

The Gentleman interviews Lee McBee an Archaeologist at Historic Jamestowne.

G - The Gentleman

Lee - Lee McBee

G - "What tools do you use?"

Lee - "The tools that I use are...sometimes we use picks, the big heavy picks if we're breaking up something hard. And we use shovels and we use trowels which I can show you if you hang on just one second"

(Lee goes to grab a trowel)

G - "Well it appears they use pickaxes"

Lee - "We use these more than anything. These we use more than anything and those are trowels so that we're really careful when we're taking away the dirt and sometimes we even use a toothbrush if we're picking up something or we're excavating an artifact that's very fragile then we use a toothbrush or small picks or even popsicle sticks sometimes.

G - "Why do you use popsicle sticks?"

Lee - "Good question. Popsicle sticks we use because the wood is usually softer than the artifact we're taking out and the wood won't like hurt or scratch or break the artifact. These (referring to the trowel) could hurt or scratch or break if we weren't careful. But if we use popsicle sticks or small wooden sticks or even a toothpick then they don't usually hurt the artifact.

G - "Why do you use those anyways?" (referring to the trowel)

Lee - "Well this has a nice edge, so that we can make a nice straight cut in the ground and just barely scrape things up. We don't hardly ever use the point, we just use the sides."

G - "How many breaks do you take?"

Lee - "How many breaks? Hmmm if it's really warm here, which sometimes in Virginia on this river (*the James River*) it can get really hot. One summer we were digging in a church floor and the floor of the church was over 130 degrees so we took a lot of breaks then. We even changed our socks sometimes (chuckling) because they'd get so wet and sweaty. You wanted to know that right?

X - (giggling) "Yes"

Lee - "We drink a lot of water and we take breaks in the shade, and the nice breeze that you feel right now?"

G - "uh huh"

Lee - "It really helps us alot. But sometimes if we're below ground, we don't have a breeze so we may even like put a tent up over us so the sun doesn't hurt us quite as bad."

G - "When do you stop digging and go home?"

Lee - "Um, we stop digging usually around 4 O'clock. Um we usually get here at 8 o'clock in the morning and the park opens up around 9 o'clock so people can start coming in to watch us because we're public archaeology so we like to talk to people and we like to be watched. Do you like to be watched? (smiling)

X - (Shaking his head while smiling)

Lee - "We like to be watched. Because people that way can see what we're digging and they can see it the moment we find it.

G - "When do you have to come here so you can dig artifacts?"

Lee - "Um, we usually get here about 7:30 in the morning. And we have to get our tools ready, and load up our equipment and open up our sheds and sometimes we have to pull the tarps, um off of our sites because we cover them up at night.

G - "hrmm"

Lee - "We call it tucking them in at night." (smiling)

G - "That is almost exactly how I did it with archaeology class."

Lee - "Well that's good. And then once we've put the tarps down we'll put sandbags all around, um, that way we can protect whatever we're digging. (chuckling)

G - "What favorite artifacts have you found?"

Lee - "Oh, my favorite artifacts. (sighs) Those are, those are probably the very common things that they leave their mark on. So, for example if they have made a brick and they pick that brick up before it's dried, they can leave like a full hand print with fingerprints in that brick. Um, sometimes we find handles from jugs, where they put the handle on the wet clay, they've left fingerprints, so it's kinda like, "ah there it is." It's sort of like a human connection, because even though they lived here 3-400 years ago, when you see where they put their fingerprint or touched something, it's almost like reaching back in time and touching history."

G - "How many artifacts have you found?"

Lee - " huhohho, in ten years? Probably thousands? Um, I worked here in the summer time for 8 years and then part time and then full time, so thousands."

G - "That's just insane"

Lee - "That is. But all kinds of things, um, a lot of things you'd be interested in probably."

G - "Is archaeology fun?"

Lee - "It is SO much fun. Because I taught history for a long time in Ohio and Virginia and when you teach history you get to talk about it and when you do archaeology you get to talk about it and you get to feel it, you get to dig it up. So you might be touching something that no one has touched in 400 years, here at Jamestowne, and that's really cool to think like the last person who picked that up was someone 400 years ago, a colonist."

G - "What is the biggest artifact you've found?"

Lee - "Like biggest size? Um in the John Smith well that we dug, over inside the fort, I dug a weapon called a billhook. It was a large curved blade over a foot long and it mounted onto a long wooden pole. And sometimes they used those as weapons and sometimes they used those just to cut down brush and trees. But they're called billhooks and it was thrown in that well, so it was about 400 years old."

G - "Like an axe."

Lee - "Pardon?"

G - "Like an axe, because it can kill and chop."

Lee - "yeah, it was similar to an axe, but it was longer and the top was curved, but it was a blade like, it had a blade like and axe."

G - "When did you first decide that you wanted to be an archaeologist?"

Lee - "How old are you right now?"

G - "8"

Me - "9..." (birthday was just a couple weeks earlier)

G - "I mean 9"

Lee - (chuckling) "Uh, about when I was 8 or 9 because my dad was a history teacher and behind the bank in the little town where i grew up was a big hill and in that hill they had dumped old pottery from a pottery that had been there in town, and my mom used to take me down there and drop me off and I would spend all day digging to see if I could find old pieces of pottery. So I started really young. All those years I taught history my plan was when I stopped teaching history full time, I would do archaeology. So I started to do a little archaeology and then I got a chance to be full time at Jamestowne, so I took it."

G - "What did you study at university?"

Lee - "I was an education and history major and I had my bachelors degree in education and history and right now I'm working on my masters in archaeology through the university of leicester, in england."

G - "What is the most interesting or favorite site that you've dug in?"

Lee - "The most interesting site?"

G - "And your favorite."

Lee - "And my favorite. um probably my favorite was the John Smith dug well inside the fort because they used it as a trash pit and there were all kinds of artifacts just piled on top of each other. Irish coins the dozens, irish copper pennies. Um there were weapons, there were tools, there thousands of oyster shells where they'd eaten food and thrown their trash away. Just more things than you can possibly imagine."

G - "Almost exactly where we dig, we found pottery, piles of artifacts and bones."

Lee - "It's really cool, like you never know what you're going to find when you're an archaeologist right?"

G - "mm hmm"

Lee - "So that's kind of the fun, because you don't know what you're going to find next and the well was just full of that kind of thing, so it was cool."

G - "Thank you."

Lee - "You are welcome" (chuckling)