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The Legacy of Native Languages: Tracing the Path of the Cherokee Language

Presenter: Blanca Roman-Luevanos

Faculty Mentor: Michael Welsh

Abstract: The status of native languages is an issue currently being raised among Native American tribes. With the rise of cultural awareness has come the need to encourage the usage of a tribe's language. By studying a specific native language I hope to understand its evolution and current status. The Cherokee people have an incredibly rich history that is linked with Anglo-Americans. Cherokee language preservation can be traced back to the 19th century with the creation of the alphabet. The Cherokee tribe was the first to create a native alphabet. It was produced by a Cherokee man named Sequoyah who could neither read nor write. What followed this remarkable foundation was a constant struggle to tamp down and revive the language by Anglo-Americans and Cherokees themselves. The Cherokee frequently conformed to the culture of Anglo-Americans which included intermarriage. This contributed to loss of their native language. Anglos introduced boarding schools to force the English language. The 20th century saw the rise of the civil rights along with the Red Power Movement. This encouraged pride in tribal culture and heritage. Despite this movement, usage of a native tongue is still not widely encouraged in the 21st century. Through the analysis of documents over this timeline I will study what the Cherokee language has overcome. Scholars in the history of native groups here in the United States emphasized the atrocities committed to them. Yet despite these struggles they survived and parts of their cultural persisted. The Cherokee experience matters because of its 200 year history of preservation and loss. I hope to demonstrate to others the value of recognizing the memories of language and culture.