

Tribe celebrates new Wawa language app

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

The Grand Ronde Tribe celebrated transporting the 19th century Chinuk Wawa language into the 21st century with a teaching application for Lipum (Wawa for “apple”) products from 4 to 6 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 9, at Chachalu Tribal Museum and Cultural Center, 8720 Grand Ronde Road.

“Chinuk Wawa is an interTribal hybrid language indigenous to the Pacific Northwest, where it served as a regional lingua franca facilitating communication between speakers of different Tribal languages, as well as between Tribal people and speakers of English and Canadian French,” states the introduction of “Chinuk Wawa: As our Elders teach us to speak it,” a Wawa dictionary published by the Tribe in 2012.

When the almost 30 Tribes and bands were forced on to the Grand Ronde Reservation in the 1850s, Chinuk Wawa became the only tongue that Native speakers of different languages could use to communicate with each other. Over the years, as other Tribal languages died out from lack of use or lack of speakers, it became the official language of the Grand Ronde Tribe.

“Since Tribal members live all over the world, it is difficult for some of them to learn and use our language,” Tribal Land and Culture Manager Jan Looking Wolf Reibach said. “The creation of this application combines our language with technology, creating a modern teaching tool for use in classrooms, homes and everywhere there is a desire to learn our language.”

The celebration opened with a prayer in Chinuk Wawa and then English by Tribal Council member Jon A. George. A drum that included Bobby Mercier, Brian Krehbiel, Jeff Mercier, Reibach, George, Eirik Thorsgard and Halona Butler followed.

Reibach welcomed those in attendance and thanked Cultural Education and Outreach Program Manager Kathy Cole for her work on creation of the app.

“I can’t get her to take a day off,”



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Kathy Cole, Tribal Cultural Education and Outreach Program manager, demonstrates the Tribe’s new Chinuk Wawa application during a celebration to launch the language app for iPhones and iPads at Chachalu Tribal Museum & Cultural Center in Grand Ronde on Thursday, Oct. 9.

Chachalu info

According to Land and Culture Department Manager Jan Looking Wolf Reibach, since Chachalu opened on June 5, the Tribal museum has seen:

- More than 1,300 visitors;
- Conducted more than 28 guided tours;
- Raised more than \$700,000 toward its Phase II capital campaign to build a new exhibit hall;
- Staff is working on a marketing plan.

Reibach said. “Even when she takes a day off, she still goes to the high school to teach Tribal students Chinuk Wawa. ... She is very dedicated to this language and she is the most dedicated teacher of this language. Her hard work made this app possible.”

Cultural Outreach Specialist Bobby Mercier talked about how far

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the Tribe has come in resurrecting the Chinuk Wawa language, which was on the brink of extinction.

“How special and how far this has come,” Mercier said. “From something that our people went through a time when you weren’t able to speak this or you were shunned to having it today and seeing everything that we have done with this. All the way from having immersion classrooms to having it accredited through universities to teaching it in high school on a daily basis to a dictionary and now an app.

“This is showing the evolution of ourselves and our language. It shows that we have taken a step to preserve something for our kids so that they will never know a day that it did not exist.”

Mercier said that his interest in learning the language was inspired by his desire to speak with his grandmother, who walked on before he became fluent. He eventually became a master apprentice to learn the language.

“It was a true blessing in my life and for my children,” he said, adding that his children and nieces and nephews can now speak the language.

After Tribal children sang “Tumala (Tomorrow)” in Chinuk Wawa, Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno thanked pre-

vious Tribal Councils for recognizing the importance of saving and teaching the language. He honored Tribal Elder Kathryn Harrison, a longtime Tribal Council member and Tribal chairperson, who was sitting in the back of the room.

“We didn’t have anything else but a cemetery, a language and a name,” Leno said about 1954’s Termination. “It has always been supported by Tribal Council. It’s just one of those things as a Native American Tribe that you respect. There really are not a lot of questions when it comes to supporting the language program. The outcome is what we have today, putting it on apps. ... This is our culture. This is Grand Ronde people. This is our representation of who we are.”

Tribal Council Vice Chair Jack Giffen Jr. said Chinuk Wawa was one of many languages Tribal ancestors spoke.

“It is the only tool we really have left from all those different languages,” Giffen said. “As a Tribal Council person, I know the value of that language and I know how much sovereignty it brings back to each one of us.”

Tribal Council member Jon A. George recalled hearing Elders speak Chinuk Wawa while he was growing up in Grand Ronde. He remembers them going off into other rooms or out to the barn to speak the language, refraining from doing so in public.

“Now no matter where our Tribal members live, they have an opportunity to have a connection to our Tribe,” George said. “What is so dear to me is that this is something that is who we are. This is our identity, our sovereignty. We get to speak it and write it. Pretty soon, our children won’t know anything different.”

Tribal Council member Chris Mercier used Chinuk Wawa to salute his alma mater, the University of Oregon, by saying “ʔatwa qʰwex-qʰwex” (“Go Ducks!”).

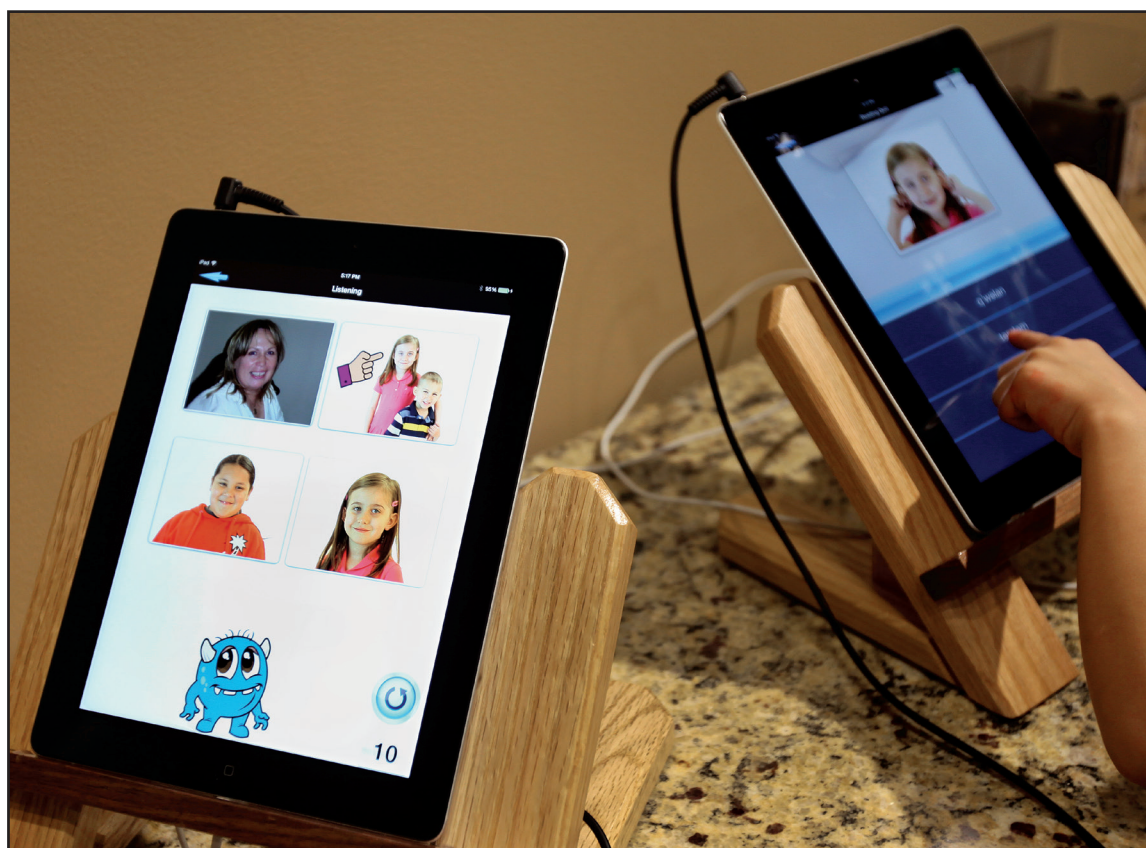
Tribal Chinuk Wawa language consultant Henry Zenk received a Pendleton blanket in appreciation of his work on chronicling the language, which included spending many hours interviewing Elders on how to speak Chinuk Wawa.

“The work that he did is history for us. You couldn’t put a price on the work he did,” Bobby Mercier said.

Mercier also acknowledged the dedicated work that was done on the language program by former Tribal employee Tony Johnson and Jackie Whisler, who walked on in 2007.

Cole demonstrated the app on a large screen. It features 27 categories that allow users to learn the language, play games to reinforce the lessons and take quizzes. It also includes audio (five songs and five stories in Chinuk Wawa), a history video and 50 historical photos with

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iPads loaded with the Chinuk Wawa application are available for use in the lobby of Chachalu Tribal Museum & Cultural Center in Grand Ronde. Ian Mercier uses the app during a launch celebration held at Chachalu on Thursday, Oct. 9.