
The Comanche Language & Cultural Preservation Committee

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Editor: Barbara Goodin

“From The President”

*(*Editor’s Note: Following is a paper written by the late Michael Red Elk on February 12, 1996, when he was attending Haskell at Lawrence, Kansas. Michael is the son of president Ron Red Elk and his wife Frances, and was killed in an automobile accident in 1999.)*

THE COMANCHE LANGUAGE, FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE

by Michael Red Elk (1996)

“The Comanche language has a very long and proud history and has been through much diversity. But to fully understand it one must examine where it came from and where it is going. In all aspects of Comanche life the language has played a key role.

Actually the language itself is part of the ‘Shoshonian branch of the Uto-Aztecs language group’ (Cash, 3). In language, the Shoshone and Comanche speak a very similar dialect. This places the Comanche origin somewhere in Colorado and Wyoming. Through oral history, it is said that they were both one large tribe. But one winter the food became scarce and the tribe began to quarrel. So an elder stepped forth and said the tribe should divide instead of fight each other. This is when the Comanches evolved. One large band divided and decided to head south where the food was plentiful. While traveling south the Comanches discovered U-taibo, or Spanish explorers. It is then that the Comanches found the horse, which actually reformed their culture into a Plains lifestyle.

When talking about Comanches it must be kept in mind that prior to the 1900s there was not individual tribal identity, but instead several broken-up bands of Comanches. These bands dominated an area that expanded from Southern Kansas to Northern Mexico and from New

Mexico to Eastern Oklahoma. But the one thing that united these bands was their language. Based on their previous experience, these bands never fought each other due to their language ties. From the late 1600s to the late 1800s the bands raided and dominated their territory. But after constant encroachment from European settlers, the Comanches slowly lost their large land base and soon was confined to a small tract of land in Southwest Oklahoma.

After fighting for their land valiantly, the Comanche culture was feared and despised by the United States Government. At the heart of their culture was the Comanche language. In an attempt to destroy the language and culture, Indian children were sent to boarding schools. It was here if an Indian student was caught speaking their language they were heavily beaten. One such incident is something called a belt line, ‘this is when twelve students stood in two lines across from each other and whipped a student as they ran through.’ (Red Elk) At least two generations of Comanches were subject to this punishment. It was believed by my Grandmother’s generation that the Comanche language was of the past and had no place in the future. But this is not the case, actually Comanche language can only make one a broader person.

The importance of the Comanche language was not only for the Comanche people but also for the benefit of white people. In the 1940s, during World War II, it was found that native languages could be used for communicating secret messages. And because of the uniqueness and diversity of native languages, these messages were almost unbreakable by enemy intelligence. A bunch of Comanches got together and decided to enlist in the army in order to become code talkers. In training they learned how to use military

equipment and use their language. The group made up terms and codes for different army equipment since there were no Comanche words for most of it. One such instance was naming a tank after a turtle. With such terms, even Comanches outside the group probably couldn't understand what they were saying. This proved to be the unbreakable code that the Germans couldn't solve. The Comanche language was used all over Europe, in battles such as D-Day. (Comanche Code Talkers) It is very unique that the government that once wanted to destroy this language soon needed its help in World War II.

Despite efforts by the government to destroy the Comanche language it is still alive today. But now the Comanches face the problem of losing their language. My dad once said, 'Each week we lose a Comanche elder, and each week we lose a valuable resource of the Comanche language. How long will it be until we are out of resources?' With this view, several Comanche members got together in the Spring-Summer of 1993, during Constitutional revisions, and felt that a group should be formed for language preservation. This is when the Comanche Language and Cultural Preservation Committee was formed. This group's sole purpose is to preserve the Comanche language. Several different efforts were undertaken by the language group. The first was to get (a spelling system) approved by the tribe. The approval came in the Fall of 1993. This system was modeled after one similar to the texts in Comanche language classes at the University of Oklahoma. Several members from this class also served on the Language Committee. One of the first activities of the Committee was to take language classes to individual communities in Comanche areas. Next, an effort to stir interest was going to several pow-wows, giving away Comanche flash cards and buttons and having story telling contests. In the Spring of 1994, on a week-end, the Committee (sponsored a total immersion program at the old Fort Sill Indian School). People came to watch or take part in speaking Comanche; English was not allowed. A similar project took place in the summer of 1995, where several sites were chosen and young children worked with elders to learn the language.

(R. Red Elk) Also at the same time, I worked with faculty and students at East Central University, to help put the Comanche language on computer. The problem was trying to get a program to match English typing to fit the several unique letters of the Comanche language. Future plans are to get a complete dictionary and a head start program where the elders work with preschoolers for language preservation.

One of the biggest problems faced by the Language Committee was support and money. After talking to the Comanche Business Committee and voting before the Council, the Language Committee received an office in Comanche Tribal Headquarters with a small staff and budget to operate on. They also received a language grant of fifteen thousand dollars. The only problem with grants are that the Comanches are new to the game and they are battling well-experienced foes. The Committee found new financial support from AT&T. This group provided needed materials and equipment. They also arranged for tribal members to speak at several functions to win support and receive money for the Committee.

The Comanche language has come a long way and has a beautiful heritage, but is currently in danger of being lost. With modern technology and determination, the language will be preserved for generations to come. With hopeful prospects and the help of elders to teach the children can we expect to preserve our language."

Works Sited

Cash, and Gerald Wolff. The Comanche People. Phoenix: Indian Tribal series, 1974.

The Comanche Codetalkers. Lawton: Lawton Constitution, January 13, 1994.

Red Elk, Dick. Personal interview. May 29, 1993.

Red Elk, Ronald. Personal interview. January 29, 1996.

MARGARET POAHWAY BEAMING

Margaret is beaming with pride after her granddaughter, Terry Poahway, was crowned Miss Lawton in February. Terry is the daughter of Michael and Lucinda and has pledged to serve as Lawton's cultural ambassador during her reign. She is a beautiful young woman, and Margaret has every right to be proud of her. She performed a traditional American Indian hoop dance during

competition and also won Miss Photogenic. Congratulations, Terry!

LANGUAGE COMMITTEE HONORED

The Lawton Arts and Humanities Council presented the Comanche Language and Cultural Preservation Committee with the Citizen of the Humanities Award at an awards luncheon in February. Billie Kreger, vice president, accepted on behalf of Ron Red Elk, who was unable to attend. Others attending were Deloris Karty, Barbara and Kenneth Goodin, Jo Vickers, Dr. Reaves Nahwooks and Henry Nahwooks.



We were honored to receive the award and hope this has raised awareness to our efforts.

“The Fort Sill Dispatch”

Issue 6, 2000

“Members of the Comanche Language and Cultural Preservation Committee have been meeting at the (Fort Sill) museum in recent weeks. This tribal organization is providing invaluable assistance with the identification of hundreds of Comanche photos in the museum archival collections. The shared benefits and experiences of the Comanches and museum staff in assigning names to faces from the past (has) been very rewarding.

Images ranged from having no identification, to having one or the other American or tribal names. The facial expressions and audible exclamations of the committee members as they discovered a long lost ancestor or relative was very satisfying. The discussions of who was related to whom and the correct spelling or pronunciation of the names was a source of much interest.

This committee has previously produced translations for bilingual interpretive labels to be installed soon in the Comanche exhibits in the Guardhouse. Hopefully, this will assist in the preservation of the tribal language while

generating a greater awareness for the non-Indian visitors as well. Members of this committee include: Deloris Karty, Marie Haumpy, Josephine Wapp, Gloria Cable, Vernon Cable, Edith Gordon, Lucille McClung, Theresa Saupitty, Betty Pete, Rosalie Attocknie, Ron Red Elk, Barbara and Kenneth Goodin, Reaves Nahwooks and Marie Parton.

As a finale to the December meeting, committee members sang Christmas carols in the Comanche language for the museum staff involved with the project. It was a refreshing experience and we deeply appreciate their assistance. Ura (Thank you).”

**This is a reprint of an article that appeared in the Fort Sill Museum Newsletter. The article was accompanied by a photo taken of the group during one of the sessions. We all certainly appreciate the museum allowing us to view these wonderful old photos of our ancestors.*

**Here is another reprint, provided by Towana Spivey, Director of the Fort Sill Museum.*

To: The Public Ledger; Philadelphia; July 27, 1843; Arkansas Bar (Texas), June 12, 1843.

“The presence of the Cumanche(sic) Indians in great numbers has stopped all communication with Mexico, for three weeks past. Santos, with 50 soldiers and some Cumanches(sic) has been at Corpus Christi, seized one boat and chased the sloop Picayune which had on board 60 bales of tobacco, but which escaped by throwing overboard part of the cargo. Two weeks since, the Washington being at the Ranche(sic), several hundred Cumanches(sic) came in, killed one Mexican and took thirteen prisoners, including one family--others took to the fort. The Ranche(sic) is deserted, as is also Lamar. The schooners Melissa and Pauline have just been for smuggling, having on board tobacco, powder, dry goods, &c(sic). They are now at Corpus Christi Bay in charge of the Revenue Cooter(sic). --New Orleans Bulletin.”

IMPORTANT INFORMATION FORT HALL 2001 TRIP

The Second Annual Shoshone Reunion has been scheduled for June, 2001. The Language Committee is already making plans to attend. A chartered bus will again be used for transportation, and a \$50 seat deposit is required as soon as possible, as seats will be limited.

In addition, each person planning to take the trip will be required to pay \$200, which can be paid all at once or in installments. The entire \$250 will be due by May 15th in order to make arrangements for the bus and lodging, which must be paid for in advance. Meals will also be included in this amount. For more information, contact the e-mail address at the top of this newsletter.

! WANTED !

**Enries for the 3rd Annual
Native Youth Language Fair,
Poster Contest & Pow Wow
Saturday, April 7th, 2001
Santa Fe Indian School**

Seeking: Posters, Poetry, Songs, Stories, Dance and Drama in Native Languages from youth. Ages: Preschool through 19 years. Prizes for all! For entry forms and information, please contact:

Indigenous Language Institute
formerly IPOLA

telephone 505-820-0311

fax 505-820-0316

e-mail: ili@indigenous-language.com

COMMUNITY LANGUAGE CLASSES

Comanche language classes continue in the following communities:

CACHE: 6:30-8:30 p.m. in the Cache Housing Authority activity room.

LAWTON: 6:30-8:30 p.m. in the old conference room at the Comanche Complex.

WALTERS: 7:00-9:00 p.m. in the Comanche Community Center east of Walters.

Added Note: Language classes have been held in the Indianoma community for the past several years at the Post Oak Church dining hall on Monday evenings.

MEGAN OBERLY

Comanche language student, Megan Oberly, participated in the Jr. Miss Indian Oklahoma pageant recently and won First Runner Up. For the competition she sang hymns and spoke in Comanche. Megan has been active with the Comanche Language Committee since returning to the Walters area.



COMANCHE SINGING CLASSES

After a holiday break, the Comanche singing classes are back on track again. Funded with a grant from the OK Arts Council, the classes started in Walters, then moved to Apache, and ended in Cyril during February. The next area will be the Cache-Indianoma communities starting in March. For more information contact:

RedElk@comanchelanguage.org or

Billie@comanchelanguage.org

*(*It is time again to share stories during the last of wintertime.)*

Sumu Ekapitu Mahimia

as told by Albert Nahquaddy

1. Tsaa sobesukutsa nu tsoo mahimianu, atabitsu kwinebetu. 2. Surase uhrii pukunii taasu sumuhake urii uruu petumatu kwuhuyaakinu. 3. Surase usa tunehtsunu uhrii pukuniihake makwiakatu; 4. suru ose nuukikina, yu?anuenakwu puhu kahnibetu. 5. Surase atabitsinu usu u taatsainu; pumii sururu taatsaika, 6. surukwu sihka suhukukabaa wekwiika. 7. Surukwu suruku wekwikaakia, ubinaisu maruuku pia wasape to?inu. 8. Surase, "Tobesukia noo tukumanu, nariyaaku puhakatu ma! 9. Ma bua tanu," me. Kee suruu suaru, nuraanu pitusu. 10. Wihnuse surukwuhake suku suhukuku to?itsi. 11. Wihnu puhu kahnibatuu suruu kimanu. 12. Surii pukunii makwi?ekatu. 13. Surase oosehake pumi

tekwa^uniwapu tekwaaku suru suhku 14. suru surii suhku hani?ake naramuikanu. 15. Subeeta ma.

Literal Translation:

1. A long time ago, it is said, my great grandfather went on a raid to the Indians up north. 2. He rounded up their horses and also captured one of their women for a wife. 3. Then he ran and herded their horses; 4. he was running them south, toward their home. 5. Those other Indians caught up with them; when they caught up with them, 6. those two went into this plum thicket. 7. As soon as they went in there, a big bear came out of there at the others. 8. They said, "Stop, he has strong medicine! 9. Let's leave him alone." They felt bad; they went back. 10. Then they came of the plum ticket there. 11. Then they came to their house. 12. They herded those horses. 13. And every time those warriors were talking, 14. he told them about what he did there. 15. That's all.

Free Translation:

My great, great uncle was a warrior. He went north to the Cree Indians. He went to get a herd of horse, which he did. Meanwhile, while he was there he got a girl for his wife. They got on the horses and started south with them. He was traveling pretty good, but they weren't traveling as fast as they should have been. They came upon a plum thicket and they went in, leaving their horses outside. They no more than went in the plum thicket when a bear came out of the thicket. The Cree Indians saw the bear coming towards them and they said, "We better leave this man alone; because he looks like he's got big medicine!" So they left and went back north. The other two got out and gathered up the horses and started back south. Afterwards, every time he would have to tell a story, he'd tell that story. He would smile about it. That's all the story.

(*Following is a story told by the late Forest Kassanavoid during the 1993 Comanche Nation Fair.)

ANCESTORS AND RELATIVES

told by Forest Kassanavoid

1. Ma tuaweka nanumunnu. 2. Nahkia munu sumu oyetu supanaitu. 3. Use nu suhka Tosawi nahniaru nu u numhabinu nu. 4. Suse, usu, nu haitsi; u nu

pabi. 5. Nuse tuasu, usu u tua nahkia munu nakanu 6. Pia Kusa nahniaru. 7. Tuase usu nu tsoo. 8. U kwuhuse usu taa nukwupu, taiboo Wisupu nahniaru. 9. Surakuse wahati turuetapai. 10. Sumuse urumatu Paa Wi nahniaru. 11. Ohka oru Jeanette Chasenah u kunu. 12. Ise tuasu ata u taka, Joyce nahniaru. 13. Ise tuasu sumu u tuetu, usu Ida Pitsidoo nahniayu. 14. Suse usu punu nu huutsi. 15. Usu suhka Tosawita u kunu. 16. Punu Pahibitu nahniaru.

Translation:

1. Hello, my relatives. 2. I think most of you know me. 3. I am descended from that one called Tosawi. 4. So, he was my friend, he was my elder brother. 5. And maybe you've heard of his son 6. whose name was Big Leggins. 7. And this son was my great-grandfather. 8. And his wife was a white captive, called Wisupu. 9. And she had two children. 10. One of them was called Paa Wi. 11. Jeanette Chasenah was his granddaughter. 12. And there was another sister of hers, called Joyce. 13.. And the name of one of her children was Ida Pitsidoo. 14. So she was my grandmother. 15. And she was Tosawi's granddaughter. 16. And she was called "She Came Three Times."

(*The history of the Comanches and Kiowas has been intertwined for many years now. Intermarriage between the tribes has made it even more so, with many of us having Kiowa blood coursing through our veins. Here is a Kiowa story for all of us to enjoy. It was told by Old Lady Horse (Spear Woman) to author Alice Marriott in the 1960s.)

A LEGEND ABOUT THE BUFFALO

as told by Old Lady Horse (Kiowa)

Everything the Kiowas had came from the buffalo. Their tipis were made of buffalo hides; so were their clothes and moccasins. They ate buffalo meat. Their containers were made of hide, bladder, or stomach of the buffalo. The buffalo was the life of the Kiowas.

Most of all, the buffalo was part of the Kiowa religion. A white buffalo calf must be sacrificed in the Sun Dance. The priests used parts of the buffalo to make their prayers when they healed people or when they sang to the powers above.

So when the white men wanted to build railroads, or when they wanted to farm and raise cattle, the buffalo still protected the Kiowas. They tore up the railroad tracks and the gardens. They chased the cattle off the ranges. The buffalo loved their people as much as the Kiowas loved them.

There was war between the buffalo and the white men. The white men built forts in the Kiowa country, and the woolly-headed buffalo soldiers (the Tenth Cavalry, made up of black troops) shot the buffalo as fast as they could, but the buffalo kept coming on, coming on, even into the post cemetery at Fort Sill. Soldiers were not enough to hold them back.

Then the white men hired hunters to do nothing but kill the buffalo. Up and down the Plains those men ranged, shooting sometimes as many as a hundred buffalo a day. Behind them came the skinners with their wagons. They piled the hides and bones into the wagons until they were full, and then took their loads to the new railroad stations that were being built, to be shipped east to the market. Sometimes there would be a pile of bones as high as a man, stretching a mile along the railroad track.

The buffalo saw that their day was over. They could protect their people no longer. Sadly, the last remnant of the great herd gathered in council, and decided what they would do.

The Kiowas were camped on the north side of Mount Scott, those of them who were still free to camp. One young woman got up very early in the morning. The dawn mist was still rising from Medicine Creek, and as she looked across the water, peering through the haze, she saw the last buffalo herd appear like a spirit dream. Straight to Mount Scott the leader of the herd walked. Behind him came the cows and their calves, and the few young males who had survived. As the woman watched, the face of the mountain opened.

Inside Mount Scott the world was green and fresh, as it had been when she was a small girl. The rivers ran clear, not red. The wild plums were in blossom, chasing the red buds up the inside slopes. Into this world of beauty the buffalo walked, never to be seen again.

A RAID FOR HORSES

told by Felix Koweno, 1940

One night when the moon was full, a small but brave band of Comanches planned a daring raid to extend into Mexico in order to secure more horses. The animals that had proved so valuable to their new life on the Plains in hunting buffalo, moving camp, catching wild prairie chickens and Indian road runners, playing games and fighting enemies. An expedition so dangerous required special prearranged plans which had to be strictly followed. Scouts had located some desirable herds.

Horses on the range were often in the special charge of one soldier or guard who, by holding the leader of the horses by a long rope or rein, was able to keep the entire herd near.

Following directions carefully, the warriors advanced in the darkness of night. At a certain point one of the warriors went ahead stealthily to approach the guard. He knew that only one sound could mean the death of the entire band by the fire of other aroused guards. He found the guard asleep. When he located the rope, he cut it midway between the horse and guard, and led the leader silently over the range with the other horses following. At a safe distance, each of the several hundred tribesmen caught a horse and galloped across the Plains to their distant camp.

NUAHNUH

as told by Rachel Mow-wat, 1940

Long ago, Nuahnuh, a young Comanche woman was camping with others of her tribe along a stream. The band suddenly found themselves surrounded by Osage. The scouts watching the camp had not been alert. Horses around the camp that had been tied and ready for a surprise attack had been released and driven away. The Comanches ran for their lives, on foot. In the rain of arrows from the enemy, Nuahnuh was wounded. She fell to the ground and appeared to be dead. In the confusion the Osage ran over her body, killing others all around her. She had on a beautiful buckskin dress and moccasins, but no one stopped to notice them in the thick of the fight.

COMANCHE LANGUAGE & CULTURAL PRESERVATION COMMITTEE
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NUMU TEKWAPU!

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