Probably the first named feature in what is now Griggs County was the Sheyenne River. The French missionaries and explorers would listen to the Native American pronunciation of words and write it down in the French language based on how it sounded. Each speaker had a slightly different pronunciation and each had a slightly different spelling.

The Cheyenne Indians called themselves the Suhtai. They were part of the Algonquian language family so the Sioux called them “Sahiyena”, meaning “those who speak a red language”. A red language was a dialect that was foreign to the Sioux and a white language was a dialect they understood. The Cheyenne would also often paint their bodies and clothing red when the Sioux first encountered them and the word may have been a reference to red paint instead of red talkers.

The French word for dog was Chien and the Cheyenne Indians did not have horses at that time so they used dogs to pull their travois. The Sioux word for Little Cree was Sahiyela based on their word for rabbit and some of the Sioux referred to the Cheyenne as little Cree.

The earliest French maps refer to the river as Chaiena, probably based on Sahiyena. Other early French notes and maps had many variants similar to that. Some of the early English wrote it as the Shayenne, Cheyenne or Sheyenne. I’ve always resented the people in Wyoming who say that the reason we call it the Sheyenne is because we don’t know how to spell it correctly. The only thing we’re fairly certain of is that it was of American Indian and French origin.