

Sequoyah

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driving a portion of The Trail of Tears from Robbinsville to Andrews. The gravel road winds over the Snowbird Mountains with signs reminding us this was a path of great suffering for families rounded up and forced to make the long journey to Oklahoma. Stopping briefly at a waterfall, we imagined the weary prisoners may have had welcome rest and refreshment.

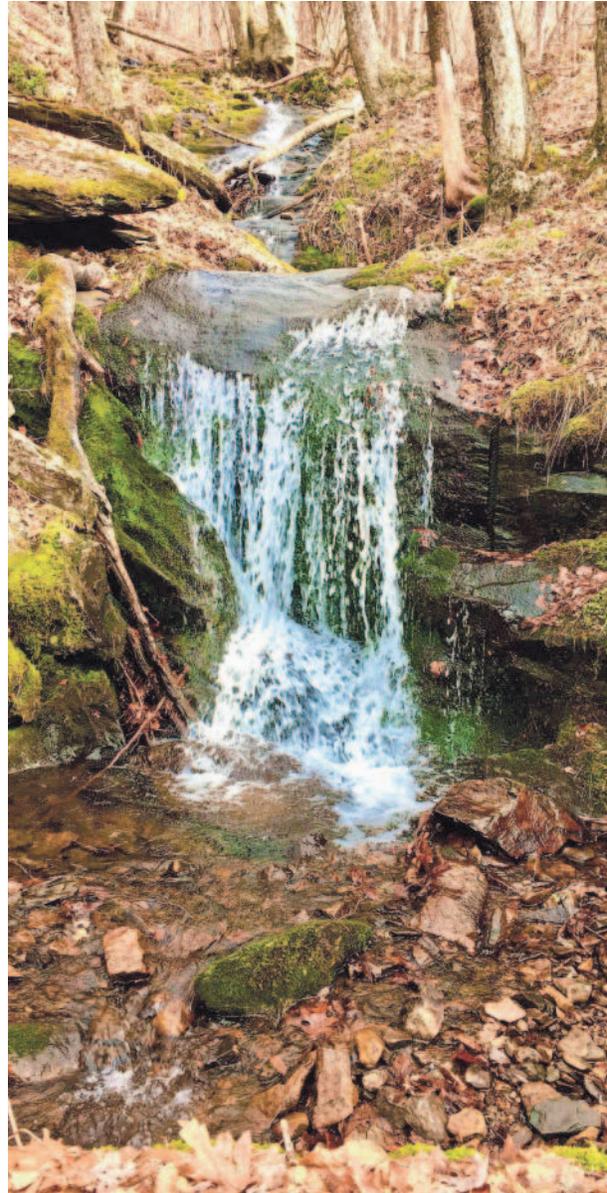
In the Robbinsville area we appreciated the frequent use of Cherokee characters on road signs—constant reminders we were on native soil. Reaching Andrews we were impressed and humbled by interpretive markers telling the story of the forced migration and survival of the Cherokee culture.

For many years in California, I was surrounded by redwoods and took every opportunity to make a kind of pilgrimage to the Giant Sequoias in the Sierra Nevada (the large sculpture of Sequoyah in front of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian was carved from a sequoia log). Redwoods are tall and majestic—their shaded and shadowed forests can feel like standing in cathedrals. Sequoias are massive and ancient. In a grove of these trees you get the feeling you're in the presence of old, wise teachers. And maybe they are. Some have survived for millennia, like the Cherokee among the 500 First Nations on the continent. All rooted in a living planet where the forests of our tribal circles are consistently challenged to discover ways of growing alongside each other, of communicating somehow.

Sequoyah understood the power of language for tribal identity. And, it seems, he saw a wider vision of human communication across all boundaries, beyond all tribal identities. I'm speculating, but I wonder about those many hours and years as he was crafting the symbols that would open the tongue of his people to the world. As he taught his daughter Ayoka, she became a representative, a living symbol, of the expressions, the stories of one tribal circle.

Scanning the characters of the Cherokee language they come alive, like elements of nature, in need of respectful preservation. "Today, there are only about 200 native speakers in the Eastern Band, and the majority are over the age of 55. As more and more speakers pass away, the efforts to preserve the language have intensified" (visitcherokeenc.com). UNC Asheville has a Cherokee Language Program.

We can imagine what the missionaries were thinking when they tried to discourage Sequoyah. Teaching indigenous people English, especially by reading the Bible, was standard procedure across the globe. How much is lost when one religion thinks that it's the only tribe that matters? What if Sequoyah had



On the Trail of Tears (Snowbird Mountain) CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

allowed himself to be discouraged and submit to the dominant culture?

Sequoyah left the world his talking leaves—a gift of language and gesture of hope. Like the majestic trees named in his honor, he deserves timeless respect.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.