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The Story of a Set of Bamboo Picks

When pondering which of my archaeology tools are most important to me, I had a lot of choices (for example, I have used the same trowel since 1969). I admit that I get very attached to those digging tools that work well, but some have better stories than others. The tool that I have selected for this post is my set of “Perino picks.”

Anyone who ever knew or worked with Gregory Perino became fascinated not only with his encyclopedia-like knowledge of archaeology, but also with his ability to create the perfect archaeological tools. Having done much of my early field work in archaeology in the Lower

Illinois River Valley and at Cahokia, hearing Perino's name was a common occurrence (the man dug everywhere!), and I am delighted that I had the opportunity not only to talk with him, but to work with him at several sites. In particular, he visited me regularly when I excavated the Mississippian Moss Cemetery, and I had the opportunity to visit him in Tulsa when I incorporated the Mississippian Schild cemetery (which he excavated) into my dissertation, along with Moss. Greg always told me that his job was to find, excavate, and describe sites, but interpretation and fancy analyses were for students and academics. He was always happy to share.

Greg was an amateur archaeologist who trained himself to be a professional. He was astounding in his ability to find "cool" sites and artifacts, and his excavation pictures demonstrate his amazing ability to conduct beautiful excavations. He had his own little bulldozer, he created special sets of shovels and trowels and screens, and he invented the Perino probe, which was sprung steel with a little steel knob on the end. Greg used the probe to find sites and also to identify what he had found. Having been trained to use the Perino probe, I can attest that you can tell the difference between stone, ceramics, clay, bone, etc. Unfortunately, I'm sorry to say that I don't own one.

Another tool I don't own is one of Greg's postmold cross-sectioners. It was an adapted shovel that was a little wider than 95% of any postmolds (or possible postmolds) you might find. With two cuts, he could cross-section the postmold, and determine whether it was real or a rodent burrow or something else. He loaned me the shovel for some work I had to do on a special project. It worked extremely well, and significantly sped up the process of excavation (we had about 100 possible postmolds to examine).

When I was excavating the Moss cemetery in 1972, Greg was visiting Kampsville from Oklahoma, and came out to the site one day and announced that I did not have the right tools for the job. He then gave me several "Perino picks." A Perino pick is a piece of bamboo about 6-8" long that he cut to various thicknesses, then carved to have a nice blunt point on one end and a nice beveled scraping edge on the other. You can easily work around and expose delicate artifacts and bone without risking harm to the items. I love those picks, and still use them today.

But, after Greg left to return home, another visitor decided that my supply of Perino picks was too limited. That visitor was the late Eugene Gray. Gene was a wonderful person who was an avid amateur archaeologist. He was happy to share information with professionals, and he very much wanted to learn how to do things properly. Gene also worked with Greg whenever the possibility arose. In any case, during Gene's visit to Moss, he decided that I needed a broader range of Perino picks, and besides, he was trying to improve his ability to make these tools. I happily agreed, and Gene made me a set of picks that are similar to Greg's, but are thinner and

have a GG on them so that they can be clearly identified as distinct from Greg's. In case you are wondering, the reason everyone was concerned about my toolkit was because we were finding significant numbers of whole pots at Moss, and no one wanted them harmed due to excavation.

My set of bamboo picks was complete, and to this day, I use them proudly and I loan them infrequently. Not only are they wonderful tools, but every time I use them I think of the two terrific field men who created them for me. In the years since, I have shown students how to create such picks, but I would never trade a new set for my originals – they were made with much knowledge and love by two remarkable archaeologists.

