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Finding Children Without Toys: The Archaeology of Children at Shabbona Grove, Illinois

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The idea that children's activities may be seen through traditionally adult material culture is rarely explored in archaeological analyses. This paper advocates a more nuanced interpretation of assemblages in archaeological datasets that highlights children and their activities. Discussions of children in the archaeological record are often restricted to material culture attributed specifically to them, such as toys and clothing. Archaeological research conducted in Shabbona Grove, rural Illinois, USA, revealed a concentration of non-child-specific artefacts, the context of which suggests the deliberate collection or curation by children in the latter part of the twentieth century. The concentration was diverse and included artefacts of ceramics, glassware, machinery metal and clothing. The Shabbona Grove study illustrates the potential of identifying children's actions without child-specific material culture. At this site, child-specific material culture recovered in excavation may be less informative about the actions and lives of children compared to other child-utilised items. The oppressive poverty at Shabbona Grove suggests an interpretation of the suspected children's collection as a form of coping mechanism or expression.

KEYWORDS child-specific material culture, archaeology of children, collecting, agency

Introduction

Over the last quarter of a century, childhood studies have developed as a sub-field of archaeology (Lillehammer, 1989; Kamp, 2001; Baxter, 2005; Kamp, 2015; Lillehammer, 2015). In the wake of the post-processual movement, archaeologists have long expanded the field to include marginalised narratives, which now include children's experiences. With a paucity of knowledge about the specific

behaviours of children as differentiated from adults across time and space, it is difficult to recognise evidence for the actions of children in the absence of material culture specifically attributed to them, yet such behaviours are fundamental to human culture (Lillehammer, 2015: 83).

Recent studies highlight several approaches in the archaeological investigation of children (Moore and Scott, 1997; Sofaer Derevenski, 2000; Baxter, 2005). The Baxter volume, and most other work, can be divided into three main foci. First is an establishment of ethnographies that relate the experiences of childhood, describe children's behaviours, and explain enculturation processes (Kamp, 2002; Bugarin, 2005; Keith, 2005; Park, 2005; Thomas, 2005; Moshenska, 2008). The second focus is the archaeology of childhood through the study of child-specific material culture. Within this arena, miniatures, low quality ceramics and lithics, and toys are seen as material culture specific to children. In prehistoric archaeology, smaller and/or 'practice' versions of adult objects predominates the material culture attributed to children (Finlay, 1997; Greenfield, 2000; Grimm, 2000; Bagwell, 2002; Smith, 2003; Park, 2005; Smith, 2005; Cunnar, 2015; Finlay, 2015). In historical archaeologies, childhood is often acknowledged through the ubiquity and influence of formal toys that are adult's attempts to socialise children to societal norms (Pearson and Mullins, 1999; Wilkie, 2000; Crewe and Hadley, 2013). The third focus, bioarchaeology, relates age and development to health, work and social stratification regimes (Lally and Moore, 2011; Sobolik, 2002; Whittlesey, 2002). Many bioarchaeological studies place children as a crucial part of understanding past cultures, not for themselves, but out of the assumption that since children cannot care for themselves or gain status for themselves, their health and status as reflected in burial practice reflect upon adult culture (e.g. Larson, 1971; Perry, 2005). The works cited above showcase the increased interest in including children in archaeological study; however, researchers need to acknowledge children's agency in their interpretations. Robert Park (2005: 53–4) relates a common pitfall of archaeologists' portrayal of children:

... in each of the contexts in which children were mentioned, children and childhood were never the focus of the archaeologist's interest. Instead ... children's graves were a means to learn about the (adult) political organization of a society ... children were seen as a site-formation process affecting the material culture produced by adults, and ... children were invoked as a means of separating out seemingly aberrant potsherds so that they would not confuse the stylistic and other kinds of analyses that were being applied to the remaining 'adult' potsherds.

Park (2005) is correct in that children's activities are often seen as indicators of more important adult actions; post-medieval archaeologies especially struggle with recognising the importance of children's effects (Morrison and Crawford, 2013). Even detailed archaeological analyses focused on children, such as Buchli and Lucas's (2000) study of children's material culture in an abandoned tenant house, also tend to cultivate conclusions directed, ultimately, towards the adults of the study. Because childhood is a comparatively short time frame, most interpretations focus on the 'fleeting' aspects of childhood. As Joanna Sofaer Derevenski (2000: 11) lamented: 'The modern, Western perception of childhood as a prolonged period

of dependence on an adult has led archaeologists to construct interpretations that reduce children to passive, inert automatons.’ While the recent work on the archaeology of children has undeniably improved the understanding of children’s lives in the past, there is ample room to empower children as their subjects (Kamp, 2015).

The archaeologies presented here tend to implicitly categorise the material culture of childhood into two categories. I call these two categories – *formal (child-specific) material culture* and *informal (adult-specific) material culture*. The first category, child-specific material culture, contains artefacts that are somehow marked, whether in size, style or creation specifically for or by children. This category dominates the discussion of childhood in historical archaeology through recognisable toys like marbles, dolls, books and the like. Prehistorians also fixate on formal toys, but often do not have the tools to identify toys securely. Low-quality or novelty-size replicas of full-sized, functional material culture that many archaeologists assign to children’s work also fall under this category (e.g. Finlay, 1997; Greenfield, 2000; Grimm, 2000; Bagwell, 2002; Smith, 2003; Park, 2005; Smith, 2005; Cunnar, 2015; Finlay, 2015). Child-specific material culture also refers to the personal effects of children – shoes, buttons, ribbons, pacifiers, cradles and clothing. These artefacts speak to the bodies of children and their physical presence in a space. My second category, informal material culture, is problematic in most archaeological assemblages because primary function of the materials may be utilitarian. I may also refer to this category as *adult-specific material culture* because archaeologists traditionally understand those things that are not marked for children as part of adult practices. Following the adage ‘kids will play with anything’, almost everything could fall into this second category. Children interact with a large variety of material culture types, both with purpose and with play. By restricting the archaeological interpretations of the lives of children to child-specific material culture, as all of the literature mentioned above does, many researchers let questions regarding agency and individuality fall through the cracks. The present study aims to showcase a case study in recognising children’s actions and wills independent of adults from an archaeological vantage.

The Stakes

Laurie Wilkie (2000: 100) assesses the stance of many historical archaeologists toward children:

It is the presence of these mass-produced, easily recognizable artefacts that has compelled historical archaeologists to at least admit that children once peopled the past. However, within historical archaeology, children’s intentions and experiences, as reflected by their material culture, are not discussed. Children’s artefacts are discussed as by-products of parents’ attempts to instil values into their children, not as statements made by children Unfortunately, beyond being cited as the users and disposers of certain artefacts, children are not considered as actors engaged in social dialogues, nor are they considered by historical archaeologists as active participants in shaping the archaeological record. Just as importantly, children are not seen as the users and consumers of non-children’s artefacts.¹

Almost all archaeological studies of children, including Wilkie (2000) above, have thus far focused on my first category of the material culture of children – formal (child-specific) material culture. Studies that suggest the ‘distortion’ that children’s play activities can have on surface collections comprise the only exceptions (Wilk and Schiffer, 1979; Hammond and Hammond, 1981). Children’s effects and formal toys, however, only describe children’s presence and enculturation regimes encouraged by adults; thereby, children can only be archaeologically interpreted through presence/absence or through enculturation regimes. Their agency is therefore limited to their association with adults – whether that be in mimicking or learning adult behaviours or through material culture produced by adults for children. By avoiding discussions of children’s alternative uses of material culture, children are reduced to Sofaer Derevenski’s (2000) automatons of adult expectations. However, children do not perfectly conform to the expectations put upon them. Wilkie (2000: 103–4) has produced a narrative of childhood resistance, which she attains through the purposeful breaking of porcelain doll heads. Beyond resistance narratives, however, archaeologists need to highlight that children are individuals with their own prerogatives.

Disregard of children’s actions and/or a lack of proper context contributes to the lack of study of informal toys in the archaeological record. As mentioned, informal toys can potentially be any material culture and are therefore more likely to be associated with a formal or functional use, with the consideration that material culture can hold multiple meanings for different individuals. However, alternative interpretations of use, when the context suggests, can be even more poignant in reminding archaeologists of the idiosyncratic nature of all humans. The development of my argument compliments Lillehammer’s (1989; 2000) notions of the *world of children* in that it highlights how a child’s physical being and material rationale in this space, and on this material culture, in Shabbona Grove makes sense. I argue that the archaeology at Shabbona Grove shows children’s proactive use of material culture for their own purposes – that children’s actions can be seen as a lasting influence on the landscape.

History and Archaeology at Shabbona Grove

Shabbona Grove is located in south DeKalb County, Illinois, USA (Fig. 1). The town was founded in 1836 with the first Euro-American settlers, though Potawatomi presence was strong in the area before the Black Hawk War (Boies, 1868; Thompson and Everts, 1871; Strand, 1905; Gross, 1907). By 1848–9, settlers bought up much of the county lands; the small town quickly blossomed in the mid-nineteenth century (Smith and DuMoulin, 1860; Anonymous, 1876). When the Chicago and Iowa Railroad came north of the town by 3.5 miles [5.63 km] in 1871, many of the town’s businesses and residents moved to the new depot. The Northern Illinois Railroad came to Shabbona Grove in 1885 but was too late to reinvigorate the village’s economy despite high hopes (Anonymous, 2012 [1886]). By 1923, only sixty-one people resided in the town and the ranks of numerous business and community buildings were torn down (Anonymous, 1876; Lintereur, 2012). The train

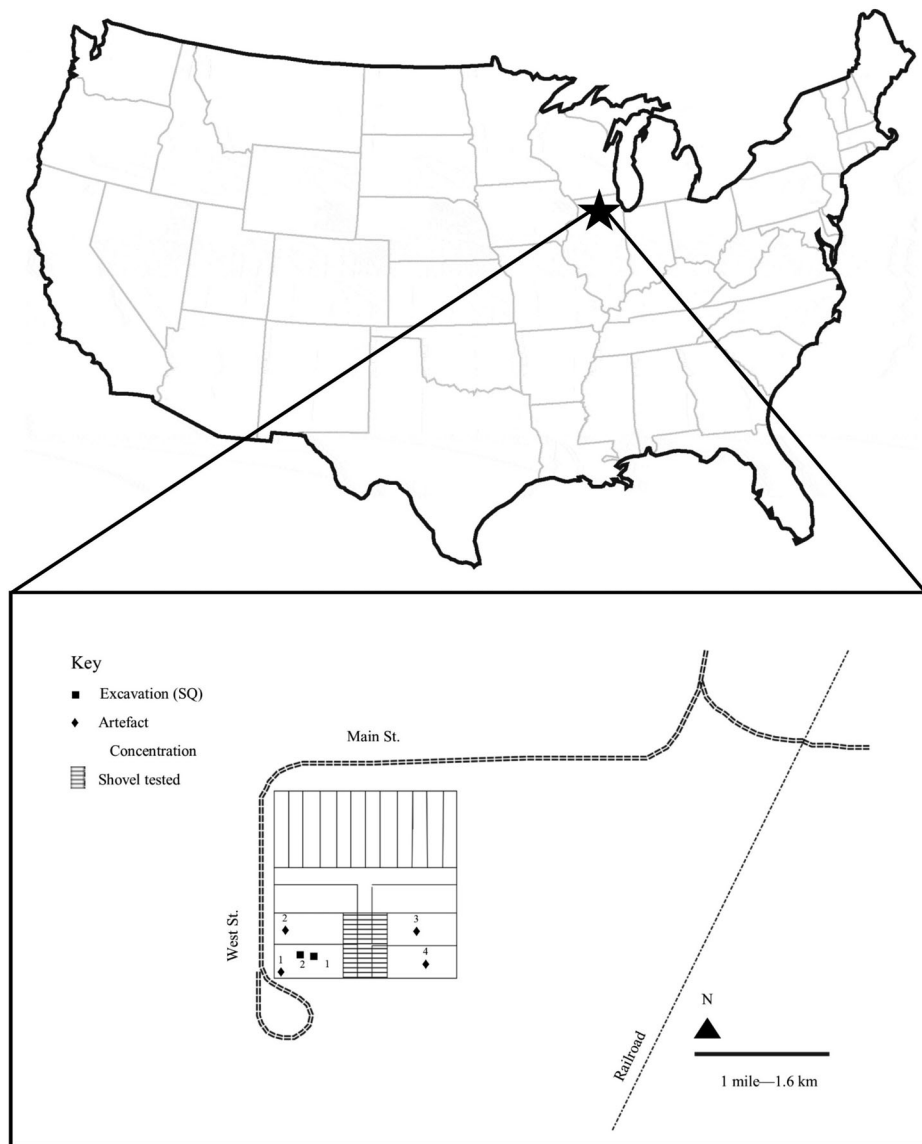


FIGURE 1 Shabbona Grove archaeological project map. Shabbona Grove, Illinois, USA. Shows site location, the site boundaries for surface collection, the inter-site property divisions, and archaeological investigations.

stopped mail service in 1929 and the station closed in 1942 (Lintereur, 2012: 36; Pardridge, 2012: 42). Today there are ten houses in the unincorporated village, six of which are modern constructions within the past twenty years.

The Shabbona Grove Archaeological Project (SGAP) was established in spring of 2011 as a research initiative to learn more about the extant town and the people who lived there. No evidence exists that the people who owned the property actually lived

there, considering that the longest time that any one person owned the lot was ten years (1976 to 1986) and has exchanged hands twenty-three times since 1895. Local residents have recorded through personal, hand-drawn maps that at least two houses have stood on the property. An aerial photograph from 1939 shows a house (Fig. 2). No above-ground evidence of permanent housing, such as foundations, currently exists and no apparent development of the site after abandonment/destruction of the houses has occurred.

Methodology: Surface Collection and Excavation

SGAP began the 2011 season by using a total station to re-assess the property lines and complete a surface survey. Because of the dense undergrowth, visibility and access was limited to the central-southern area of the property and along the few four-wheeler trails. Unfortunately, the impassable underbrush made the usual pedestrian transect survey impossible, though the passable areas of the property were well covered. The total area surveyed is approximately 1,000 square yards (836 m²).

The surface survey revealed four areas of artefact concentration, with the westernmost two being the sharpest defined, being within 1 m² (see Fig. 1). Artefact Concentrations 1 and 2 were not only well defined, but relatively hard to see, both sheltered by trees and developed shrubs. Both were relatively near the edge of the property (approximately 10 m) but were shielded from that edge by flora. Concentration 1 was composed entirely of alcohol bottles and was located in easy distance of one of the four-wheeler trails. Concentration 2, the concentration of primary interest for this paper, was far harder to see and access was protected by low-lying bushes. Adults could only access the artefacts by bending or crawling to the space. Table 1 relates the inventory of Concentration 2, while Figure 3 shows some of the items included within Concentration 2.

The surface survey revealed no above-surface architectural remains and a shovel-testing survey across the reported alleyway proved sterile. Just outside the shovel-testing survey, however, two shallow depressions were chosen to be shovel tested and when artefacts emerged, they were transitioned into full 1 m by 2 m excavation units (SQ01 and SQ02). These excavations exposed two large, well-mixed midden features dating to the approximate abandonment of Shabbona Grove (early 1960s). A defined pit in SQ02 was capped by wooden planks and roofing tiles and contained many nearly complete artefacts. This paper will especially explore the child-specific artefacts, which stylistically date to the early 1960s (Fig. 4; Table 2).

The Usual Suspects: Child-Specific Material Culture

SQ02 contained an especially high concentration of child-specific material culture. The toys date from the 1960s and were predominantly formed of plastic (i.e. doll cups, a submarine, a piggybank, a play clock face). Most of the artefacts were pushed against the sides of the pit feature; the centre of the pit contained gravel and mixed dirt. This pattern indicates intentional burial, with deposition of the artefacts before the pit was completely filled. Most of the toys display a degree of

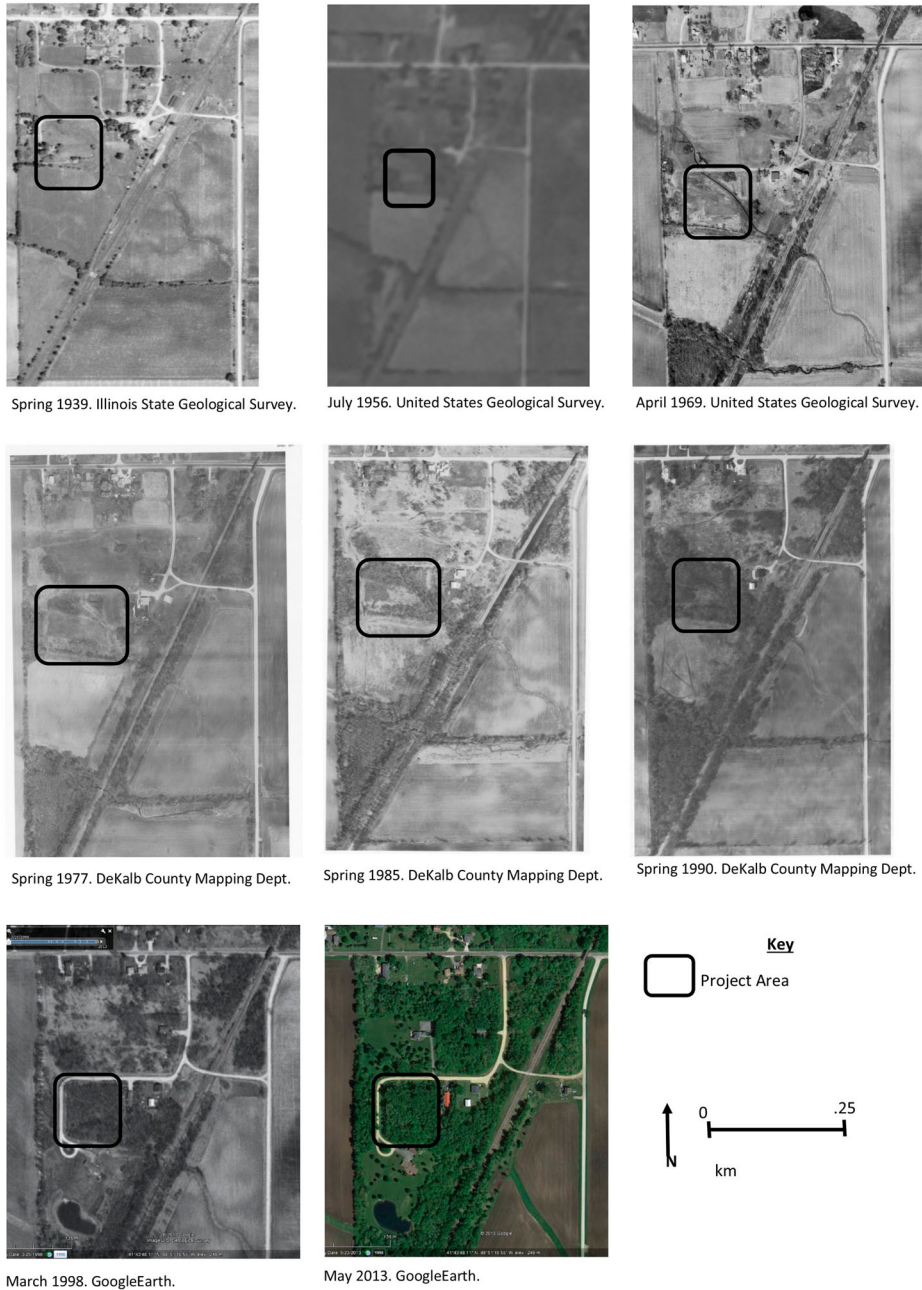


FIGURE 2 Historic aerial photographs showing Shabbona Grove (1939–2013).

damage, some which seems pre-depositional and some that show indeterminate damage. It is hard to tell if these imperfections are post-depositional or may have been the cause of their having been thrown away. Unlike Wilkie's (2000) case, there is no evidence of intentional breakage.

TABLE 1
INVENTORY OF THE ARTEFACTS RECOVERED FROM SURFACE CONCENTRATION 2 (SURFACE COLLECTION BAG 6FIN).

Photo Reference, Fig. 3	Description	Debris Category	Date
1	Reconstructable brown glass bottle – ‘One Pint’	Container	1910–
2	Reconstructable clear glass jar – ‘One Pint’	Container	1910–
3	Small clear glass twist-top lip	Container	1910–
4, 5	Clear glass smooth lip	Container	1910–
6	Heinz ‘57’ glass bottle piece	Misc.	1890–
7	Clear glass oval base	Misc.	1890–
8	‘Solar’ plastic fuse	Misc.	1960–85
9	Tube Television inside dial ‘1–10’	Container	1960–85
10	Tube Television metal component	Container	1960–85
11	Plastic dial	Container	
12	Metal clamp	Serving	
	Blue glass jar shards	Serving	
	Green glass shard	Serving	
	White glass shards	Clothing	
	Blue undecorated stoneware	Clothing	
	Green undecorated stoneware	Serving	
	Decorated porcelain- foliage design	Serving	
	Blue plastic flower-shaped button	Clothing	
	Tan shoe heel	Clothing	

It is impossible to know if children or adults constructed this pit; it was not unusual for children to construct dug-outs as private play spaces in the mid-twentieth century (Thoms, 2013, pers. comm.). Dug-outs provided shelter from adult eyes for more liberated play activities.

Unexpected Play: A Child-Calculated Collection

Several different sets of evidence suggest that Concentration 2, found during the surface collection, displays the action of children. To support the assertion of purposeful collection by children, it must be shown that the concentration was made by human actors, that it is not simply refuse but an intentionally wrought concentration (with evidence of curation or consistent, internal logic), and that children would have the best accessibility to the precise location of the concentration. This conclusion does not preclude the possibility that adults could have had the opportunity to create the concentration but, as a population, children need to be recognised as being just as influential and (in this case, more likely) active shapers of their environment.

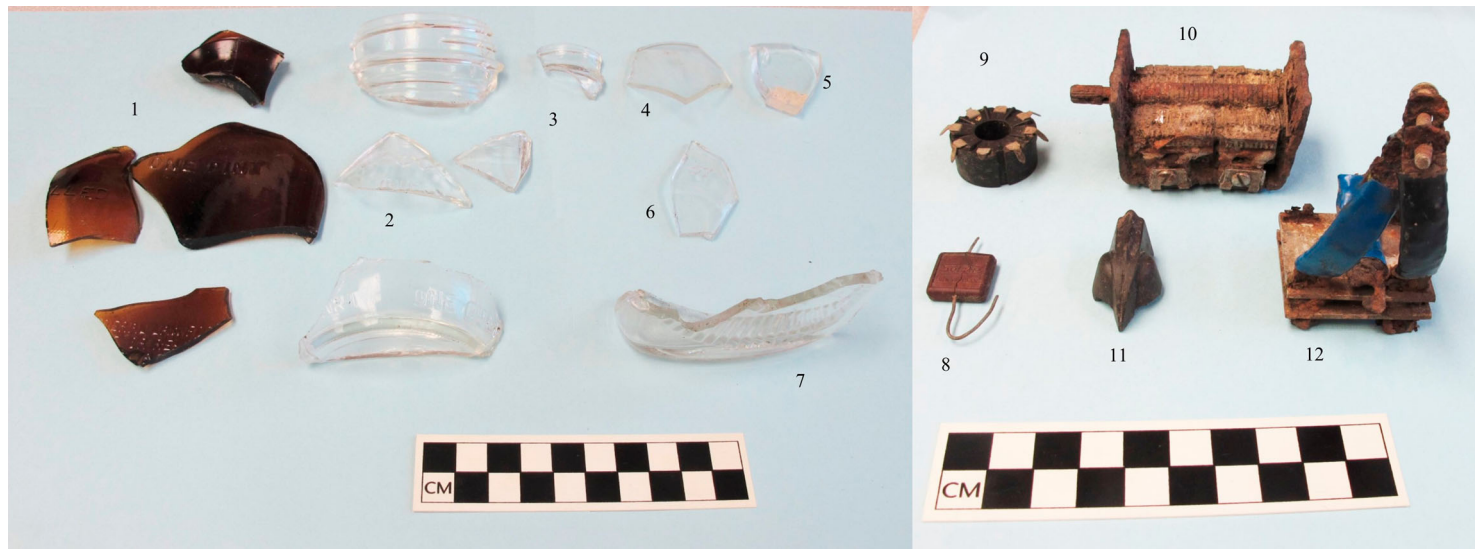


FIGURE 3 Select artefacts from Concentration 2 (Surface Collection Bag 6fin).



FIGURE 4 Child-Specific artefacts from Excavation Squares 1 and 2.

Natural phenomena could not have created Concentration 2. The artefacts in the assemblage are quite large or complete; this would make it difficult for water or other types of weather/taphonomic activities to move them into a collected area. Also, observation of the site confirmed that drainage after heavy storms did not wash over the area. Animal relocation is also unlikely. The only local fauna that may be interested in human artefacts would be raccoons and the location showed no evidence of animal presence – neither soil disturbances nor faeces were noticed. In contrast, Concentrations 3 and 4 showed evidence of taphonomic

TABLE 2
INVENTORY OF THE CHILD-SPECIFIC ARTEFACTS FROM EXCAVATION SQUARES 1 AND 2.

Photo Reference, Fig. 4	Description	Provenience/ Artefact No.	Dates
	'Eskimo Pie' wrapper	TC800-015	1922-?
1	'DuPont Park Avenue' toothbrush	TC800-023	1930s-
2	yellow plastic beads on strand	TC800-025	1930s-
3	clear glass marble	TC800-029	
4	yellow marble shooter	SQ02 F3 B3unfin	
5	'Lincoln Log': plastic building toy	TC800-14	1942-
6	plastic toy wheel	SQ02-06 B2unfin	1960-80
7	plastic pig bank	SQ02-06 C2unfin	1942-
8	plastic play ring, broken	SQ02-04 B2unfin	1942-
9	green plastic play watch, broken – 'Czech'	TC800-033	1942-
10	yellow play plastic cup	TC800-032, TC800-034	1942-
11	white lace edging	TC600-02	
	'Charms' wrapper	TC800-35	1912-88

disturbance, as the artefacts were well dispersed along natural drainages. As Concentration 2 is unlikely to have been formed by these natural processes, however, humans must be directly responsible for the placement of the artefacts together.

Concentration 2 does not seem to represent the remnants of single-incident dumping or cleaning. Firstly, there is a substantial temporal range for the artefacts in the surface collection. Artefact analysis indicates a possible range of dates from before the First World War at least through the mid-twentieth century. The absolute most recent date is difficult to discern, as Heinz® still produce a glass sculpted '57' bottle (see Fig. 3), but the television tube parts certainly date from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. This timeframe works well with the assumption of the destruction of the house on the property to the early to mid-1960s. As such, the concentration clearly does not reflect a single depositional episode of materials of recent use and from the same era.

Secondly, the variety of material culture found in Concentration 2 indicates that this site was not the designated location for particular types of trash dumping. In other words, these concentrations do not seem to imply a clearing of heirloomed materials from a single space (e.g. a kitchen). While the completeness of the material culture in the concentration suggests some kind of heirlooming process, the artefacts do not group into a singular functional category. Also, there are too few items in Concentration 2 to indicate regular use of the space as a primary place of rubbish disposal.

Without a discernible temporal, functional, material type, or completeness similarity to unite Concentration 2's assemblage, it is difficult to label the concentration as a singular (or additive) dumping activity. Therefore, we can assume that the concentration is an idiosyncratic, curated collection brought together at this location by human actor(s). Rather than commonalities among the artefacts defining it, the exceptionality of the artefacts in this concentration creates its own logic. In no other locus on site is such a variety of glassware (MNV = 6) and ceramic vessels (MNV = 3) seen, especially decorated (see Table 1). While all of the pieces gathered during the surface collection were diagnostic, no other area of the site showed such a degree of diversity and decoration. Subjectively, the pieces are aesthetically pleasing and rather enigmatic (see Fig. 3).

Another possible interpretation of Concentration 2 may be of a whole house cleaning event of disparate trash. It seems unlikely, however, that someone would go into the abandoned lot to get rid of just a basketful of items instead of whatever their normal routine for dealing with refuse was, especially because the material culture does not seem explicit or harmful.

The second-growth forest on this property in Shabbona Grove has been a primary and formidable obstacle to accessibility. As stated by the owners, for at least the past sixteen years the property has been covered in bushes, trees and other woody plants; in 1996, the overgrowth had been even worse, to a point where the forest had even overtaken East, West, and Main Streets. Aerial photographs reveal ever-increasing brush cover on the property (see Fig. 2). It follows that it is more likely that a person of extremely small stature would have best access to the space as the outskirts of Shabbona Grove transformed into second-growth forest.

I suggest that the actor in this collecting activity was a child. As an essentially abandoned lot on the edge of the tiny village, it would be a short and easy walk



FIGURE 5 Child's shoe and plastic button (Surface Collection Bag 1unfin).

for any residents to the property. There is no evidence that the lawful owners of the property lived near it for the past forty years to enforce restricted access. Of the local community, children would have the best access to the space as second-growth forest and abandoned lot; while no formal toys were found in the surface collection, a child's (American size 6, Europe size 22, UK Size 5) rubber shoe sole and several buttons were recovered elsewhere on the property (Fig. 5). Studies of rural children and their play activities in the latter half of the twentieth century support the likelihood of seeing the results of children's play activities in the context of an abandoned lot in Shabbona Grove (Wilk and Schiffer, 1979; Wilkie, 1994; Lillehammer, 2000; Thomas, 2005).

Conclusions

Finding Children

Concentration 2 of the surface collection at Shabbona Grove poses an interesting interpretative puzzle. Natural processes or animal disturbances could not have

created the concentration of temporally and materially diverse objects in such a small, secluded spot. The diversity of the objects suggests that this concentration is not generalised garbage concentrations or the result of a single depositional episode. The multi-variate diversity in the concentration assemblages does not seem consistent with pure garbage accumulations. The challenge in accessing, or even observing, the overgrown area for full-grown adults further supports the interpretation that children were responsible for the creation of the concentration. Therefore, it may be viewed as the idiosyncratic collection of children. Even without child-specific material culture in Concentration 2, this case study highlights the consequence of children's actions on the landscape and posits that similar analyses may be useful at other archaeological sites. The child-specific material culture found during the excavations of SQ01 and SQ02 at Shabbona Grove (see Fig. 4; Table 2) does not provide much further insight into the lives of children other than their presence. Indeed, the presence of the toys gives greater insight into adult decisions of enculturation rather than the child's agency. Wilkie (2000: 101) explains: 'Toys and child-specific artefacts (such as cups, clothing, mugs, medicines, school paraphernalia, etc.), when purchased or made for children, represent attempts, made by adults, to suggest and enforce certain norms of behaviour.'

The collection of adult-specific material culture by children, and the expenditure of child-specific material culture by adults, complicates the very nature of the phrases 'adult-specific' and 'child-specific'. In this context, children are responsible for the final deposition of what is usually considered adult-specific material culture, and the adults are responsible for the final deposition of the child-specific material culture. In advocating a more nuanced approach to children's agency in the archaeological record, the following is a possible interpretation of this collection that recognises the child/children's performative and transformative action upon the landscape.

Purposeful Play and Agency

Humans (children included!) collect physical objects for a variety of reasons. Following the argument of Moshenska (2008), it is possible that the child, or children, responsible for the collection in Shabbona Grove used this collection activity as a coping mechanism for the economic stress that hung over Shabbona Grove throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. Moshenska argues that the collection of warhead shrapnel by children in Second World War Britain allowed for an outlet of stability and control in their everyday lives that were subject to so much stress. He agrees with Danet and Katriel (1994: 32) that, in collecting, an individual is granted with control over an object in a way that they are not allowed in other sectors of their life, in that:

Collecting is imbued with the theme of control, articulated both as striving towards controlling as the fear of being controlled. A collector gains control over the objects that comprise his or her collection through the power of ownership, which is actualized in the right to handle, rearrange, and even sell items in the collection.

The physicality of the collection process allows for physical as well as emotional control over an object that transfers to suppress the insecurities of extreme stress (Belk, 1995; Pearce, 1995; Baudrillard, 2005). While Shabbona Grove never endured the terrible bombing of Second World War Britain, the dire economic depression that the township underwent (and still stagnates under) is nonetheless extremely stressful. Without a railway connection after 1942, employment opportunities consisted of manual labour in agriculture or housework. With no operating stores in the village, the community was reliant on other towns for their sustenance and employment. This once bustling town had collapsed without a transportation link to the all-powerful Chicago, like so many small Midwestern towns (see Faragher, 1986; Cronon, 1991). Children are just as sensitive to these types of stresses as adults, with perhaps less ability to change the situation. Economic stress often translates into other types of familial distress which also can be even more traumatising for children. It is impossible to determine the nature of the stress that might have caused such collecting activities from the archaeological evidence, however, and we cannot assume that it is not a purely idiosyncratic distraction or play activity. Nonetheless, play has arisen as one of the most important aspects of child development and one of the themes that should be further explored in the archaeology of children's activities (Ember and Cunnar, 2015; Höberg and Gårdenfors, 2015; Kamp, 2015; Lillehammer, 2015).

The individual(s) who formed Concentration 2 picked up the pieces of the former residences of Shabbona Grove and established their own meanings for the objects. Away from adult interference, in the collection seen here at Shabbona Grove, a child, or children, were able to practice their dominance over the environment and therefore exercise their own agency in negotiating their world.


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Note

1. References in the quotation have been excluded for the purposes of clarity.

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