

# The Beltrami County Logging Frontier

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AFTER BEGINNING in the St. Croix Valley in the 1830's, the Minnesota lumber industry pushed northward rapidly. The loggers quickly worked their way up the Rum and Crow Wing rivers to the limits of their pine. In the 1870's woodsmen on the Mississippi were cutting pine north of Grand Rapids. By 1900 the largest logging camps in the state were in St. Louis, Itasca, and Beltrami counties. Large-scale logging in Beltrami County was first carried on along the Clearwater and Red Lake rivers in what was then the western part of the county. During the 1880's and 1890's logs were floated down these westward-flowing streams to sawmills at Thief River Falls, Red Lake Falls, Crookston, and Grand Forks, there to be made into lumber for the farms and cities of the Red River Valley. Steamboats plied the Red Lake River with supplies for the logging camps along that stream, while the railhead at Fosston was the point from which the camps to the south were supplied. These early logging activities, however, were limited to the areas included in the Red River drainage basin. The pineries surrounding the Mississippi headwaters in southern Beltrami and northern Hubbard counties were isolated. The Mississippi River flows through numerous large lakes before it reaches Grand Rapids, and it therefore was not a practicable highway to the major lumber manufacturing points. Until a man-made highway—the railroad—was built, no extensive logging operations were possible in the Mississippi headwaters region.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, during the 1890's settlement in the area slowly began. A few trading centers developed for a sparse, scattered population attracted by the opportunity to acquire homesteads. Of these places, Bemidji was the largest. Rough wagon trails linked the com-

<sup>1</sup>E. G. Cheyney, "The Development of the Lumber Industry in Minnesota," in *Journal of Geography*, 14:192 (February, 1916); Return I. Holcombe and William H. Bingham, *Compendium of History and Biography of Polk County*, 73-78 (Minneapolis, 1916); Agnes M. Larson, "On the Trail of the Woodsman in Minnesota," *ante*, 13:357, 366.

munity with railheads at Fosston to the west and Park Rapids to the south, each some fifty miles distant. As part of the pioneer economy, logging and sawmilling were begun to meet local needs. In 1895 John Steidl established a sawmill with a daily capacity of twelve thousand feet. Logs were supplied chiefly by farmers, who often took lumber in exchange. Later a smaller sawmill was located at the junction of the Mississippi and Schoolcraft rivers about two miles southwest of Bemidji. In 1898 a second sawmill was built in Bemidji. The village then had a population of about five hundred. Geographical advantages pointed to the development of Bemidji as the principal lumbering center in the county. It was situated on the Mississippi River and Lakes Bemidji and Irving. Hence the pine of the Mississippi and Schoolcraft rivers in northern Hubbard County was tributary to it. Furthermore, the lakes with their smooth waters of ample extent for handling logs afforded favorable sites for sawmills.<sup>2</sup>

The building of railroads set the stage for the rise of the lumber industry. The growing utilization of the logging railroad was a major development in Minnesota lumbering of the 1890's. Logs which could not be driven to the mills because they were cut too far from a drivable stream reached the mills by rail. In Beltrami County and other areas of northern Minnesota, a network of railroads played the role enacted by the Mississippi, St. Croix, and Rum rivers in the earlier centers of the lumber industry. During the summer of 1898 the Great Northern Railroad built an extension from Deer River to Fosston by way of Bemidji, thereby making it possible to ship logs by rail to the mills at Crookston and Grand Forks. While the possibility of a log traffic was a contributing factor in the construction of this road, the general prospects of a through line across northern Minnesota were more important. In the meantime, work on the Brainerd and Northern Minnesota Railway extending northward from Walker was under way, and in December the road was completed to Bemidji. This was primarily a logging railroad, although when it reached Bemidji it became a common carrier. Organized in 1892, the Brainerd and Northern Minnesota began by constructing

<sup>2</sup> Harold T. Hagg, "Bemidji: A Pioneer Community of the 1890's," *ante*, 23:28, 32.

the road from Brainerd into the extensive pine areas to the north. As the pine receded, the line was extended, reaching Walker in 1895. The completion of this railroad to Bemidji linked the surrounding pineries with the Brainerd Lumber Company's large sawmill at Brainerd. Additional railroad building in 1899 gave Bemidji direct connections with Akeley, where the Red River Lumber Company had just built a large sawmill.<sup>3</sup>

The railroads transformed Bemidji from an isolated pioneer community into a busy logging town. "Bemidji has become so much the center of logging preparations that it don't seem like the same town," runs a contemporary news item. "Cruisers are almost as thick as lumberjacks and the pine land baron pure and simple is getting ready to make his hotel headquarters in the town." The Brainerd Lumber Company made preparations to supply its Brainerd mill with logs from Bemidji. Having acquired of C. A. Pillsbury a vast amount of pine tributary to Bemidji, the company expected to have ten years' work in the region. Although the company operated its own camps, it also contracted with jobbers to cut part of its timber. Among the latter was the Carver brothers' firm, which had camps on the Schoolcraft River. Hoisting works were erected on Lake Irving, where the logs were to be loaded onto railroad cars for shipment to Brainerd. During the summer of 1899, the company shipped forty million feet of logs to that city. The following year an office and a warehouse were built in Bemidji by the company.<sup>4</sup>

In the early years of logging in Beltrami County, the interests of Thomas B. Walker of Minneapolis were easily first in importance. He was reputed to be the largest owner of pine land in the county. Associated with him in logging operations was H. C. Akeley. In the logging season of 1900-01, about four thousand men were employed in the woods within a radius of ten miles from Bemidji; they were cutting a quarter of a billion feet of logs. At least half of this

<sup>3</sup> *Bemidji Pioneer*, March 30, 1899; Hagg, *ante*, 23:33; J. C. Ryan, "Minnesota Logging Railroads," *ante*, 27:300; Carl Zapffe, *Brainerd*, 62-65 (Minneapolis, 1946); Thomas B. Walker, "Memories of the Early Life and Development of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:477. The file of the *Pioneer* consulted by the writer is preserved in its publication office in Bemidji.

<sup>4</sup> *Pioneer*, August 28, September 22, October 20, 27, 1898; June 29, 1899; October 18, 1900.

amount was for Walker and Akeley, who shipped large quantities of logs from their hoisting works on Lake Irving. An unsuccessful attempt was made by Bemidji civic and business leaders to induce Walker to build a sawmill in their city.<sup>5</sup>

During the summer months the river drives down the Mississippi and the Schoolcraft brought millions of feet of logs to Lakes Bemidji and Irving. In 1900 about seventy-five million feet were hoisted from the lakes and shipped by rail to the sawmill centers. The following year the total was about a hundred and thirty million. In addition to Walker and Akeley and the Brainerd Lumber Company, the Backus-Brooks Company and the Scanlon-Gipson Lumber Company were engaged in shipping operations. To Minneapolis, Brainerd, Stillwater, Grand Forks, and Akeley, logs cut in Beltrami County were shipped by rail to be manufactured into lumber. Even in areas where river driving was possible, lumbermen often preferred to ship logs by rail, thereby avoiding the delay and uncertainty caused by the necessity of waiting for a proper driving stage of water. Thus many logs went all the way to Minneapolis by rail, instead of being transferred to the Mississippi at Brainerd to be driven the remainder of the distance.<sup>6</sup>

The rapid growth of the logging business quickened the economic development of the county. In December, 1899, a Crookston paper reported that "Bemidji is enjoying a boom such as is seldom experienced by a northern Minnesota town." Lumber concerns built offices and warehouses. Hauling supplies, equipment, and freight required for the loggers swelled railroad revenues. Thousands of woodsmen sought work in Bemidji employment agencies and diversion in local saloons. During the summer, river drives and shipping operations furnished employment to a large force of men. By 1900 the population of the city had increased to about twenty-one hundred. Other places, too, enjoyed a mushroom growth as centers of logging operations. On the Great Northern Railroad line, twelve miles west of Bemidji, logging, sawmilling, and railroad construc-

<sup>5</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, October 27, 1900; *Pioneer*, May 19, 1898; October 4, 1900; January 10, October 24, 1901.

<sup>6</sup> *Pioneer*, June 28, 1900; May 9, September 19, October 31, 1901.

tion made the village of Solway a scene of brisk activity. A few miles north of Bemidji, in May, 1901, Buena Vista could boast of three stores, three hotels, a sawmill, a saloon, and a blacksmith shop. Ten-strike and Turtle River, in the eastern part of Beltrami County, were points from which logging camps in the vicinity were supplied.<sup>7</sup>

With the approach of the logging season each fall, hordes of men arrived seeking work in the woods. "They come on every train, on foot, and on horseback," reported a Bemidji newspaper in December, 1900. "For a month past, trains from the west dump their passengers at Bemidji and give our streets the appearance of an Oklahoma land rush." Most of the workers were migratory laborers who shifted to the lumber camps in the winter after being employed during the summer months in railroad construction or in harvesting the wheat of the Red River Valley. There were also many local farmers who left their homesteads and went into the woods in the winter. Their earnings provided a cash income without which they would have had to abandon their claims. By 1903, it was estimated that more men were hired in Bemidji for work in lumber camps than in any other city in the state except Duluth.<sup>8</sup>

The pioneer employment agent was Arthur T. Wheelock. He went to Bemidji in 1899 and opened an employment office which furnished more than a thousand men to the logging camps during the winter of 1899-1900. The woodsman paid a fee of a dollar for the services of the agency. During the season of 1902-03, Wheelock sent forty to sixty men to the woods each day. If a man had no funds, the agency provided a meal and transportation to the camp. The logging firm then withheld from his wages an amount sufficient to reimburse the agency for its fee and any money it had advanced. If the man did not appear at the camp—as sometimes happened—the agency lost the funds advanced. Saloonkeepers often complained that employment agencies sent men to the woods before they had spent much time in the city, but the agents were naturally

<sup>7</sup> *Pioneer*, November 23, December 7, 1899; February 1, May 17, 1900; May 23, September 19, 1901.

<sup>8</sup> *Pioneer*, November 30, 1899; December 6, 1900; October 31, 1901; October 8, November 5, 1903; November 23, 1905; Marcus L. Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, 74 (Cambridge, 1940).

interested in preventing the lumberjacks from spending all their money for liquor and then seeking advances to get to the camps. In 1903 another agency was opened in Bemidji, and in 1905 there were four, including Wheelock's. In 1905 the employment offices sent out five thousand men. About a thousand more were hired directly by the loggers and the lumber companies.<sup>9</sup>

The physical prowess and the colorful qualities of the lumberjack have provided a fascinating chapter in American history. Many woodsmen were indeed rough and coarse and given to boisterous relaxation. But they were also tough, hard-working men, who faced constant hazards in a harsh environment. Accidents took a terrible toll. Falling trees and limbs killed many and maimed others. Families were left destitute. Injured men frequently could turn only to a poor farm to recuperate. In the lumber industry, human as well as natural resources were ruthlessly exploited.<sup>10</sup>

Some lumber companies owned forest lands, operated sawmills, built logging railroads, and had logging departments with their own superintendents and foremen to direct work in the camps. Most of the companies also contracted with jobbers to cut some of their timber. Among them were Walker and Akeley and the Brainerd Lumber Company. Some logging companies owned forest lands, but most of them were interested only in logging operations. They contracted to cut certain tracts or certain amounts of logs, furnishing their own men and delivering the logs at a specified landing. The firms varied greatly in size and the extent of their operations; some were contractors and others were sub-contractors. In the average camp from sixty to eighty men were employed.<sup>11</sup>

The lumber camps provided a substantial market for farm products. But the farms in Beltrami County were few and undeveloped, and they could furnish only a small part of the loggers' needs. Some camps kept livestock, especially hogs, for food purposes,

<sup>9</sup> *Pioneer*, November 13, 1902; October 8, 1903; November 24, 1904; interview with Mr. Wheelock, Bemidji, January 10, 1948.

<sup>10</sup> *Pioneer*, December 28, 1899; March 15, 1900; November 7, 1901; December 25, 1902; November 26, 1903; May 19, 1904. The activities of the lumberjacks on their visits to town are stressed by Stewart H. Holbrook in *Holy Old Mackinaw* (New York, 1938). See also Vernon H. Jensen, *Lumber and Labor*, 21-24 (New York, 1945).

<sup>11</sup> *Pioneer*, November 13, 1902.

and some logging companies raised their own vegetables. The bulk of the groceries and other supplies needed in the camps, however, was shipped from the wholesale houses of Duluth and the Twin Cities. Hay and feed likewise were transported in vast quantities to Bemidji and other centers by railroad and hauled by tote teams to the logging camps. Like the men, the horses needed for work in the woods were migratory. They were shipped in from the agricultural areas of Minnesota and the Dakotas in the fall and shipped back for farm work in the spring.<sup>12</sup>

Wage scales fluctuated with labor supply and demand. If work began slowly in the woods because of unfavorable weather, and if men were plentiful, wages were low. As operations expanded, wage levels tended to rise. In 1902 wages paid for common labor varied from twenty-six to thirty-five dollars per month with board. Not infrequently, the completion of railroad grading contracts and threshing would throw an army of men on the labor market, and wages would slump. Sometimes a demand for tiemakers and laborers on a railroad project competed with the need for men in the woods and raised wage levels. In 1901 wages with board for sawyers were thirty to thirty-five dollars per month; for teamsters, thirty-five to forty-five; for cooks, forty to eighty; for blacksmiths, forty to sixty. In 1905 wages for such work remained about the same, but foremen received a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month, and clerks were paid from thirty-five to forty. When wages were high, employers complained that the men became restless, and that it was difficult to keep a crew together. As one jobber put it, "a majority of the lumberjacks are all right but many of them care for nothing but to put in time and work up an expensive appetite. When wages are high, we have a hard time to keep a crew together or to maintain anything like a fair standard of results." Obtaining and retaining an efficient labor force was not the least of the problems of the loggers.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Pioneer*, January 3, 1901; November 26, 1903; March 31, August 4, 1904; interviews with Mr. Nels Willett of Bemidji, July 23, 1946, and Mr. Manzer Blakely of Turtle River, July 19, 1947.

<sup>13</sup> *Pioneer*, December 7, 1899; December 6, 1900; November 21, 1901; October 8, 1903; November 23, 1905.

Another problem was the weather, for logging operations were almost as dependent as agriculture on favorable weather conditions. If the ground froze before snow fell, the preliminary work of cutting roads and building camps was aided. Then a light snowfall would make skidding and hauling possible. An early snowfall tended to keep the ground from freezing sufficiently hard to allow hauling. Much of the land in the Bemidji area was somewhat swampy. Unseasonable thaws hindered the work of moving logs to the landings. Lack of snow at any time during the logging season was disastrous, especially to the small loggers who could not afford to construct the ice roads used by larger firms. The latter could operate if temperatures dropped below freezing at night, as daytime thaws did not stop hauling over the ice roads. The spring thaw was the signal for the breakup of the camps, for it was said that the "lumberjack had a horror of wet feet."<sup>14</sup>

In the story of the lumber industry, the role of the great magnates and the exploits of the lumberjacks are familiar themes. The logging contractors, however, have not appealed greatly to the imagination, and they have received less attention. Yet they should be given their due share of credit in a picturesque story. They were entrepreneurs operating under conditions that involved the hazards of uncertain weather and a fluctuating labor supply. Nor were their interests limited to logging. Migrating with a frontier industry, they were pioneers in opening up a new country. Many were interested in townsites and real estate, and they founded communities which bear their names. They were often influential in local politics. Not a few were also railroad contractors; the horses and much of the equipment used in logging were needed also in railroad grading and construction. Enterprising and versatile, these men were concerned with virtually all aspects of the development of a new country.<sup>15</sup>

One of the earliest loggers in northwestern Minnesota was Sumner C. Bagley. His career well illustrates the role played by logging contractors in the growth of a new area. Like many other Minnesota

<sup>14</sup> *Pioneer*, February 1, 1900; March 14, November 21, 1901.

<sup>15</sup> For interesting parallels in the career of an early frontier builder, see Rodney C. Loehr, "Franklin Steele, Frontier Businessman," *ante*, 27:309-318.

lumbermen, he was born in Maine. After migrating to Minnesota in 1865 and working for a time in the woods, he began logging contracting along the Mississippi River. Later he settled at Fosston, and during the 1890's he was logging along the Clearwater River. He was a pioneer in cruising and prospecting for railroad routes in northern Minnesota, and while engaged in railroad contracting he built ten miles of the Great Northern west of Bemidji. He served as one of the first county commissioners of Beltrami County, and he was a founder of the community which bears his name. In the early 1900's he was one of the leading loggers in the county, receiving large contracts from T. B. Walker.<sup>16</sup>

Albert J. Lammers and his brother George A. Lammers, both of Stillwater, also were prominent logging contractors. In 1898 they had four hundred men at work in their camps along the Clearwater River. They gave their name to Lammers Township in the southwestern part of the present Beltrami County. In this area in 1899 and 1900 the Lammers brothers cut thirty-seven million feet of logs, which were floated on the Clearwater River to Crookston and Grand Forks. They were among the proprietors of the townsite of Solway, platted in 1898. Later the firm sold its interests in the Solway region and shifted its operations to Northome, forty miles northwest of Bemidji.<sup>17</sup>

Among the logging contractors at work in Beltrami County in the early 1900's, the Blakely and Farley Company was the largest. In 1901 its contracts totaled a hundred million feet. Blakely and Farley operated some camps under their own immediate supervision, and also gave sub-contracts to smaller firms. In 1900 they built an office and warehouse in Bemidji, but a year later their townsite of Farley, ten miles northwest of Bemidji, was made the center of operations. Much of their logging was done on Turtle River Lake and the Turtle River. The logs were driven down the Turtle River to Cass

<sup>16</sup> *Pioneer*, September 22, 1898; October 19, 1899; November 21, 1901; Henry A. Castle, *Minnesota*, 3:1462 (New York, 1915).

<sup>17</sup> *Pioneer*, September 29, 1898; May 17, August 2, 1900; November 12, 1903; Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 39 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17). A plat of the townsite of Solway is in Plat Book no. 1, p. 5, in the office of the register of deeds, Beltrami County Courthouse, Bemidji.

Lake. In 1904 twenty-four million feet were driven to Cass Lake and there hoisted and railed to Cohasset. In 1905 the drive, employing two hundred and fifty men, contained twenty-five million feet of lumber; part of it was sawed in Cass Lake and the remainder was shipped to Burlington, Iowa.<sup>18</sup>

The Turtle River was but one of the many streams in the county used for log driving. Each spring hundreds of rivermen were hired and outfitted in Bemidji for the drives. Down the Mississippi and Schoolcraft rivers vast quantities of logs were floated to Lakes Bemidji and Irving, where they were sorted and boomed for hoisting. The logging firms did their own driving, instead of utilizing a boom company. In 1900 and 1901 the drives of the Carver brothers totaled twenty million feet for each year. One of the largest drives ever taken to Lake Irving was that of the Brainerd Lumber Company in 1904, containing forty million feet and employing two hundred men. East of Bemidji there were log drives down the Mississippi to Cass Lake. In the region north of Bemidji, drives on the Black Duck, Tamarac, Battle, and other tributary streams took vast numbers of logs to Red Lake. These logs were then towed by steamboat across the lake to the Red Lake River and floated down that stream to the mills of the Red River Valley. In 1901 four large steamboats were engaged in towing rafts totaling about seventy-five million feet of logs. Five smaller steamboats transported men and supplies bound for the lumber camps from Thief River Falls. They also carried an occasional settler and his goods.<sup>19</sup>

River driving was as skilled as well as a hazardous occupation, and the wages paid were comparatively high. In 1901 river pigs received two and a half dollars a day. They worked as long as there was daylight, in order to keep the logs moving as much of the time as possible while water was at the right stage. The rivermen needed great endurance and agility, for in getting stranded logs afloat and

<sup>18</sup> *Pioneer*, September 27, 1900; October 3, November 21, 1901; November 13, 1902; April 21, 1904; April 13, 1905; interviews with Messrs. Charles and Manzer Blakely of Turtle River, July 19, 1947. Both men were employed by the Blakely and Farley Company.

<sup>19</sup> *Pioneer*, July 12, 1900; April 18, October 24, 1901; May 21, 1903; May 26, June 23, 1904.

breaking log jams, they often worked waist-deep in cold water. River driving, like logging, was dependent on the weather. Head winds occasionally impeded the progress of the drives. Often there were delays until rains raised the water to the right driving stage. Lumbermen sometimes had to build dams to provide a sufficient head of water to move logs. High water on the other hand meant floods, with logs stranded along river banks and damage to farm lands and crops. To prevent floods, it was necessary in some places to construct dikes.<sup>20</sup>

Complementing the river highways, was a network of railway lines and logging spurs tapping all parts of Beltrami County and centering in Bemidji. From that city, the Minnesota and International was extended gradually to the northwest. Turtle River was the railhead in 1901, then Tenstrike, and in 1902 Blackduck became the terminus. A year later a branch was built to Kelliher, twenty miles farther north. Both Blackduck and Kelliher became bustling centers of logging and shipping operations. In 1904 about twenty camps were located on the Minnesota and International line. Spurs were built into the pine forests adjacent to the railroad, and from lakes and other landings millions of feet of logs were hoisted on the cars and hauled to Bemidji.<sup>21</sup>

The first logging railroad in Beltrami County was built in 1898 from Nebish northward to Red Lake, a distance of fifteen miles. The road was operated by the Red Lake Transportation Company, which also had a steamboat line across Red Lake. Large amounts of logs were hauled to Red Lake for the Walker and Shevlin-Carpenter lumber interests. After going into receivership, the road was reorganized in 1904 under the imposing title of the Minneapolis, Red Lake, and Manitoba Railroad. A lumber magnate, Charles A. Smith, and a former governor, John Lind, were among those financially interested in the line. In 1905 it was extended to Bemidji, and it then began to operate a regular passenger and freight service, as well as to handle log traffic. In the same year another logging road

<sup>20</sup> *Pioneer*, May 9, June 13, 1901.

<sup>21</sup> *Pioneer*, October 17, 1901; March 19, 1903; September 29, October 20, 1904; October 12, 1905.

was built northward from the Great Northern at Wilton six miles west of Bemidji. This was the Wilton and Northern line, over which logs were hauled to the Crookston Lumber Company's sawmill at Bemidji. The line also carried freight and passenger traffic. Along each line several towns were laid out, but the lively anticipations of the founders did not materialize.<sup>22</sup>

In the early 1900's only a negligible part of the logs cut in Beltrami County went to local sawmills. There were two sawmills at Bemidji and there was scarcely a settlement in the county which did not have at least one. But none of these mills had an annual output exceeding two million feet. At Cass Lake a large mill was built in 1899 by the J. Neils Lumber Company. This mill was a natural destination for logs cut along Turtle River and the Mississippi east of Bemidji. Like T. B. Walker's firm, the Brainerd Lumber Company never built a sawmill in Bemidji. The first large sawmill in that city was built by the Crookston Lumber Company, which was owned by the Shevlin-Carpenter interests. It began operations in 1903, and during its first few years it sawed from thirty-five to forty-five million feet of lumber annually. Even after the construction of this mill, however, the greater part of the log harvest was for some years shipped elsewhere to be manufactured into lumber.<sup>23</sup>

In the years that followed the turn of the century, logs and lumber laid the economic foundations of the Bemidji region. The rise of large-scale logging did not precede the beginnings of settlement, but it did greatly speed the development of the area. The needs of the industry hastened the coming of the railroads. Some of the loggers' roads and abandoned railroad spurs became the settlers' routes to market. Logging stimulated the rise and growth of towns. Not a few were stranded when the heyday of lumbering ended, but nearly all the present-day communities in Beltrami County were once centers of the industry. Many place names testify to the loggers' role in

<sup>22</sup> *Pioneer*, March 21, 1901; August 10, November 2, December 14, 1905; George M. Stephenson, *John Lind of Minnesota*, 352 (Minneapolis, 1935).

<sup>23</sup> *Pioneer*, August 2, 1900; May 28, November 12, 1903; February 2, 1905; *Mississippi Valley Lumberman*, vol. 31, no. 3, p. 65 (January 19, 1900); vol. 32, no. 27, p. 15 (July 5, 1901).

the development of the area. When the forests were gone and the industry moved on, it left in its wake troublesome social and economic problems—scattered settlement, depleted resources, ghost towns—for a later generation. But the logging era also contributed to the story of the region a rich and colorful chapter that has not been neglected in tourist promotion and publicity.



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