A Specialist Before My Time

John T. Flanagan

ON MAY 14, 1977, the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, which was organized in 1970 at Michigan State University by Professor David D. Anderson and his associates, presented the first annual award "for distinguished contributions to the study of Midwestern Literature." As the recipient of this honor I spoke briefly to an audience of townspeople, students, and literary specialists, and subsequently began to speculate on just how it happened that I, having begun my forty-five-year teaching career with a major in English literature, eventually developed into an Americanist with a particular devotion to the writing and culture of the Middle West. Chance certainly figured here, but there were other factors too.

When I returned to the University of Minnesota in 1929 after a year of teaching at the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks, I decided to specialize in American literature. There were few professors of American literature in major universities in those days, and in general the field seemed somewhat neglected. But certain signs seemed auspicious. For one thing in March, 1929, the first issue of *American Literature*, then edited by Jay B. Hubbell, appeared. This was the first professional journal to be devoted to the subject, and after almost fifty years it remains the best. Various universities, moreover, were beginning to expand their offerings and slowly graduate students were entering American literature programs at Yale, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. It would be years before the subject was given a significant place in English departments, but at least the avenue was beginning to clear a little.

I had never had a college course in American literature, nor even one in American history. Indeed, I had written a master's thesis in 1928 on the philosophy of Samuel Butler, the seventeenth-century English satirist who had produced a still readable poem, *Hudibras*. The year 1929 was not a good time to start anything new. Indeed, for six years, 1929–35, the University of Minnesota failed to award even a single doctoral degree in English literature. Such luminaries of the English department at Minnesota as Frederick Klaeber, Douglas Bush, and Elmer Edgar Stoll were not exactly aficionados of American literature. (Stoll, a little later,

Mr. Flanagan (pictured above in 1935) taught English for forty-three years, at the University of Minnesota from 1929 to 1945 and at the University of Illinois from 1945 until his retirement in 1972. He continues to do research and write, and his two most recent books are Theodore C. Blegen: A Memoir *(1977) and, with his daughter, Cathleen C. Flanagan,* American Folklore: A Bibliography, 1950–1974 *(1977). This is the twentieth article of Flanagan's to be published in* Minnesota History *since 1935.*

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wrote a very hostile article on *Moby Dick* in which he lamented Ahab's attack on what he called a harmless aquatic mammal.) But Minnesota did offer a few courses in the general field as well as several seminars in nineteenth-century American romanticism taught by a newly appointed assistant professor, Tremaine McDowell. Somewhat later, with the strong support of Dean Theodore C. Blegen, McDowell was instrumental in developing a new program in American studies which cut across the conventional departmental barriers.

It was also possible for me to choose an American topic for my dissertation, although I doubt that I was greatly encouraged to do so. There were certainly some proscriptions. The establishment would surely not have accepted a regional author or a regional literary movement as a subject. Nor could one select a living writer. I finally chose to work on Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was an author of some prominence and, moreover, he was safely dead. I never published "Emerson and the State" as a unit, but I did extract two articles from the dissertation in later years.

During the period when I was both an instructor and a graduate student at Minnesota, the English department was distinguished and eccentric. Frederick Klaeber, the German-born philologist who made almost a career out of studying and interpreting *Beowulf*, taught courses in Old English language and literature which were mandatory for doctoral students. He was a slight gentleman with a gray beard who generally wore a frock coat to class and was surprisingly gentle with students who had only a minimal interest in philology. Linguistic changes were his forte, and he was delighted by any student who could possibly suggest cognates in Greek or Hebrew for Old English terms. But he brought enthusiasm to his exposition of *Beowulf* and the old battle poems, and if students rarely left his classes as converts to his discipline, they remembered him with respect.

Elmer Edgar Stoll, an Ohioan who took his Ph.D. at Munich in 1904, was more of a martinet than Klaeber. His specialties were the English ballad, the poetry of Edmund Spenser, and the plays, especially the later tragedies, of Shakespeare. A productive scholar who wrote in somewhat crabbed academic style, he became one of the best known American Shakespeareans, and his monographs on *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* were generally admired. Stoll was a dignified man with a commanding presence who was not inclined to truckle to his students. He disliked late comers and more than once locked the door of his classroom so that unpunctual students were stranded in the corridor. He also demanded quiet and attention, and when he was accorded them, as was usually the case, he could read poetry with sensitivity and affection. He liked music and generally attended Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra concerts, then held at Northrop Auditorium. But he disliked modern music and more than once stalked out of the concert hall when the orchestra played any composition written after 1900. Stoll was more feared than popular, but few students regretted having been exposed to his teachings.

One of his particular bêtes noires was Oscar W. Firkins, a nervous little man who became possibly the best-known teacher in Folwell Hall and one of the remarkable figures on the Minnesota campus. Gossip had it that when Firkins was first appointed to the university's English department a feud developed between him and Stoll. It is possible that Stoll with his Germanic background resented the appointment of a colleague who did not have a doctoral degree and whose chief claim to recognition was distinguished writing in poetry and literary criticism. Whatever the truth was, Firkins was ousted from the department and given an office and a field in which he was the only professor. For years he was the entire department of Comparative Literature, famous for his courses in contemporary drama and European romanticism.

Firkins' method of teaching was distinctive. A thin

FREDERICK KLAEBER

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figure with extraordinarily heavy glasses and a wisp of graying hair brushed carelessly over his temple, he would walk back and forth across the lecture platform, his paces as precise as his language, seldom using notes, almost never looking at his class (which he probably could not see anyway). He would provide just enough biographical information about Ibsen or Shelley or Alfred de Musset to warrant an analogy or a paradox or, best of all, an ingenious but extravagant metaphor. Then, he would distribute an outline of his lecture, replete with subdivisions and examples. He did not welcome questions or discussions, and the best way to receive a good grade in his courses was to memorize his outlines. Firkins did not insist on this word-for-word feedback but he certainly did not dislike it. And since students were more docile in the 1930s than forty years later, there was no classroom rebellion.

But one point must not be overlooked. Firkins was a professional literary critic with an admirable command of the English language. He had written dramatic criticism for New York periodicals, he had produced a number of competent articles in nationally circulated journals, and he was the author of still significant biographies of Emerson and William Dean Howells. Since the average student could hardly compete with him in self-expression, it was perhaps best simply to imitate him.

Anecdotes about Firkins were campus commonplaces for years. He refused to have a telephone in his office because it disturbed him. He would not accept rides in automobiles, preferring to use the streetcars. Indeed, since he lived within a block of his office and within three blocks of the campus library, he had seldom any need for extensive transportation. His umbrella was as much of a fixture as a derby hat is for a man on Fleet Street. And since his eyesight was so poor he had occasional classroom difficulties. One story involves James Gray, later a St. Paul dramatic critic and the historian of the University of Minnesota. Gray had a high-pitched voice. One day when Firkins called the roll he reached the name of Gray. A voice responded, "Here." Firkins heard but was uncertain. He obviously could not see the student. And he said crisply, "Will the young lady answering for Mr. Gray please desist," and went on with the roll.

Firkins' sister, Ina Firkins, was the university reference librarian and the author of a much-used index to short stories. The reference room was large and often noisy, a situation she tried constantly to correct. But sometimes things got out of hand. When I first went to the university in 1925, one of the frequent users of the reference room was William Watts Folwell, the venerable historian and the first president of the university. Folwell, then about ninety-three, was still alert, still vigorous, but quite deaf. The conversation which inevitably developed between them was certainly not private, but I am not sure to this day whether either party was aware of the commotion they caused, Miss Firkins fluttering around Folwell in an effort to help him, Folwell himself uncertain that his questions had always been answered.

Several other members of the English department in the 1930s, all of them with doctorates from Harvard, were prominent if somewhat less colorful. Douglas Bush, a Canadian who had gone to Cambridge for graduate training, came to Minnesota in 1927 and remained for nine years before returning to his alma mater. Bush was a shy, quiet man with a friendly manner who carried his immense erudition lightly and attracted more students than such courses as pre-Shakespearean

JOSEPH WARREN BEACH

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drama and Elizabethan nondramatic literature would seem to warrant. Minnesota was fortunate to retain for almost a decade a scholar who eventually became one of the illustrious authorities on English classical and romantic poetry. A specialist in English satirical and philosophical writing of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was Cecil A. Moore, a mild-mannered Tennessean who provided an immense amount of background information in his courses and delighted in tracing ideas back to their Greek origins. He read poetry flatly, but his enormous knowledge of English life in past centuries enabled him to interest students in the feuds of Dryden, Pope, and Swift. Moore also taught occasionally a survey course in American literature, but since he seldom got beyond the Civil War, his coverage of the field might well be called inadequate. A frail man and not always in the best of health, he served the English department well for thirty years and provided a stabilizing influence among colleagues who were not always in full agreement. Incidentally, his retirement in 1947 deprived a Campus Club contract bridge foursome of one of its most faithful and expert members.

A third professor, Joseph Warren Beach, came to Minnesota in 1900 and, save for a period of graduate work at Harvard, remained until his retirement forty-eight years later. He became well known for his interest in the technique of fiction and in contemporary poetry. Beach was extremely sympathetic to the early imagists and free verse writers like Amy Lowell, John Gould Fletcher, and Carl Sandburg, and he numbered Robert Frost and Stephen Vincent Benét among his personal friends. He read the new poetry with sensitivity and perception and often attracted students who were less impressed by his parlor liberalism. More hospitable than most of his colleagues, he welcomed chosen undergraduates at his home on University Avenue at occasional soirées given over to the reading and discussion of contemporary literature.

The English department had a number of women members, but in the days before the ERA they had a minority status and seldom received full consideration in terms of salaries or promotions. Indeed, only one reached professorial rank, and she was the most striking personality in the group. Elizabeth Jackson was a Radcliffe graduate who shared Beach's interest in contemporary poetry and prosody but published very little. She had a flamboyant manner and a loud voice which she used effectively. Her candor and bluntness in pronouncements about people and policies did not help her status, but her long deferred promotion to a full professorship may also have been due to the fact that her brother, Dunham Jackson, was a distinguished member of the mathematics department at a time when nepotism was deemed a serious problem in university appointments. One of Miss Jackson's oddities was her refusal to teach composition courses at a time when they were normally part of an assistant professor's load; indeed, she accepted a reduced teaching assignment and presumably a reduced salary for freedom from what she considered a disagreeable task. Students in her classes long remem-

bered her habit of bringing her dog to her classroom. She had several West Highland white terriers, each in succession named Bobby, and each trained to lie quietly beneath her desk while she lectured. After class she would normally go to her car, a roadster with the top down, and she and Bobby would return to her apartment just north of the campus.

In later years there were other distinguished members of the English department, notably Allen Tate, Henry Nash Smith, and Robert Penn Warren, but of these I knew only Warren. He came in 1942 and remained eight years, during which time he was a conscientious and successful teacher of writing besides being a productive poet and novelist. Warren had considerable personal charm and was an effective lecturer, but I often had trouble in understanding his Kentucky accent which was never quite eliminated by his time abroad as a Rhodes scholar.

In 1935, with my doctoral degree in my pocket, I resolved to specialize as far as I could. In those early days of the Great Depression I never received a fellowship or university grant of any kind but generally taught three sections of freshman or sophomore English and read from seventy-five to 100 themes a week. What time I could salvage from a time-consuming teaching schedule I devoted to reading American books. After a rather long apprenticeship I was given a course in Shakespeare to teach and was partially freed from reading student papers. I certainly have nothing against Shakespeare, but I taught him rather badly since my heart was not in Renaissance England and I never thought I was adequately prepared for the assignment. Incidentally, a study of Shakespeare's plays was a service course offered by the English department to satisfy the College of Education requirement for prospective teachers of English, and junior faculty members were routinely assigned to staff it. I was much happier a little later when, before leaving Minnesota in 1945, I was permitted to offer courses in the American essay and middle western literature.

Two books had appeared in the 1920s which not only strengthened my determination to work in the general field of American literature, but also to specialize in what might be called a regional approach. One was Ralph Leslie Rusk's *Literature of the Middle Western Frontier*, published in 1925. Rusk's book was perhaps overly ambitious, and it had definite limitations. The terminal date in its coverage was 1840, and it included material (journalism, theology, handbooks for travelers, gazetteers, political orations) which certainly had small aesthetic value. Even when Rusk began his research, such names as John Mason Peck, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, William D. Gallagher, and Daniel Drake were not considered as significant as they were in the early history of Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio. But Rusk did confirm the point that the Middle West *had* a literature, even if the definition of the term was somewhat limited and the authors were more likely to be soldiers, explorers, educators, ministers, and housewives rather than professional writers. The other book in question was Dorothy Dondore's *The Prairie and the Making of Middle America*, published in 1926. Here again the reader noticed certain oddities. The prairie suddenly became the whole Mississippi Valley, and the scope of the book was not confined to the twelve states which we normally think of today as the Middle West.[1] But both these volumes, erudite and meticulous, called attention in a commanding way to the important regional literature of the United States. The only major trouble with them was that they were terrifyingly comprehensive. Rusk's book appeared in two volumes, the second of which included a bibliography of 324 pages even though he ended his study in 1840. My first intention was to write a continuation of Rusk's work on the same scale. But I soon found that this plan was unrealistic. And so my magnum opus, like Sinclair Lewis' novel on the labor movement, was never written.

There were some other influential personal factors in my decision to specialize in the study of middle western literature. In the early 1940s, J. Christian Bay was still the librarian of the John Crerar Library in Chicago. Bay was a Danish immigrant who had conceived a passion for the literature of travel and exploration in the American West, and he had built up an impressive collection of such works. Probably his three little volumes privately printed in 1935-37, in which he commented on and described the contents of part of his own library, are still familiar to collectors of Americana.[2] I wrote an essay for the *Minnesota Alumni Weekly* in which I pointed out the deficiencies of the University of Minnesota library in the American field and remarked that one of the important regional novels that the library lacked was Joseph Kirkland's *Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County*.[3] Kirkland's novel, incidentally, was a primary influence on Hamlin Garland and his development as a rural realist. Bay somehow saw my essay, sent the library a copy of *Zury*, and invited me to visit him when next I came to Chicago. When I did get to the Crerar Library, he was extremely cordial. We talked for a while, and he

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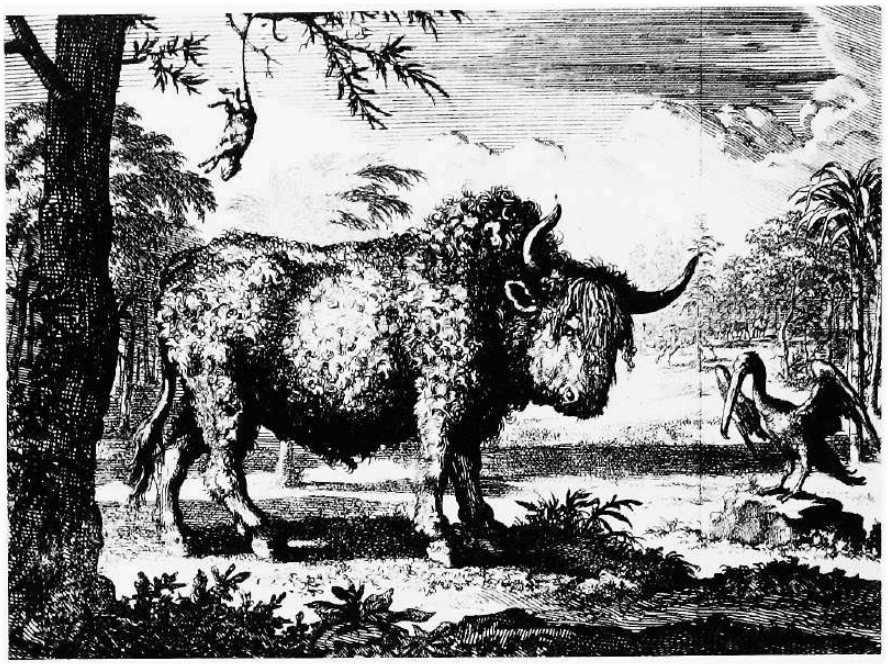
[1] Namely, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota.

[2] J. Christian Bay, *A Handful of Western Books* (Chicago, 1935), *A Second Handful of Western Books* (Chicago, 1936), *A Third Handful of Western Books* (Cedar Rapids, 1937). These little volumes were reprinted with slight revisions and emendations in *The Fortune of Books* (Chicago, 1941)

[3] John T. Flanagan, "Early American Fiction in the University Library," *Minnesota Alumni Weekly*, 333-335 (February 10, 1940). In 1956 the University of Illinois Press issued a facsimile reprint of *Zury* with an introduction by me.



THIS MEMORABLE ENGRAVING of a buffalo looking at an opossum and a pelican is from Louis Hennepin's Nouvelle Découverte d'un Très Grand Pays Situé dans l'Amérique. *J. Christian Bay gave a 1698 Amsterdam edition of this book to Flanagan — one factor which led to the professor's eventual concentration on middle western literature.*

lamented the fact that so many young literary scholars, misled by their eastern mentors, were still so immersed in Milton and Shelley that they had no time for or interest in any writing about the American West. Naturally I agreed. Then suddenly he picked up a book and asked if I owned a copy of Louis Hennepin's travels. I had to admit that I did not. I am not sure that I had ever seen a copy, with the memorable plates of Niagara Falls and of a buffalo looking at an opossum and a pelican. "Well," he said, "this is for you." And a little later I walked out of his office clutching carefully in my hand the Amsterdam 1698 edition of *Nouvelle Découverte d'un Très Grand Pays Situé dans l'Amérique*. Hennepin may have been a rogue and a liar. But at that time in my mind he was a great author. I still have that book.

It was also about this time that I first met Franklin J. Meine, publisher, student of American humor and folklore, collaborator with Walter Blair on books about Mike Fink, devoted admirer of Mark Twain, and book collector extraordinary. His library in the familiar house on Chicago's La Salle Street was literally top-heavy with books. I had never seen a private collection before which was often three rows deep on broad shelves and which was complemented by photographs, authorial memorabilia, and runs of rare comic periodicals. Franklin invariably knew what he had and where he had put it, whether he was talking about the multiple first editions of *Huckleberry Finn* or the innumerable variants in different colors and bindings of Augustus B. Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*, first published in 1835. Like other collectors of regional literature (including Bernard DeVoto, Richard Dorson, Constance Rourke), I have been indebted to Franklin for many courtesies and stimulated by his enthusiasm. A lifelong resident of Chicago, he had known George Ade, Hamlin Garland, Carl Sandburg, Lloyd Lewis, and the cartoonist John T. McCutcheon, and he liked to regale his friends with reminiscences of these and others. One result of our friendship was the acquisition by the University of Illinois library of the Meine collection of humor and folklore, including an invaluable set of *The Spirit of the Times*, and subsequently of his special Mark Twain collection.

A third man who had much to do with my concentration on the literature of the Middle West was Theodore C. Blegen I was never a student of Blegen's, but I knew him well for some thirty-five years, during which time he was the editor of *Minnesota History* and dean of the Graduate School at the University of Minnesota. Blegen's permanent interest was Norwegian immigration to the United States, about which subject he wrote two definitive volumes. But he also made *Minnesota History* into one of the best state historical journals, and since his interests were catholic he accepted for publication many articles which more conventional editors would have rejected. In 1935 he published my first essay, "Thoreau in Minnesota," and subsequently others on Bayard Taylor, Edward Eggleston, Captain Frederick Marryat, Fredrika Bremer, and Hamlin Garland. In both his own writing and his editorial practice he gave wide currency to the concept of "grass roots history." I have tried to acknowledge my debt to a friend and mentor in a biography which the Norwegian-American Historical Association of Northfield, Minnesota, published in 1977.

I suppose that another factor which influenced me, although at the time I was not overly conscious of it, was

the appearance in the pre-World War II years of a number of local writers, two of whom soon won national eminence. Certainly if Minnesota could produce creative writers of distinction, it also seemed important to study the work of authors from contiguous states, past and present, and perhaps even to attempt to learn what was peculiarly middle western about their achievement. I never saw F. Scott Fitzgerald, but I passed his home on Summit Avenue in St. Paul many times when I was en route to the Minnesota campus, and the scenes which he utilized in his short stories — the Winter Carnival ice palace, the yacht club at White Bear Lake, the St. Paul suburbs — were quite familiar. Years later I learned that for a short time Fitzgerald had courted a young lady who later married my cousin. I cannot say that I knew Sinclair Lewis either, but I did see him in Folwell Hall on the Minnesota campus during the year when he taught an occasional class in writing. He attracted a mixed following of undergraduates, teaching assistants, and townspeople with only a minimal interest in composition, and stories about his erratic behavior circulated around. I do recall the almost constant rumor that Lewis was at work on a novel dealing with a state university and its faculty, and various professors became uneasy that he might be using them as models. But this novel never materialized.

About this time Minnesota produced a number of writers of popular fiction: Margaret Culkin Banning of Duluth, Grace Flandrau and James Gray of St. Paul, William J. McNally of Minneapolis. Several wives of Minnesota faculty members wrote fiction with a strong popular appeal. Laura Krey, the Texas-born wife of a well-known professor of history, produced several historical novels of her native state; Carol Brink, wife of a professor of mathematics, became a successful author of children's stories; and Mabel Seeley, married to an instructor in the English department, had a loyal following of detective story addicts and usually chose Minnesota small towns for her physical settings. Frederick Manfred (who also wrote under his original name, Feike Feikema) was trying to establish himself as a creator of a fictional topography which he liked to call Siouxland and occasionally appeared on the campus.

During my tenure as a Minnesota faculty member (1929–45) both Max Shulman and Thomas Heggen were undergraduates but not my students. Indeed, Heggen contributed one of his first short stories to *Ski-U-Mah* when Theodore Peterson, now dean of the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Illinois, was editor of the campus humor magazine. A few years earlier Cedric Adams was an intermittent student. Later he became a columnist for the *Minneapolis Star* as well as a radio commentator.[4] As a final reminiscence I might add that when I as a senior undergraduate enrolled in a short story writing class taught by Mrs. Anna Von Helmholtz Phelan, one of my fellow students was Harrison Salisbury, later, of course, the celebrated foreign correspondent and an editor of the *New York Times*, as well as author of several books.

My own teaching career has been divided largely between the University of Minnesota and the University of Illinois, although I have also taught courses in middle western literature at both Indiana University and Southern Methodist University. During two Fulbright lectureships in France and Belgium, I was able to discuss various middle western authors, and I have directed doctoral dissertations on such figures as Sinclair Lewis, O. E. Rølvaag, Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Ruth Suckow, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and Mark Twain. To advert to a recently founded organization, the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, it is pleasant to know that regional literature no longer needs an apology and that specialists in the writing from and about the Middle West now occupy a respectable place in academia. There are many middle western writers today who deserve the attention once accorded Lewis and Sandburg and Dreiser. The work of James Farrell needs to be more resolutely evaluated than it has been. Vachel Lindsay should be reconsidered before he is allowed to fall into oblivion. Among many others, Louis Bromfield, Nelson Algren, Willard Motley, Gwendolyn Brooks, William Maxwell, James Jones, and the newest Nobel laureate, Saul Bellow, merit study and analysis. And there are probably as many middle western themes crying for attention today, as Hamlin Garland discovered in his challenging book of 1894, *Crumbling Idols*.

[4] He also gave his name to a favorite sandwich at Charlie's Cafe Exceptionale in Minneapolis, further assuring that he would be remembered. The sandwich includes fresh turkey, mushrooms, cream sauce, and cheddar cheese.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS of faculty members, with the two exceptions noted here, are published with permission of the University of Minnesota. The picture of William W. Folwell is from the MHS audio-visual library, and the one of Flanagan was lent by the author. The engraving on page 22 is from the 1698 edition of the Hennepin book owned by the Minnesota Historical Society library.

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