

Our Trip Takes Us

By Becky Hirn

One thing I had to give up when I decided to take a year off was my involvement with the Northwest Ohio Literacy Council. Just like traveling the United States, becoming a literacy tutor started out as a “bucket-list” kind of goal for me. I wanted to make a difference in an area that is important to me. The thing that connects me to literacy is my belief that information is power. There’s so much information available in books and on the Internet, I feel I could learn, research or understand anything I want. This idea was one of my greatest life lessons, especially in college at the advent of the world wide web. That’s also when I started to believe that literacy is essential for everyone.

I started at the Literacy Council about four years ago, as a tutor. I got involved in the fundraisers and eventually served on the Board. While there, I was stunned to learn that in Allen County, in Ohio and all over the United States, we struggle with illiteracy. By some counts 22 percent can’t read at a functional level. Being able to fill out a job application, take a driving test or more importantly, read to my kids at night is something I take for granted. The power of literacy and language has always fascinated me.

To my great surprise this week we found ourselves in a section of Oklahoma where I was able to visit the historical grounds of two interesting languages that I’d never been exposed to. The Cherokee Indian written language and runic inscriptions, or runestones of the Vikings who came to North America between 600-900 A.D. Two languages, thousands of years apart and just an hour drive between the two parks that honor them.

Our first stop was Sequoyah’s cabin in Sallisaw, Oklahoma. Sequoyah was the Cherokee who was so impressed by the settlers’ “talking leaves” or letters that he created an 86-letter alphabet, for the Cherokee language. Amazingly this happened just a couple hundred years ago. Before then their stories were preserved in oral tradition. I kept wondering what life would be like without written words. Before Sequoyah’s invention, the Cherokee were missing out on so much of what I enjoy – books, journaling and writing. Even to-do lists must have been mental notes only.

At the park, I learned even more about this leading Cherokee. He was an artist. He built his own cabin and he operated a salt spring. The best part of our whole visit was how Abby studied Sequoyah in literature class the same week we went to the cabin. I couldn’t have planned this field trip more perfectly.

The second stop on our linguistic tour was at the Heavener Runestone State Park, in Heavener, Oklahoma. In a tiny little town, just before entering the Ouachita National Forest and crossing over into Arkansas, there’s a lovely park up in the mountains. The park is there because it holds a gigantic 10’ x 12’ runestone. The ancient markings on the stone are debated but some say the stone was a property marker that reads: “Gnome Valley.” Others say the eight-character rune marked a date, November 11, 1012. What I liked about this stop was reading about all the research that went into determining what exactly the runestone meant. The stone was pretty cool too. And so were the views of the surrounding

mountains. What really amazed me was the idea that the runic alphabet came before the Latin alphabet we use today. This remnant of an obsolete language is so intriguing.

Sequoyah's alphabet gave the Indians new power in signing and understanding treaties. It gave them a way to record their history and genealogy. And whether the runestone was a property marker or a significant date, it speaks through time, maybe thousands of years. It tells that there were people here in Oklahoma, centuries before it was "discovered" by Americans. The information was important to those who wrote it, and the people who could read it.

I guess visiting these two sites this week sort of justifies all the time I spend recording my own thoughts, reading other people's stories and maybe even my work with the Literacy Council, because it creates a record of history, even if it's only my own.

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