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Indian Languages Struggle to Survive

Chester Trigg is proud to say he has both Comanche and Cherokee blood in his heritage. It's a pride he's trying to install in his younger daughter as he teaches her the Native American ways, many which he had to teach himself.

One thing that Trigg won't be able to pass down is the tribes' language. He doesn't recall knowing his mom, a full-blooded Comanche. While he remembers his father talking to his grandfather in Cherokee, he wasn't taught any of the language.

"My daddy told me, 'Don't tell them you're Indian,'" the Mount Gilead, Ohio resident said. "You know how the blacks had to sit on the back of the bus? They wouldn't even let the Indians get on the bus.

"He didn't teach it to us so we wouldn't be kicked around." It's a story similar to many told by American Indians, forced into white boarding schools and banned from using their language. Many now fear it may be a death knoll for most of these languages as tribes work to keep them alive.

Rita Coosewoon, whose last name means "gray eyes" in Comanche, remembers being forced to skip a meal or sit on the basement steps of her school all night for speaking her native language.

"I sure had a hard time, because I couldn't ask any (questions) because they would punish me for not speaking English," said Coosewoon, who is now 71. "What a twist that they want me to teach a language that they wanted to get rid of."

Coosewoon is the only public school teacher in Oklahoma teaching Comanche.

She and others worry that tribes are in a race against time to save their languages, a vital part of American Indian culture, before they die off with tribal elders. Consider:

- A 1997 study by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians found 3 percent of their children under 6 could speak the language.
- Only an estimated 2,000 Ojibwes, or Chippewas, out of more than 100,000 in the United States speak the language.
- One study predicts that 80 percent of the nation's 175 existing Indian languages will disappear in the next generation if nothing is done because the vast majority of speakers are older than 60.

The situation is especially dire in California, where there are no longer any native speakers of 35 tribal languages and only a handful who speak 50 other languages, according to Leanne Hinton, chairwoman of the University of California at Berkeley linguistics department.

"Here in California we have 50 languages ... almost all of them are spoken by people over 60," Hinton said.

Dave Lakota, a Marion, Ohio resident who is part Lakota Indian, said he believes Native American ceremonies and languages are making a comeback. "Unfortunately most people practicing it are not Native American," he said.

He remembers attending a sun dance in North Dakota, during which he sat with an elder on a hill overlooking the dance. The elder, with a sad look on his face, pointed to the people below.

While Pinnick said it was quite a turnout, the man asked him, "How many of my people do you see?" The answer, Pinnick said, was very few. About 80 percent of the participants were non-Indians.

He's started learning some of the Lakota language and believes it's more powerful when he's able to pray to the Creator in his native tongue. His Native American or Earth name is tree spider warrior, he said, and spiders are known as the keepers of the ancient language.

What the Indian nations have to rely on, Pinnick said, is that there are enough elders left to pass down the language and traditions. Many will also be forced to depend on whites that have learned the language.

Pinnick, like many, blames the white colonization for causing the phenomenon. He specifically faults whites in the early 1900s for kicking American Indians and sending them to white schools in the east where they were severely punished if caught talking in their native tongue.

Tribes are taking steps to revive their languages, with the help of funds from gambling or the government. Some tribes are spending their casino profits on preschools where children are immersed in their native tongue. And Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, has sponsored a bill to provide more funds to language immersion schools.

Language revitalization started in the 1970s in Hawaii, where the Aha Punana Leo language organization brought together preschoolers with island elders. The children then were moved into language immersion schools. Members of the first senior class, who speak both Hawaiian and English, graduated in 1999.

The Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians in Temecula, Calif., started a preschool program last year that teaches both English and Luiseno.

With fewer than 10 native speakers, all older than 70, the tribe voted to spend \$200,000 of its casino profits on the program, said Gary DuBois, director of cultural resources. The Pechangas hired Eric Elliott, a linguist who has learned four California Indian languages, to repeat in Luiseno what English-speaking teachers say in class.

"We can't use (elders) as resources because they're too frail," DuBois said. "We're running against time."

The Pechangas could eventually expand their language immersion classes through elementary and even high school, similar to the Hawaiian system, he said.

"I'll never become a native speaker," said DuBois, who is taking adult Luiseno classes. "But these kids will -- or the hope is anyway."

The Blackfeet opened the Nizipuhwahsin -- meaning "original language" -- school in Browning, Mont., in 1995 that teaches children ages 5 through 13 in the Blackfeet language. School director Rosalyn LaPier said the tribe tried adult and high school classes, summer culture camps, and Head Start programs but none created any speakers of Blackfeet.

"The only thing that has created fluent speakers is language survival schools," she said, where all subjects are taught in Blackfeet.

Most tribes don't have big casino profits to plow into language programs. Congress passed legislation in the early 1990s that funded language revitalization programs but these short-term grants leave programs in a constant hunt for funds, said Mary Hermes, an education professor at the University of Minnesota in

Duluth. She also is a board member and parent at the Waadookodaading Ojibwe language immersion school in Hayward, Wis.

American Indians blame the government for eradicating their languages by pushing them off their lands, removing children to English-speaking boarding schools, like the one Coosewoon attended, and barring them from talking in school in their native tongue.

Governments in New Zealand and Canada have acknowledged their roles in eradicating native languages and have provided funding to tribes, Hermes said.

"It is really the responsibility of the government that we're in this situation," Hermes said. "We're not asking for money because of the harm suffered. We're asking for efforts to revitalize our language."

Inouye's bill would provide roughly \$10 million a year to help fund private school efforts to teach Indian languages and provide money for training to larger institutions like the Blackfeet's Nizipuhwahsin. Inouye has introduced similar legislation in previous congressional sessions that failed to pass.

Coosewoon, who finished her second year teaching at Elgin High School in Elgin, Okla., on May 23, said half of her 10 students studying Comanche were non-Indians. Ironically, she didn't teach her own children the language, but now has taught her grandchildren many phrases in Comanche.

"As I grew older, I realized the mistake I, along with others, had made," said Coosewoon, whose grandfather and uncles were Comanche Code Talkers during World War II. "We robbed them of their culture and now we are struggling to teach them what we can."

Doug Abrahams of Gannett News Service and Kurt Moore of The Marion Star contributed to this report.