would prove his theory that all languages—especially those of the Indian tribes—had a connecting link between them. He had heard the ancient tradition that a part of his people were in New Mexico, having been separated from them sometime before the advent of the white men. Somewhere there he expected to find a missing link in the linguistic chain. Somewhere there in the beautiful, haze-covered land of the early Conquistadores, this famous philosopher, teacher, and prophet hoped to find the key to a burning secret . . . and the fulfillment of a glorious dream.

Just how Se-quo-yah, brother of savage tribesmen, should undertake such a noble enterprise; how an Indian, uncivilized and unlettered, should ever acquire such strange ambitions, is certainly worthy of some explanation.

So we must turn back the pages of history some seventy years to the spring of 1770, when young America was striving to throw off the yoke of British dominance. On a morning of that year Se-quo-yah was born, of a Cherokee mother and a German father by name of George Gist. Of the latter little is known other than that he abandoned his Indian wife some time before the advent of the child, and was never heard of again.

Se-quo-yah's youth is little less interesting than his invention of the Cherokee alphabet. Around the wigwam fires he was taught the ancient traditions of his ancestors and, that bravery in the chase and on the warpath assured everlasting pleasure after death in that land known to all Indians as the Happy Hunting Ground.

His mother reared him with the utmost tenderness, and in the crude language of her race instilled in him the only religion she had ever known—that a “good god” resided in the east, and a “bad god” held sway in the west; that no warrior felt himself secure until he had addressed his god, and no hunter ever dreamed of success until before the rising sun.

Se-quo-yah, who never saw his father and could never utter a word of German, still carried deep in his nature an odd compound of Indian and German transcendentalism; essentially Indian in opinion, but German in instinct and thought. He talked with his people upon all the points of law, religion, and art. He hungered for knowledge and advice, and many are the long hours that he spent with the old men of his tribe, seeking answers to his questions.

To his mother, undoubtedly, was due all the energy and perseverance of his nature; his meditative and philosophical inclinations came from his father.

He early developed a mechanical ability. He traded furs for pieces of silver and English and Spanish coins. These he beat into rings and breastplates and bells for the ankles. He soon became the greatest silversmith of his tribe, yet he was never taught this trade.

After his mother had died, Se-quo-yah resolved to be a blacksmith. He never asked to be taught, but visiting the white men's shops, he freely used his eyes, and with them learned how to use his hands. He became an excellent blacksmith.

For some years he continued thus, and in the meantime turned his hand to drawing. He made many sketches of animals and houses, which were as crude as those which the Indians drew upon their dressed skins, but which improved so rapidly as to present a striking resemblance of the figures intended to be copied. He had probably at this time never seen a picture or engraving, but was led to these exercises by the stirring of an innate propensity for the imitative arts.

Se-quo-yah's territory abounded in all the choice gifts of nature, which he loved intensely. Across the Cherokee Nation stretched a lofty range of mountains. There were extensive plains, and streams filled with trout, and great forests where birds sang all day long.

From all these beautiful things of nature came the inspiration that guided Se-quo-yah's hand in the sketching of his pictures—pictures that eventually led to the education of his people.

About the time that General Washington had taken, for the second time, his oath of office as President of the United States, the Cherokees took a white man prisoner, and in his pocket they found a crumpled piece of paper, a letter. The shrewdness of the prisoner prompted him to interpret this letter for his own advantage. The story the "talking leaf" told filled the Indians with wonder and they accepted it as a message from the Great Spirit. The matter was laid before Se-quo-yah, who was even then accounted by them as a brave favored by the gods. He believed it to be simply an invitation of the white men.

"Much that red men know, they forget," he stated. "They have no way to preserve it. White men make what they know fast on paper, like catching the wild panther and taming it."

But Se-quo-yah was intrigued. He pondered the mystery of the "talking leaf" for weeks and months. In whatever work he was engaged the longing to solve the problem followed him. He never forgot the mystery of the written page. It became the mania of his life—and thus was born the germ of a great invention.

From this time on he watched the use of books and papers in white men's hands. He could neither read nor speak a word of English, but chance put him in possession of a whole bundle of "talking leaves," in the form of an old English speller. Eagerly he searched this book in the seclusion of his wigwam, attentively he listened, but not one of the talking leaves as much as whispered to him the secret they concealed. He was not discouraged.

One evening some young braves were lounging around the campfire, and the topic of conversation was the superior talents of the white man. One said that the pale faces could put their talk on paper and send it to any distance, and those who received it could understand its message. They all agreed this was strange, but they could not see how it was done.

Se-quo-yah, sitting quietly by himself, suddenly rose.

"Huh! You are fools," he said. "The thing is easy. Look, I will do it myself."

Picking up a flat stone, he began scratching on it with a pointed stick, and after a few moments he read to them a sentence which he had written, making a symbol for each word. His attempt to write produced a general laugh, and the conversation ended. But this laugh stung Se-quo-yah to action and he began putting his inventive powers to work. He resolved then and there to put the Cherokee language in writing.

Not long after this an accident deprived him of the glories of war and the chase. Thereafter, day upon day, he would sit in the door of his wigwam, listening to the voices of nature, and meditating and planning his great scheme.

At last there dawned upon him a plan by which he could convey these voices to the minds of others. If he found in nature a tone which he thought resembled some word, he drew a picture of that which made the sound. But this plan, he soon found, would be an endless task and instead of these pictures he began to make arbitrary signs. Several thousand of these resulted, but he discovered that this too was not good, for nobody could remember all these characters.

A year went by, during which time he strove to find a better method, and here for the first time the talking leaves of the white men whispered to Se-quo-yah, for several of his characters he took from English spellers. But these English letters had no relation to their English sound when used for Cherokee syllables for which they stood.

So closely had Se-quo-yah listened for Cherokee sounds that the first alphabet he compiled represented every known syllable in the Cherokee language save three. Who added these to the eighty-two is not known, but this amazing comprehension of a language seems all the more wonderful when we know that before he invented it he could not read! Indeed, it was a wonder to men of science that a language so copious, a single verb often undergoing several hundred inflections, only embraced eighty-five letters.

At the age of fifty-one, he completed his great work. His alphabet finished, he found that his people looked upon it with suspicion. So at last Se-quo-yah summoned to his lodge the great chiefs of his

R D W h G J W P C A P Y 3 B P 3 M
 S F U P W B 2 A O h G T A J Y 4 F G
 2 Q V I Z 2 C R h 2 A h 2 E 2
 T O 2 B W O J K M 2 2 G G 2 A 2 2
 F C i O 2 2 2 P F H C D G A L G
 P T A E

FACSIMILE OF CHEROKEE ALPHABET BEFORE PRINTING

First Line: 1 A, short, 2 A, broad, 3 Lah, 4 Tsec, 5 Nah, 6 Weeh, 7 Weh, 8 Leeh, 9 Neh, 10 Mooh, 11 Keeh, 12 Yeeh, 13 Seeh, 14 Clanh, 15 Ah, 16 Luh.
Second Line: 1 Leh, 2 Hah, 3 Woh, 4 Cloh, 5 Tah, 6 Yahh, 7 Lahh, 8 Hee, 9 Ss (sibilant), 10 Yoh, 11 Un (French), 12 Hoo, 13 Goh, 14 Tsoo, 15 Maugh, 16 Seh, 17 Saugh, 18 Cleegh.
Third Line: 1 Queegh, 2 Quegh, 3 Sah, 4 Quah, 5 Gnaugh (nasal), 6 Kaah, 7 Tsahn, 8 Sahn, 9 Neeh, 10 Kah, 11 Taugh, 12 Keh, 13 Taah, 14 Khan, 15 Weeh.
Fourth Line: 1 Eeh, 2 Ooh, 3 Yeh, 4 Un, 5 Tun, 6 Kooch, 7 Tsobh, 8 Quoh, 9 Noo, 10 Na, 11 Loh, 12 Yu, 13 Tsch, 14 Tee, 15 Wahh, 16 Tooh.
Fifth Line: 1 Teh, 2 Tsah, 3 Un, 4 Neh, 5-6 Tsooh, 7 Mah, 8 Clooh, 9 Haah, 10 Hab, 11 Meeh, 12 Clah, 13 Yah, 14 Wah, 15 Teeh, 16 Clegh, 17 Naa.
Sixth Line: 1 Quh, 2 Clah, 3 Maah, 4 Quhn.

tribe. He then explained to them his invention. His daughter, Ahy-okch, then six years old, was called in. She was only a pupil but Se-quo-yah sent her away from the company, and then wrote down any words his friends named. She was again called in and easily read them.

The chiefs, however, were not quite satisfied. They thought him insane, and that his invention would mean very little to their tribe. Se-quo-yah was saddened, knowing that he held the key to their progress; how to induce them to accept it was now as great a problem as the invention itself. But he was rewarded at last.

The doty chiefs decided on a final test. From various parts of the Nation the brightest young men were selected and sent to Se-quo-yah that they might be taught. Faithfully he instructed them and as faithfully did they apply themselves to their task. At the appointed time the chiefs again assembled at the Council Lodge and the students were put to the most rigid tests, until in the minds of all no doubt remained concerning the great value of his invention.

Great was the praise Se-quo-yah received. His dream was realized. And at once it became the popular thing for people to read and write. Had the Cherokee, then naturally indolent, been obliged to spend long weeks in an English school, they would not, as a Nation, have attempted it; but this alphabet, once learned, enabled them to read and write at once.

So simple was it and so well adapted to the needs of the Cherokee people, that often only three days were required by the bright youths to learn the whole system. Indeed, it is an historical fact that the enthusiasm of the young men became so great that they even abandoned their favorite pastimes, so as to devote more time to letter writing. They would go on long journeys for the sole purpose of writing and sending back letters to friends, and it was not long before a regular correspondence was opened up among their distant relatives and friends. And to think that only a few months before they knew nothing of reading or writing.

Se-quo-yah's alphabet soon became a national institution. In 1824 the Cherokee Council voted to the inventor a large silver medal as a mark of distinction for his work.

On February 21, 1828, not five years after Se-quo-yah's alphabet had been generally accepted, an iron printing press containing fonts of Cherokee and English type, was put up at Echota, and the

first copy of the *Cherokee Phoenix* was given to the world. This printing press was the first ever owned by an aboriginal people, and the *Phoenix* was the first aboriginal newspaper on this continent, Elias Boudinot being the first native editor.

This newspaper was the turning point of the whole Cherokee Nation—from savagery and stolid indolence to enlightenment and industry. Within five years after Se-quo-yah's triumphal recognition, the press at Echota, had turned out 733,800 pages of reading matter. This was eagerly read by every Indian who had learned how. They began to adopt white man's dress; they tilled the fields, and cattle increased; they longed for knowledge; schools were started; even wigwams were replaced by board huts, with chimneys of brick.

An entire savage race was becoming, almost overnight, a wholly different people, thanks to the untiring efforts of one man.

Se-quo-yah traveled hundreds of miles teaching his alphabet. To impart knowledge became his great ambition. He went so far as to the Arkansas Territory, where many of his people had emigrated when the whites had encroached too close upon Cherokee lands.

But at the age of sixty rheumatism troubled him, and again he sat by his cabin door and dreamed. And once again a grand inspiration came to him. The voices that now spoke to him in dreams were not the whisperings of Nature. He had listened closely to the different languages he had heard, and now was dawning on his mind the gossamer web of a second great ambition. Se-quo-yah conceived the idea of writing a book. Studied philology was to him an unknown thing. Books likewise, except the *Phoenix*, the portions of the Bible which the missionaries had translated, the Cherokee almanac, and songs were the only printed leaves that ever whispered to this strange red man. How without the aid of books and records of the past was he to unravel the mysteries of philology?

But his dream persisted. Having at last recovered from his attack of rheumatism, he at once put his plan of collecting material for his book into execution. There were for him no libraries of rich lore; no musty records or parchments of the past to aid him—the first thing he did toward the accomplishment of his purpose was to build an ox cart.

This, then, was the beginning of his trek into the mystic Land

of Cibola, where strange races warred with each other across the drifting sands or in the lofty mountains—races whose ancient traditions still bore the stamp of the iron heel of conquering Spanish invaders.

For two years this incongruous knowledge crusade traveled the wilds, and though the tribes were hostile and at war, Se-quo-yah and his itinerant school were allowed to pass in peace. His fame had gone before him, and he visited tribe after tribe. Many were the facts picked up favorable to his theory.

Early in 1842 he reached a ridge of the Rocky Mountains. He was worn out with his long journey and researches.

For a day he camped on a spur of the mountains, and before him lay what he supposed to be the promised land where he would find a missing branch of his race. As in early days, the Hebrew, Moses, went from the plains of Moab into the mountains of Nebo, so this great schoolmaster of the Cherokees left the plains and beheld the land of his dreams.

He searched the valleys of New Mexico, looked at the adobe villages of the Pueblos, but found not that which he sought; and one day, weary and sick of fever, he halted his cart. Up to this time he had borne his sufferings so uncomplainingly that his companions never realized the end was near. They gently bore him to a cave, a fire was built, and they tried to warm away the chill that seized upon him.

But it was futile. For a moment a shade of sadness darkened the brow of this dying hero as there passed before his mental eye a vision of the uncompleted possibilities that might have been—could he have carried on!

Still another vision brought a faint glow to the eyes of Se-quo-yah, as he saw in retrospect the great results of the alphabet he had made. He saw a race that in a few short years had made greater progress than any other recorded on history's page. His achievement was revealed in a perfect light. But that which faded from his view was a completion of his grand conception—a conception so great that no human being conceived the like before; that of forming a more wonderful alphabet, one that would enable all the Indian tribes of North America to read and speak a common language; that would enable them to unite in a grand confederacy, for the purpose of defense; for the mutual preservation from the

encroachments of the white man, and their lasting perpetuation in the land deeded to the Indian by God.

As the day drew to a close and the sun dropped below the misty silent mountains, the Cherokee schoolmaster, philosopher, and chief, quietly fell asleep.

Congress once thought to bring back his remains and erect over them a fitting monument, but none were ever able to discover his resting place. The wild flowers and the great silences which he loved so well, had no tongues to whisper the exact spot.

Doubtless in some future day, a traveler searching the caverns of some mighty cañon wall, shall come across a heap of human bones, and as he looks closer to the funeral pile, he may see something like a silver coin gleaming just where there was once a human heart . . . and it may prove to be the medal given to Se-quo-yah by his race which he always thereafter wore. Unless this happens, his last resting place will ever be a secret, except to the brooding mountains and the wind softly whispering in the flowers above.