

Cherokee, Apple partner to put language on iPhones

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In this photo taken Monday, Oct. 25, 2010, Kara Hawzipta writes on the white board in a classroom at the Cherokee Nation Immersion School in Tahlequah, Okla., Cherokee children are asking for iPods and iPhones for Christmas this year, and their parents are having a much tougher time saying no than one might expect. Nearly two centuries after a Cherokee silversmith named Sequoyah developed a system of symbols for each syllable spoken by the Cherokee, the tribe's written language has become available on iPhone and iPods. (AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki)

(AP) -- Nine-year-old Lauren Hummingbird wants a cell phone for Christmas - and not just any old phone, but an iPhone. Such a request normally would be met with skepticism by her father, Cherokee Nation

employee Jamie Hummingbird.

He could dismiss the obvious reasons a kid might want an [iPhone](#), except for this - he's a proud Cherokee and buying his daughter the phone just might help keep the tribe's language alive.

Nearly two centuries after a blacksmith named Sequoyah converted Cherokee into its own unique written form, the tribe has worked with Apple to develop Cherokee language software for the iPhone, iPod and - soon - the iPad. Computers used by students - including Lauren - at the tribe's language immersion school already allow them to type using Cherokee characters.

The goal, Cherokee Chief Chad Smith said, is to spread the use of the language among tech-savvy children in the digital age. Smith has been known to text students at the school using Cherokee, and teachers do the same, allowing students to continue using the language after school hours.

Lauren isn't the only Cherokee child pleading for an iPhone, "and that doesn't help my cause," Jamie Hummingbird joked, knowing he'll probably give in.

Tribal officials first contacted Apple about getting Cherokee on the iPhone three years ago. It seemed like a long shot, as the devices support only 50 of the thousands of languages worldwide, and none were American Indian tongues. But Apple's reputation for innovation gave the tribe hope.

After many discussions and a visit from Smith, the Cupertino, Calif.-based company surprised the tribe by coming through this fall.

"There are countries vying to get on these devices for languages, so we

are pretty excited we were included," said Joseph Erb, who works in the Cherokee Nation's language technology division.

The Cherokee take particular pride in their past, including the alphabet, or syllabary, Sequoyah developed in 1821. In 1828, the tribe obtained a printing press and began publishing the Cherokee Phoenix, which the Cherokee claim was the nation's first bilingual newspaper. Copies circulated as far away as Europe, tribal officials say.

The Cherokee language thrived back then, but like other tribal tongues, it has become far less prevalent over the decades. Today only about 8,000 Cherokee speakers remain - a fraction of the tribe's 290,000 members - and most of those are 50 or older, Smith said.

Tribal leaders realized something must be done to encourage younger generations to learn the language.

"What makes you a Cherokee if you don't have Cherokee thoughts?" asked Rita Bunch, superintendent of the tribe's Sequoyah Schools.

Tribal officials thus decided to develop the language immersion school, in which students would be taught multiple subjects in a Cherokee-only environment.

The Oklahoma school began in 2001 and now has 105 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. They work on Apple laptops already loaded with the Cherokee language - the Macintosh operating system has supported Cherokee since 2003 - and featuring a unique keypad overlay with Cherokee's 85 characters, each of which represent a different syllable.

But Erb and co-workers Jeff Edwards and Roy Boney knew there had to be more ways to tap into the younger generation's love of cell phones,

iPods and the like.

"If you don't figure out a way to keep technology exciting and innovative for the language, kids have a choice when they get on a cell phone," Erb said.

"If it doesn't have Cherokee on it, they all speak English," he said. "They'll just give up their Cherokee ... because the cool technology is in English. So we had to figure out a way to make the cool technology in Cherokee."

Initially, the thought was to simply create an application so texting could be done in Cherokee. But that idea quickly grew.

Apple officials and their tribal counterparts spoke often during the give-and-take that followed. When prospects seemed bleak, Edwards said tribal officials "used our immersion school students to pull on heartstrings." And Smith, the chief, made the trip to northern California to speak with Apple's decision-makers.

Apple has a history of secrecy when it comes to its product releases, so tribal leaders didn't know for sure the company was going forward with the idea until just before the September release of Mac iOS 4.1.

Erb said the Apple devices that support Cherokee are most popular with students, but the technology is slowly gaining traction with older tribal members, especially those who might not like using computers but routinely use cell phones.

Apple spokeswoman Trudy Muller declined to answer questions about the company's work with the Cherokee, the costs involved, or whether Apple plans to collaborate with other tribes.

Tribal officials say Cherokee is so far the only American Indian language supported by Apple devices.

However, they're not the only indigenous people using technology to save their language. One of the languages supported in the Mac operating system is Hawaiian. And in 2003, the Hawaiian Language Digital Library project went online, making available more than 100,000 pages of searchable newspaper archives, books and other material in the language native to Hawaii.

Back in Tahlequah, Lauren Hummingbird just knows she wants an iPhone. Using the device to practice Cherokee at home would be easier "than getting this out of the bag," she said, pointing to her laptop. "You can just text."

That enthusiasm for using Cherokee-themed technology is what will help keep the tribe's language, and thus its culture, alive in generations to come, Smith said.

He compared the use of Cherokee on Apple devices to Sequoyah's creation of the syllabary and the tribe's purchase of the printing press.

He sees a day when tribal members routinely will read books and perform plays and operas in their native language.

"You always hear the cliché, 'History repeats itself.' This is one of those historic moments that people just don't comprehend what is happening," the chief said. "What this does is give us some hope that the [language](#) will be revitalized."

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