Sequoya’s Gift

Sequoya was a remarkable man in many ways. He was a skilled silversmith and painter. He also served as a soldier. But he is remembered today for inventing a written language.

Sequoya was a member of the Cherokee nation, the son of a Native American mother and a British father. A patriotic person, he was dismayed that white people were taking over more and more of the Cherokee lands.

There was no easy way for Cherokees to be in touch with each other because they lacked a written language. Words spoken in Cherokee were lost as soon as they were uttered. Sequoya believed that the Cherokee people would benefit greatly if they had a written language and could read and write. Newspapers could spread the word of what was happening to people. Books could record their history. He made up his mind that he would try to develop a written language for his people.

The project, which he began in 1809, took twelve years to complete. He and his daughter worked together. She carefully sounded out each syllable. Then Sequoya represented each one with a letter that he chose from the English, Greek, and Hebrew alphabets. Eighty-six letters were sufficient to cover all the sounds of the Cherokee language.

Sequoya used this new written language in a message he sent to the leaders of the Cherokee nation. The leaders were impressed with how simple the system was. They recommended that the new written language be taught to everyone who wanted to learn to read and write. People liked it because it could be learned quickly and with ease. Those who mastered it went on to teach others. The Cherokees set up schools to teach Sequoya’s alphabet and began to publish books and newspapers in their new language. The first Native American newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix, was published on February 21, 1828. It was followed by a flood of other newspapers and books.

In his later years, Sequoya travelled throughout North America studying other Native American languages. Everywhere he went he was hailed for his invention, which played such an important part in uniting the Cherokee people. He died in 1843. His memory is honored in California’s giant sequoia trees, and its beautiful Sequoia National Park.
Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. How can we tell that Sequoya was **patriotic**?

2. What is the meaning of **utter** as used in the passage?

3. Why weren’t any books written in Cherokee before 1821?

4. How did Sequoya feel about what the white settlers were doing?

5. What is the meaning of **develop** as it is used in the passage?

6. How did Sequoya use the English, Greek, and Hebrew alphabets?

7. Why weren’t 26 letters **sufficient** for the Cherokee alphabet?

8. How long did Sequoya’s work take?

9. Did Sequoya work on his **project** alone or did he have help?
10. Why was the new language popular with the people?
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11. How can we tell that the Cherokee leaders liked the new system?
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12. What is the meaning of **hailed** as it is used in the passage?
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13. How did the Cherokees help each other learn the new language?
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14. What was **remarkable** about Sequoya?
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15. How does a written language **benefit** friends living far apart?
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**FUN & FASCINATING FACTS**

- The Latin *bene* means “good” and forms a root of the word **benefit**. A *benefit* is something that is good for a person. Other words formed from this root include *benevolent*, which means “having a wish to do good,” and *beneficial*, which means “doing good.”

- In addition to its meaning as a verb, **utter** is also an adjective and means “total” or “absolute.” (When the cellar door slammed shut behind us, we were left in **utter** darkness.); (I felt like an **utter** fool when the bike I reported stolen was found just where I left it.)