

At Risk:

The Yuchi Language OKLAHOMA



“The Yuchi language is the key to our ceremonies, the unwritten histories of our people; it is a powerful tool and has been used to protect our elders in war. There is no other way to speak the Yuchi world into being, into relationship.”

—RICHARD GROUNDS,
DIRECTOR, YUCHI LANGUAGE PROJECT

Henry Washburn can do something no other person on earth can do: he can speak the male form of the Yuchi language. He is in fact, the last native male speaker of this language, and although his health is good, he is in his 80s. When he dies he will take with him eons of tradition, collective understanding, and a unique perspective on the world. Even more serious, Yuchi is a language isolate, unrelated to any other.

Like all Indigenous languages, Yuchi reflects concepts and perspectives that simply do not exist elsewhere. For example, for the Yuchi people the sense of community is so foundational that the language always marks whether or not you are speaking of a Yuchi community member through a different set of pronouns attached to the verb. If a person is Yuchi, you would say “k’a sA thl@.” If she is not Yuchi, you would say “k’a wA thl@.” There is no way to talk about someone in a generic sense. The “wA” pronoun could refer to any non-Yuchi person, including men, women, animals, the Sun, moon, etc. Even other Native Americans are classified linguistically as non-Yuchi. Yuchi has no separate word for “animals”; therefore, both grammatically and lexically, it is very hard to think of humans as categorically different or superior to those called “animals” in European languages.

Another distinctive aspect of Yuchi is that when a speaker refers to an object he or she has to refer to its physical relation to the earth. For example, in Yuchi you can’t just say “there it is;” you must say whether “it” is standing, sitting, or lying in relation to the earth. If it’s a door you say, “aKA-fa” (there it is-standing); if it’s an apple, “aKA-**chE**” (there it is-sitting); if it’s a river, “aKA-A” (there it is-lying). These distinctions in the language mean that a speaker of Yuchi is always paying attention to the way things interact with the earth. The pronouns are also carried over to talking about people: “KA dO chE” (I am here-sitting), “KA dE fa” (I am here-standing), and “KA dE A” (I am here-lying).

“The name for the Yuchi people in the language is zOyaha, “people of the Sun,” says Richard Grounds, the director of the Yuchi Language Project. “Our relationship to the Sun is celebrated through our main ceremonies, and the language is essential for conducting those ceremonies, remembering our history, and celebrating our relations with the earth, plants, and Sun. Yuchi ceremonies continue an ancient Lizard dance that goes back to the time of the dinosaurs. The songs in our ceremonies were given to us to use by the Crane, which is highly endangered. As k’asA Henry Washburn says, the plant medicines are disappearing even as our languages are going with the elders. When we began to work with our elders to bring back our language no one was very sure, at first, about the word for ‘buffalo’ because they had been wiped out of our environment for so long. We still have an important Buffalo dance in our ceremonies, but the word for Buffalo is not used in the song.”

Like 70 other Indigenous languages, Yuchi is extremely endangered. There are now only five fluent people on the planet who speak Yuchi as their first language, and the youngest just turned 80. Four of them are women, and Henry Washburn is the last male speaker—an important consideration, since Yuchi is spoken very differently by men and women. These elders are the survivors of the Native American boarding school program that was designed specifically to break the cycle of transmission of Native culture and language. Children were taken from their homes, isolated, and indoctrinated in mainstream language and religion. If they spoke their own tongues, they were punished, often brutally. They were so traumatized by the experience that they did not teach their language to their own children, and today only a handful of elders can still speak these tongues. That is why it is so critical to teach the languages to children now, while there is still time. The Yuchi Language Project is using a master-apprentice system, in which the elders teach

the language to younger adults, who then teach the children. Cultural Survival is providing administrative and financial support for the Yuchi language program and three other programs addressing highly endangered Native American languages. It is also lobbying for increased federal funding for Native language revitalization in general and is creating a website that will allow all Native language programs to share information, best practices, and inspiration.

As Simon Jenkins has said in Mark Abley's book *Spoken Here*, language isolates like Yuchi need to be protected in the same way as ancient architecture. "They are the archaeology of civilization, full of wisdom, legend, and beauty, messages from the Earth's own time-travelers."



Yoney Spencer and his daughters, Taygahn and Alyssa. Yoney is a language learner and teacher at the Yuchi Language Project. His daughters are learning Yuchi through the daily language classes for children.



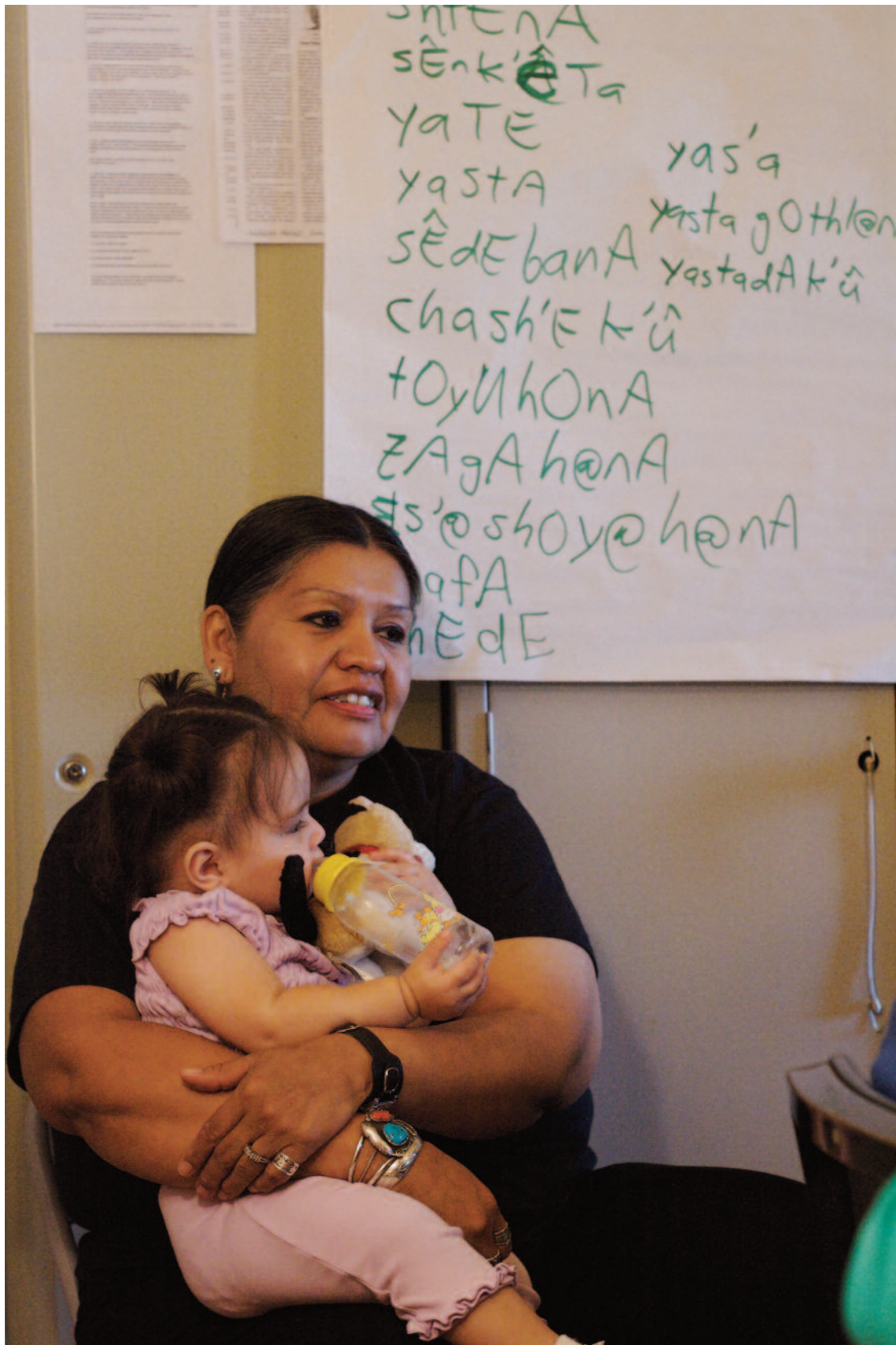
Children's classroom at the Yuchi language center



Maxine Barnett, one of the remaining Yuchi speakers.



Maggie C. Marsey, who was one of the last Yuchi speakers, recently passed away.



Jeanice Brown and her granddaughter, Shaba. Jeanice is a language learner and teacher at the Yuchi Language Project, and Shaba participates in language classes.