

# Kvfi Hvshi: Sassafras month a time for summer heat

*This article is part of a series entitled "A Year in the Life". Focusing on the time period around AD 1700, this series follows the traditional Choctaw calendar through a year, with each article providing a glimpse of the activities that our ancestors were up to during each month. This information is excerpted from a book, soon to be published by the Choctaw Nation, which is entitled "Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge."*

Kvfi Hvshi, Sassafras Month, roughly corresponds to July. By this point in the year, summer heat, humidity, and insects reach their peak. The month's name corresponds with the hot season because tea made from the roots of the sassafras tree was consumed by Choctaw people during the hottest weather in order to "thin" the blood to help stay cool.

The height of summer brought the possibility of damaging droughts. According to one Choctaw oral tradition, during an extreme drought in the early 1700s, Choctaw country saw no rain for three years. Bad droughts are known to have completely destroyed the Choctaw corn harvest several times in the 1700s. The Choctaw people believed that the spiritual balance of their community had an influence on whether or not God provided them with beneficial rain. Rainmakers, known as umba ikbit were specialists within Choctaw society who were called upon to end crop damaging droughts through their supplications to God and practice of boiling certain herbs in a pot of water to infuse the rising steam.

When the corn in the community fields reached six to seven feet in height, it was hoed for the third and final time. This third hoeing was known as hopochi. The same name was used to refer to the corn crop itself at this stage. Soon the silk would change colors, and the ears would begin to fill out. The hominy and flour varieties of corn planted in the communal fields took four to five months to mature and the latter variety could grow to 20 feet tall. Corn ears in the roasting stage were referred to as nipvsha, meat is on it. After the third hoeing and the harvest of some roasting ears, the main part of the fieldwork was done for a while, allowing families the flexibility to go fishing.



Fishing, nvn okwehli, was an enjoyable diversion in the hot season which also provided important food. It was principally done by the men, although the women participated as well, with the exception of expectant mothers and their parents. For people living in the main Choctaw towns, fishing was usually done in nearby streams which dried up during the summer, leaving small pools that concentrated the fish. The backwaters of major rivers including Patasvchi, the Mississippi River swampland, were avoided during this season for fear of disease.

Choctaw communities passively caught fish by digging holes in the active floodplains of streams. When the stream overflowed its banks and eventually receded, these holes would become small ponds with fish trapped inside them which could be harvested by hand. In another method, the community cut green branches and piled them across a stream near shallow water. Men climbed on the pile and jumped up and down on it to compress it tightly, so that it could be tied together with vines to create a brush barricade. Boys would get into the water at the

other end of the stream and scare the fish towards the barricade, which the men would lift. When the fish had entered the shallow water, the men would drop the barricade, trapping them.

In the shallow water, large fish could easily be shot with arrows. Some species of large fish float near the surface of the water at first light, absorbing some of the sun's warmth. Native Southeasterners hunted them with harpoons of river cane which had a fire-hardened point at one end and a bark fiber cord at the other. These buoyant harpoons could pull a large, wounded fish to the surface. Men sometimes swam in groups underwater, catching fish by making a line of hand-held fishing nets, nvn isht hokli. Noodling was another technique. Women sometimes also caught fish using coarse baskets as hand-held nets. Choctaws made traps, nvnvpa, from river cane to catch large fish.

The most intensive fishing technique involved poisoning fish in pools or creeks that had been dammed up with brush. Men would arrive in the morning, bringing black walnut hulls, roots of the devil's shoestring plant, buckeyes, or beauty berries. They would pound these near the water's edge, then mix them into the water. In larger bodies of water, this was sometimes done with the aid of small rafts. These plants contain chemicals which make it difficult for the fish to breathe, so they would float up near the surface of the water. In small, soft-bottomed ponds, the same effect was sometimes obtained by simply moving the feet around in the muck, stirring up enough silt that it became difficult for the fish to breathe. When fish floated to the surface, they were tossed up onto the bank.

After a successful day of fishing, women might coat the fish in clay they had dug from the banks of the stream, and bake them in the coals of the fire. The leftover cooked fish would keep for several days without spoiling. For a longer shelf life, fish were smoked and dried. Fishing was particularly important in drought years when the crops were producing low yields.

In addition to fishing, July was also the season for the chestnut harvest. Chestnuts were an important food for Choctaw communities. After the chestnuts fell to the ground, they had to be gathered and processed quickly to prevent spoilage.