

HOW

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# JESSE JAMIES

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NEARLY ROBBED NORTHFIELD...IN 1948



CHRISTOPHER G. WELTER

**A**S PLAYWRIGHTS WELL KNOW, A DASTARDLY villain can make for compelling drama and enduring appeal. (Shakespeare’s Iago comes to mind.) Minnesota has known its share of villainous individuals, from the incidental to the iconic: *Titanic* cardsharp George Brereton was born in Madelia; George “Bugs” Moran, Al Capone’s chief rival, was raised in St. Paul; John Dillinger slept here; Bonnie and Clyde may have robbed banks here; and would-be 9/11 terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui took flight lessons here. There is one character, though, who has stood front and center on Minnesota’s stage, perhaps like no other: Jesse Woodson James.

Jesse, of course, was the leader of the eight-man James-Younger gang that attempted to rob Northfield’s First National Bank on September 7, 1876. “From its opening to its closing shot,” wrote Professor George Huntington in his estimable account of the raid, “it had

occupied but seven minutes.”<sup>1</sup> As the townsfolk rallied to safeguard the bank’s employees and protect its monetary assets, the outlaws were forced to exit stage left in a decidedly ignominious manner, Jesse included. The raid was brief but the ensuing discussion and disputation down through the years have been anything but.

Nearly six years after the attempted robbery, Jesse James was assassinated by fellow gang member (though not a Northfield raider) Robert Ford. In the decades that followed, stories occasionally appeared in print that questioned whether James had indeed been killed. In about 1933 a certain J. Frank Dalton, a man who claimed to have “soldiered” with Jesse as a Civil War raider, responded to just such a story in the *Denver Post*. Like

ABOVE: Cover detail from “The James Boys in Minnesota,” the March 1882 issue of The Five Cent Wide Awake Library.

James, Dalton would later become the unlikeliest of Northfield protagonists. At this time, though, he made two remarks that illuminate the enigma that is Dalton: He had identified Jesse's corpse "to the best of my ability" back in 1882 yet now wished, "If Jesse James is alive I would like to see him for I knew him well and used to call him 'friend.'"<sup>2</sup>

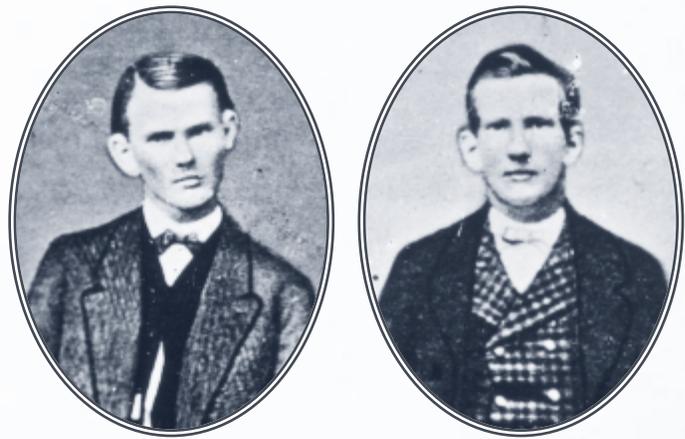
**I**N POST-CIVIL WAR AMERICA, ADVENTURE serials—such as *The Five Cent Wide Awake Library*—were quite popular reads, and the James brothers were stock characters of a sort. In the ten months before Jesse's assassination, the brothers were featured eight times, including "The James Boys in Minnesota," published less than a month before Jesse's death.<sup>3</sup> But no mythic dime-novel outlaw ever written could have gotten the drop on the Jesse James story of 1948.

That spring, the Northfield Junior Chamber of Commerce (Jaycees) reported in its weekly newsletter that it had established a "Jesse James Day" committee to plan the inaugural event. It was to take place along with the town's third annual Fall Festival in September. Mere days after the Jaycees named its planning committee, a Texan named J. Frank Dalton claimed to be none other than 100-year-old Jesse James. On May 19, 1948, the *Lawton Constitution's* headline declared, "Jesse James Is Alive! In Lawton."<sup>4</sup>

More than a dozen columns in this Oklahoma newspaper were dedicated to the story, which focused on these key aspects: a history of the James gang, the initial ruse of Jesse's assassination, his subsequent life as an incognito, and recently filed affidavits swearing to Dalton/James's authenticity. But careful and repeated readings suggest more subterfuge than substance. For instance, the newspaper staff agreed to conceal Dalton/James's identity for more than a month—in deference to the outlaw's entourage. The editors explained their motives for keeping silent, though their silence seems more plausible as a preemptive defense . . . or even a ruse unto itself. Regardless, the staff reported that "The story of Jesse James defies imagination."

Indeed.

*A collections assistant at the Minnesota Historical Society, Christopher Welter currently digitizes documents from the manuscripts and government-records collections. The letters examined herein surfaced during one of his assignments.*



*Outlaw brothers: the infamous Jesse (left) and Frank James, about 1863.*

The prelude to James's reappearance was another *Constitution* article in February 1948, this one about hidden gold in the nearby Wichita Mountains. This tale was every bit as convoluted as that of Jesse's reappearance three months later. It will suffice to know, however, that a couple of Lawtonians were convinced that outlaws, perhaps including the James brothers, had buried gold bullion throughout the area and left maps and clues to its whereabouts. Apparently, it was this story that coaxed Dalton/James out of hiding. By April 1948 a Texas newspaper contacted the *Constitution's* managing editor to say that J. Frank Dalton was headed to Lawton "to ride the old trail again." Readers were made to understand that *Constitution* reporter Lindsey Whitten suspected there was more to this story and "discovered that 'Colonel Dalton' was Jesse James."

The entire affair begs question after question, but Whitten tendered only one simple placation: "For the benefit of those who wonder why he has decided to reveal his identity, Jesse recalls his pact with the members of the gang. 'We won't reveal our identi[t]y until all of us are dead or past the age of 100.'" Convinced that "the chances of a hoax were indeed remote," Whitten proclaimed, "[History] must record a retraction for the error it made more than a half century ago when the man who was believed to be Jesse James was killed and buried." As positive proof that recorded history got the outlaw's death wrong, the newspaper offered up a litany of activities covering Jesse's last 66 years. James had

- Joined the Texas Rangers, a state-level bureau of investigation.
- Received his elementary education in Ann Arbor, Michigan, then pursued the study of medicine.

- Changed his study to law, completing his degree “in near record time.”
- Served as U.S. marshal in Oklahoma, the Indian Territory, and Kansas under the name J. Frank Dalton.
- Served as a peace officer in numerous Texas towns as Frank Dalton.
- Participated in the Spanish-American War (1898).
- Been “a close acquaintance of Poncho Villa.”
- Fought with the British in Africa during the (Second) Boer War (1899–1902), then against the African Hottentots, “the only assailants he fled from.”
- Volunteered for duty with the Canadian army when Britain entered World War I, serving also as an interpreter (being fluent in French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and “the Indian sign language”).<sup>5</sup>

As ultimate, irrefutable, corporeal proof, Dalton/James “offers as evidence the many scars on his body that he is the outlaw leader” and was willing to submit to a physician’s examination. Added all together, the “evidence” strains credulity.<sup>6</sup>

**D**ALTON/JAMES’S EXPERIENCES WHILE IN hiding may have been unusual; that someone revealed himself as the still-living Jesse James was not. In his well-regarded biography, *Frank and Jesse James*, Ted Yeatman devoted an entire chapter to “The Resurrection of Jesse James.” In 1931 alone, there were two claimants to James’s identity. When Dalton revealed himself 17 years later, Jesse James’s son Jesse Jr. was so disturbed that he refused to eat for eight days, forcing his wife to have him committed to a hospital.<sup>7</sup>

What makes Dalton’s claim even more remarkable, however, is that he had previously attempted to put the lie to other impostors. In 1936 Henry Huston Crittenden (commonly known as H. H.) published *The Crittenden Memoirs* in honor of his father, former Missouri governor Thomas T. Crittenden. H. H. endeavored, in part, to preserve his father’s legacy of subduing the James gang. While preparing the manuscript for printing in February 1935, he had a chance meeting with Dalton. During their discussion, H. H. learned that Dalton had been writing down his recollections of Missouri outlaws for publi-

cation in Texas, where Dalton then resided. Since the *Memoirs* had not yet gone to the printer—and perhaps more important, since Dalton claimed a first-person acquaintance with the James brothers—H. H. offered to include some of Dalton’s material in the *Memoirs*.

In “My Adventures with Jesse James,” Dalton claimed to have known Jesse during the Civil War as a fellow member of William Clarke Quantrill’s so-called raiders. Dalton implied that his own birthday was March 8, 1848, making him roughly James’s age (Jesse was born September 5, 1847). He concluded the piece by addressing the issue of impostors.

Of course, Jesse has been seen alive from time to time by cheap notoriety seekers. . . . How the heck do they get that way, loco weed, or what? No! Jesse James was killed by Bob Ford on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, 1882, in St. Joseph, Mo., there were too many people who knew him well and came to identify him [including Dalton] for there to be any possible doubt, so that is that. . . . These are facts. No difference HOW I know, that I DO KNOW is sufficient.<sup>8</sup>

In another short piece, Dalton cast aspersions upon witnesses to Jesse James’s resurrection, noting that “the person recognizing him is sworn to secrecy.” (In 1948 Dalton/James would claim that the surviving members of the gang had made a pact to keep their identities secret until all but one was dead or reached his century birthday.) He went on to acknowledge that “as the years roll on . . . greater becomes the opportunity for cheap notoriety seekers to strut their stuff,” then switched arguments to say about fraudulent claimants: “Let them go their way and get whatever satisfaction they may as they can harm no one by so doing.” Dalton turned about-face again



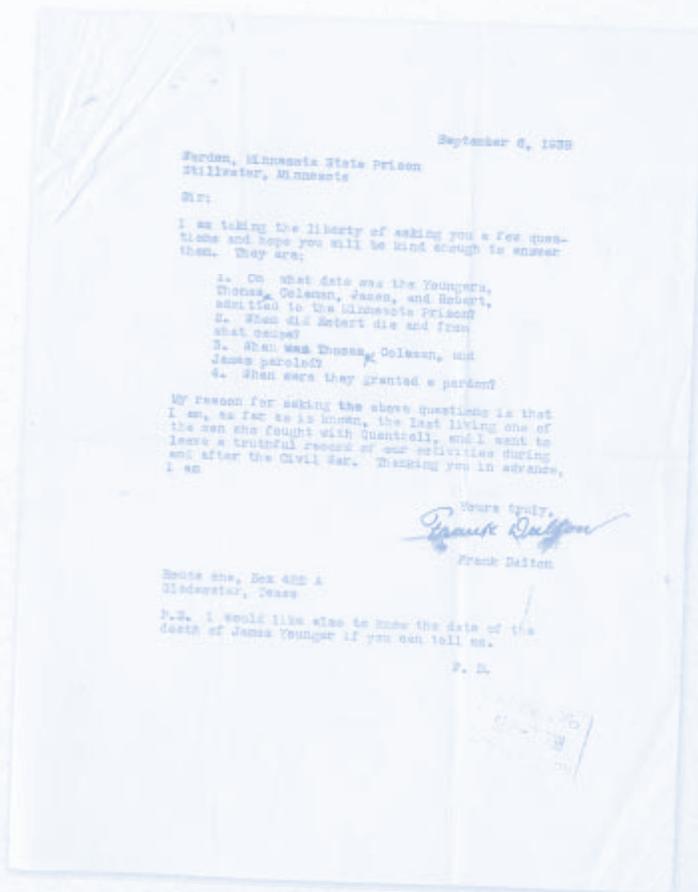
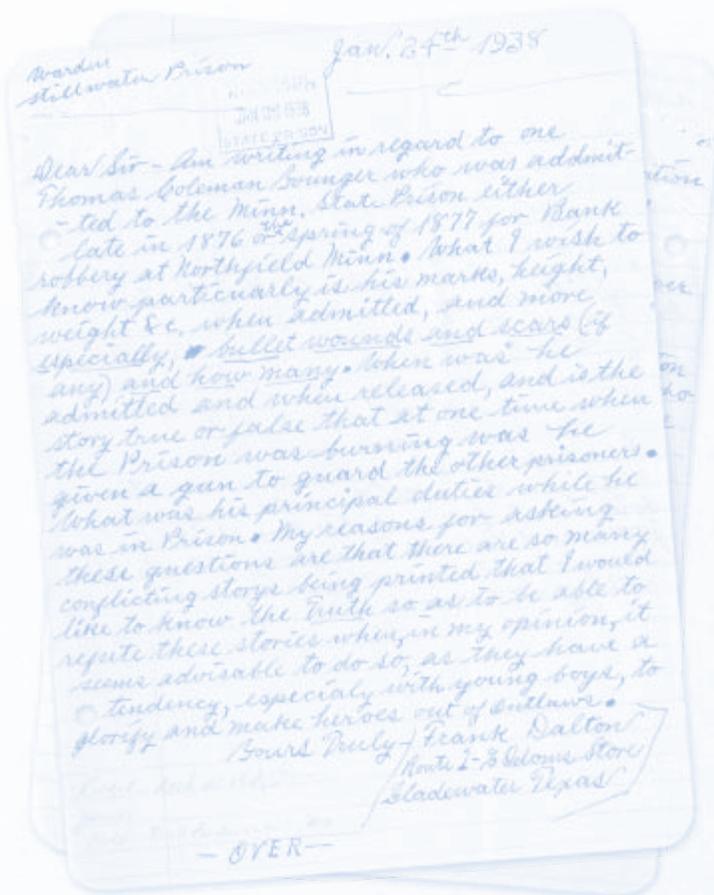
*Cole Younger mug shots, taken when he entered Stillwater Prison, 1876*

in his penultimate entry in the *Memoirs*, a letter dated March 6, 1935: “By the way, Crittenden, there is a fellow knocking around the country claiming to be Jess. . . . I believe it would be a good idea to stop him.”

**C**ONFOUNDING AS DALTON’S STATEMENTS ARE— Does he shake an angry fist at these impostors or merely wink an eye?—a researcher is wise to conjecture only as far as the written record will allow. New evidence begins to bridge the gap between Dalton in 1935 and Dalton/James in 1948.

The Minnesota Historical Society houses a significant cache of documents on the failed Northfield bank raid. The bulk consists of official records generated by the manhunt for, capture of, and eventual imprisonment of members of the James-Younger gang. Among these records are the Stillwater State Prison’s case files for discharged inmates. Readers familiar with the raid will recall that, while the James brothers escaped and two robbers were killed on the spot, all three Younger brothers—Thomas Coleman (Cole), James (Jim), and Robert (Bob)—were captured two weeks after the robbery (and Charlie Pitts was killed) in the Hanska slough, roughly a mile south of present-day La Salle, Minnesota. Bob died in prison, but Cole and Jim eventually were paroled. The prison warden received much correspondence after the brothers’ release. Even after their deaths, the Youngers continued to be of enduring interest, and the prison staff maintained a file of letters of inquiry well into the 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

Two of these letters are particularly salient, as they were penned by none other than J. Frank Dalton of Gladewater, Texas. In the first, dated January 24, 1938, Dalton inquired about Cole: “What I wish to know particularly [*sic*] is his marks, height, weight, &c, when admitted, and more *especially, bullet wounds and scars* (if any) *and how many*” [Dalton’s emphasis]. In short, Dalton wanted to learn as many facts as possible, including whether it was true that Cole was issued a gun to guard other inmates during a prison fire. Dalton then took aim at half-truths, much as he had with Crittenden three years earlier: “My reasons for asking these questions are that there are so many conflicting storys [*sic*] being printed that I would like to know the *Truth* so as to be able to refute these stories when, in my opinion, it seems advisable to do so, as they have a tendency, especially [*sic*] with young boys, to glorify and make heroes out of outlaws.” The letter concluded by reporting that a Jesse James impostor had surfaced in Texas in 1936 but



Frank Dalton’s 1938 letters to the Stillwater State Prison warden, seeking details about Cole Younger

that Dalton—aided by a copy of the coroner’s inquest on Jesse and by H. H. Crittenden—prevented the man from exhibiting himself. Dalton did not elaborate on what assistance Crittenden provided.

Three days after receiving this letter, Warden Leo F. Utecht offered a curt reply, noting that it was not customary to provide information about prisoners to anyone but law-enforcement officers. He did add, however, that Bob Younger had died in prison, Jim committed suicide in St. Paul, and Cole died in Lee’s Summit, Missouri. He also wrote that he had never heard of guns being issued to any of the Youngers “and doubt very much its veracity.”

Dalton wrote again to Utecht nearly nine months later, wanting more facts: the date of the Youngers’ admission to prison, Bob’s date and cause of death, Cole’s and Jim’s parole and pardon dates, Jim’s date of death. As in his first letter, he felt compelled to give a reason for his inquiries: “I am, as far as is known, the last living one of the men who fought with Quantrell [*sic*], and I want to leave a truthful record of our activities during and after the Civil War.”

Utecht answered nearly all of Dalton’s questions a month later, omitting Bob’s cause of death (tuberculosis) and not clarifying that only Cole, and not Jim, received a pardon. As far as the written record goes, Dalton had no more concern for Minnesota and its citizens . . . until the announcement a decade later that Northfield was planning its first Jesse James Day festival.

**D**ALTON REVEALED THAT HE WAS JESSE JAMES in Oklahoma on May 19, 1948. Before the month was out, the Northfield Jaycees had invited him to attend their event that September. Not surprisingly, the Jaycees soon noted that the invitation had spurred much newspaper publicity. But what the festival itself would look like, the committee was still sorting out. Among the entertainment suggestions was a reenactment of the raid itself. This reenactment is now the signature event of the annual Defeat of Jesse James Days.<sup>10</sup>

As planning continued, the committee awaited word on its invitation to Dalton/James. The response, reprinted in the *Northfield News*, came on June 29 from Orvus Lee Howk, the old outlaw’s handler.

It has been a big task to answer all the flood of mail, telegrams, etc., to Jesse James. Our apologies for the long delay to your kind letter. It may be possible for us to bring Jesse to your fair city, providing he’ll swear to act like a good boy this time. Please keep in touch with

us and thanks from an old timer who amazes people all over with his remarkable ability to stand up under a barrage of a thousand questions.

Not mentioned in the response was the fact that Howk would be negotiating an appearance fee, likely with the Jaycees. Meanwhile, the *Minneapolis Tribune* gave coverage to the whole affair, running an Associated Press photograph of Dalton/James while also noting that he had been invited as a guest of Northfield and to be the parade’s honorary grand marshal.<sup>11</sup>

Given that Northfield citizens Joseph Lee Heywood and Nicholas Gustavson were murdered during the 1876 raid, the invitation was a divisive issue. *Northfield News* columnist Bill Schilling took especial exception, dubbing Dalton “Synthetic Jesse” and saying that he was “just a blind used by the men who are writing the stories and the book about him for what it will net them.” Jesse James Day committee chair Sam Haugen retorted, “When a man 101 years old comes up with a yarn like this, let’s give him the benefit of the doubt, as I think some of your stories are pretty good yarns, myself.” Haugen continued to defend the invitation, saying that Dalton/James “made Northfield more famous in fifteen minutes than cows, colleges, and contentment have done in 73 years.”<sup>12</sup>

One can only imagine the remarks exchanged during family meals, between business functions, and over cups of coffee and glasses of beer. But Mrs. Vera Van Selus made her thoughts plainly known in the town paper.

What is the sixty-four dollar question in Northfield? Well, to me it is the question, “when will the Junior Chamber of Commerce invite Hitler here to celebrate ‘Hitler Day.’” I understand some people think he is alive too. I am sure the multitude that Sam Haugen spoke of, that were to gather on Horse-collar park, will be glad to help celebrate a “Hitler Day” just as proudly as a “Jesse James Day.” I see no difference.<sup>13</sup>

The festival took place as scheduled, but Dalton/James was nowhere to be seen. Columnist Bill Schilling had the last word, both figuratively and literally. He was the parade’s final unit, bedecked in Old West gear and flanked by a sign that read “You Can’t Buffalo Bill” and a coffin that contained “Jesse James.” Five days later, he reported in his column that Dalton/James’s appearance fee was to have been \$1,000, which was reduced to \$750 yet still rejected (presumably by the Jaycees).<sup>14</sup>

**T**HOUGH DALTON/JAMES DID NOT APPEAR IN Northfield, he maintained his ruse until his death in 1951, and to this day there are apologists claiming him as the genuine article. Based on recorded history, it is difficult to say when, precisely, Dalton committed to his 1948 hoax. At the very least, his 1938 letters to Warden Utecht make him look highly suspicious. Dalton wanted detailed, specific information, especially about Cole Younger's wounds. Ten years later, he used his inti-

mate knowledge of Jesse's wounds as his trump card of authenticity.

As for Northfield: well, writers Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris perhaps put it best: "Surely the town has seen more gain than loss from the raid. Whatever Jesse attempted to withdraw illegally in 1876 has been re-deposited many times over, thanks to the active chamber of commerce."<sup>15</sup> □

## Notes

1. George Huntington, *Robber and Hero: The Story of the Northfield Bank Raid* (1895; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 38.

2. Dalton reprised his remarks in H. H. Crittenden, comp., *The Crittenden Memoirs* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1936), 368–69. Dalton referred to himself as both Frank Dalton and J. Frank Dalton; this author has chosen the latter for clarity and uniformity.

3. One biographer went so far as to say that only Buffalo Bill Cody inspired more yarns than the James brothers; Ted P. Yeatman, *Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2000), 251.

4. *JC*, May 11, 1948, p. 1, June 1, 1948, p. 2. Here and four paragraphs below, see *Lawton Constitution*: for the James gang's gold, Feb. 29, 1948, p. 1, 8, and May 19, 1948, p. 1–2; for the staff's silence and Jesse's experiences, May 19, 1948, p. 8. For an analysis of the celebration's name and significance, see John McGuigan, introduction, *Robber and Hero*, ix–xxxiii. As of 2011, some memorabilia still sports the name "Jesse James Days." An individual, desiring to protect the event's brand

marketing, pointed this out and was acknowledged thus: "We are celebrating the DEFEAT and the towns people [*sic*], but Jesse James does sell"; [www.facebook.com/#!/DefeatofJesseJamesDays](http://www.facebook.com/#!/DefeatofJesseJamesDays) (accessed Aug. 29, 2011).

5. Hottentot is a derogatory term for an indigenous group known properly as Khoikhoi.

6. For a fuller recount, see Steve Eng, "The Great Outlaw Hoax," *True West*, Feb. 1986, p. 16–23.

7. Yeatman, *Frank and Jesse James*, 323–40; *Northfield News*, Sept. 16, 1948, p. 3, also reporting that Jesse James's nephew Bob counted Dalton as the eleventh uncle he'd heard of, none of whom ever made an effort to visit him.

8. Here and below, Crittenden, *Memoirs*, 355, 363–65, 367–68, 372.

9. Here and four paragraphs below, see letters (including Dalton's: Jan. 24, Sept. 6, 1938), case files (Discharged Inmate Files) 699–700, Minnesota State Prison (Stillwater), State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society. For the raid and aftermath, see Huntington, *Robber and Hero*, 17–37, 48–76. It is interesting to note that in July 1938, the small Minnesota town of Morgan

planned to exhibit the purported mummified remains of John Wilkes Booth. As partial proof of authenticity, "Doctors have examined the mummy . . . [and it] shows that the various indentification [*sic*] marks correspond with those Booth received." *Morgan Messenger*, July 14, 1938, p. 1.

10. *JC*, June 1, 1948, p. 4; June 29, 1948, p. 1.

11. *Northfield News*, July 8, 1948, p. 1; *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 5, 1948, p. 2, July 11, 1948, Upper Midwest sec., p. 7.

12. *Northfield News*, July 15, 1948, p. 3. Astute readers will have realized that Jesse James would not turn 101 until September 5, nearly seven weeks later.

13. *Northfield News*, Aug. 12, 1948, p. 2.

14. *Northfield News*, Sept. 16, 1948, p. 3. The initial appearance fee is equivalent to nearly \$9,400 in 2011 currency.

15. *New York Times*, Aug. 3, 1986, p. 37.

*All images are in MHS collections, including the letters in the Minnesota State Prison (Stillwater) files, State Archives.*



*Northfield, decorated for its first Jesse James Days celebration, 1948*



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