The Egyptian Bow Drill

by Dick Baugh (March 24, 2001)

As soon as I think I know all there is to know abut a subject something happens which reminds me that I should never boast about my all-encompassing knowledge.

In February I was teaching people the secrets of making fire by friction at the 2001Winter Count when John Olsen strode up and showed me a cute little friction fire set. It completely eliminated a couple of the problems inherent in teaching the bow drill friction fire method.

John said he saw the original in a book about ancient Egypt.

Many novices are plagued by two problems when they try to start a fire with a bow drill. First, the cord isn't wrapped tightly enough around the spindle so the cord slips, the spindle stops spinning, increased rubbing weakens the cord away and I loose my patience and start yelling at

the student. Bad pedagogy. Adding injury to insult, the spindle then slides out of the socket and propelled by the increasing tension in the string, flies through the air and pokes someone in the eye. Whoooaaa!

Leave it to the ancient Egyptians. They placed an extra long cord on the bow and either tied the middle of the cord around the spindle or passed the cord through a hole drilled in the middle of the spindle. Next, they wrapped the extra length of cord around the spindle. Now slippage of the cord is impossible and the spindle can't flip into someone's eye.

This non-slip connection between the cord and spindle may also allow the use of a thinner, weaker cord.