

## Storytelling and Culture Learning Center

### Handout F: Stories from the Mississippi Choctaw

#### *Raccoon and Possum Look for Food Together*

When Raccoon woke up on Monday morning, the sun was shining bright. He stretched himself out in his cozy nest and yawned. Just as he was about to go back to sleep, he heard someone scratching on his door. Raccoon stuck his head under the dried leaves of his nest. "Maybe they'll go away," he thought. But a few minutes later when he pulled his head out of the leaves to listen, he heard the scratching again. He sighed and got out of bed. When he opened his door a tiny crack, he could see it was his friend Possum so Raccoon went out into the warm sunshine.

Possum had come to get Raccoon so they could go looking for breakfast together. The two animal friends were glad to see each other and they started off across the pasture. They were on their way to the river bank where persimmon trees grew. Raccoon was smiling to himself because he was thinking of the little fish he might catch at the river.

When they were nearly to the other side of the pasture, they saw two black snakes curled up on a rock. The snakes were napping in the sun so Raccoon and Possum hurried by as quietly as they could. The two animal friends kept on hurrying until they squeezed under the pasture gate.

They could hear the river splashing against the rocks on its banks as it moved along. It had rained the night before and the water was high and cold. Raccoon kept thinking about those little fish he was going to catch and he hurried along even faster. Possum had to run to keep up with his friend. By the time they reached the river, Possum was panting.

There were two big rocks at the edge of the water so the two animal friends each jumped on to a rock and sat down. Possum put his feet down into the water to cool and he tried to catch his breath. But Raccoon immediately began to fish. In no time at all he had caught four little white fish and was busily washing them in the water beside his rock.

By this time Possum felt much better and was thinking about how hungry he was. As he sat there on his rock looking at the river bank, two persimmons dropped from a nearby persimmon tree onto the ground. Possum smiled as he jumped up. This breakfast was going to be easy to get.

Raccoon had just finished his last fish and was washing his whiskers. He turned around just in time to see Possum jump from the rock onto two logs lying together at the edge of the river. Before Possum could jump from the logs to the bank, the logs moved under his weight. Suddenly, the fast moving water of the river pulled the logs away from the bank.

Before Raccoon could say anything, he saw Possum go floating down the river with his tail wrapped around the two logs like a raft. Raccoon just sat there staring. He could only think of how much the logs looked like two alligators because Possum was very frightened and the fur on his back was sticking straight up in the air. Possum had called

for help three times before Raccoon finally heard him.

Raccoon felt very fat after eating all those fish, but he ran fast anyway. He jumped from the rock to the bank and began to run along the edge of the river calling to his friend.

“Let go, let go and swim!” shouted Raccoon.

“I can swim!” cried the very frightened Possum. Raccoon was surprised to hear this but he stopped only for a minute before he jumped into the cold water. He had to swim very hard because the water was moving quite fast. The river moved the Possum raft and the swimming Raccoon further and further from the rocks where they had been sitting.

Finally, Raccoon was close enough to Possum to grab one of the logs. As he did, the other log floated away and Raccoon climbed up behind his friend. Then Raccoon showed Possum how to paddle the log with his arms and the two friends paddled slowly back toward the bank of the river.

When they could touch the bottom with their feet, they climbed down from the log and dragged their cold, wet, tired selves up the bank of the river onto the grass. They lay under a tree for a long time resting. Then Raccoon got up and began to wash and straighten his fur. Possum looked at his friend.

“I’m still hungry,” said Possum.

Raccoon stopped washing and looked at Possum. Then he bent down and picked up two persimmons that had fallen out of the tree above them.

“These are for you to eat,” said Raccoon “—after we get back to my house.” He turned and started back up the bank toward the path that led through the pasture.

Possum sighed and got up from the grass. Raccoon was cold so he was hurrying to get home and Possum had to run to keep up with his friend. But he did stop for just a minute to grab three persimmons to eat on the way. He was hungrier than ever.

### ***How Poison Came into the World***

Back when the world was new, there was a certain plant that grew in the shallow water of the bayous. It grew in the places where the Choctaw people would come to bathe or swim. This vine was very poisonous and whenever the people touched this vine, they would become very sick and die.

This vine liked the Choctaw people and felt sorry for them. It did not want to cause them so much suffering. It could not show itself to them, because it was its nature to grow beneath the surface. So it decided to give its poison away. It called together the chiefs of the small people of the swamps—the bees, wasps and snakes. It told them that it wished to give up its poison.

Those small creatures held council together about the vine’s offer. Until then, they had no poison and they were often stepped on by others. They agreed that

they would share the poison.

Wasp spoke first. "I will take a small part of your poison," it said. "Then I will be able to defend my nest. But I will warn the people by buzzing close to them before I poison them. I will keep the poison in my tail."

Bee was next. "I, too, will take a small part of your poison," it said. "I will use it to defend my hive. I will warn the people away before I poison them and even if I should have to use my poison, it will kill me to use it, so I will use it carefully."

Water Moccasin spoke. "I will take some of your poison. I will only use it if people step on me. I will hold it in my mouth and when I open my mouth people will see how white it is and know that they should avoid me."

Last of all, Rattlesnake spoke. "I will take a good measure of your poison," he said. "I will take all that remains. I will hold it in my mouth, too. Before I strike anyone, I will use my tail to warn them. Intesha, intesha, intesha, intesha. That is the sound I will make to let them know they are too close."

So it was done. The vine gave up its poison to the bees and wasps, the water moccasin and the rattlesnake. Now the shallow waters of the bayous were safe for the Choctaw people and where once that vine had poison, now it had flowers.

From then on, only those who were foolish and did not heed the warnings of the small ones who took the vine's poison were hurt.