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Southwest Arkansas Local Colorists

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SOUTHWEST ARKANSAS LOCAL COLORISTS

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Ouachita Baptist University

Proposal For

The Carl Goodson Honors Program

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The small town of Washington, Arkansas, which now has a meagre population of 269 once held an important place in history. Early in the nineteenth century, Washington had been a part of the nation's Southwest expansion, for the town lay at the junction of two important national roads. In the 1820's the Chihuahua Road from St. Louis to Mexico served as a mail route and was a major trail to Texas and the Southwest. The Fort Towson Road led from Louisiana through the Oklahoma Indian territory to Fort Smith. During the Mexican War Washington was the mobilization place for the military. Many famous Texas heroes, such as Sam Houston, passed through Washington on their way to battle. Mary Meadearis captured one of these incidents in her book Washington Arkansas: History on the Southwest Trail:

Sam Houston rode over the Town Creek with a passport from Andrew Jackson in his saddlebags. Davy Crockett held a conversation with the tavern keeper at the town well. Jim Bowie wandered in and out---in and out---and Stephen F. Austin came riding through the hollow before there was a tavern, or a town well or even a courthouse there.

During the years 1863-1865, Washington was the state capitol, and its population grew to forty thousand of whom the majority were refugees or soldiers camped in the area.²

Old Washington is not only a town rich in history, but also in literature. Ruth McEnery Stuart and Claud Garner, two residents were inspired to write of the town's Southern culture and its people. They became famous as local colorists. Garner's most widely known piece of work set in Washington was Cornbread Aristocrat. Cornbread Aristocrat re-created the days when wagon trains rolled through the state:

Spring floods had mired the lowlands of Southwestern Arkansas Territory, rutting the roads for the heavy wagons and making travel impossible, so that for weeks the men of this Texas-bound caravan had been

holed up in the log-hamlet of Washington on the frontier, drinking and fighting and lying to one another to pass the time away and help forget their eagerness to be over the river and on their way to the free land and riches promised by Stephen F. Austin.³

Stuart wrote in the form of short stories. From the vantage point of the 1980's, the most artistically successful group of Stuart's fiction is that represented in this paper.

These stories and sketches were associated with the imaginary town of Simpkinsville which was based on Washington, Arkansas where Stuart lived after her marriage in 1879 until 1883.

Mrs. Stuart's stay in Washington was short. The once bustling outpost was much like the Simpkinsville she described in her stories. These stories often included a rural village circled by farms and plantations whose occupants go into town to buy their supplies and visit their friends or to attend church or social gatherings. Like the roads of Washington, the roads of Simpkinsville and vicinity were unreliable; in "An Arkansas Prophet," the New Year's Eve party had to take place in spite of the week-long rain that caused the roads to reduce to hub deep "gumbo mud.".

The night was stormy, the roads were heavy, and most of the wagons without cover; but the festive spirit is impervious to weather the world over, and there were umbrella's in Simpkinsville, and overcoats and "tarpaulins."

But on still, quiet summer afternoons when the deep galleries and high-ceilinged sitting rooms provide cool, dim havens, the characters indoors can recognize the doctors buggy or of Ol' Proph's wagon and can hear the field hands on their way to work.

Claud Garner is the other writer to be focused on in this paper. Garner was a resident in Washington from 1896 until 1906, then returned to the town for a brief period in 1908. Garner's story Cornbread Aristocrat is set in the days of the United States' greatest expansion to the Southwest and the Texas region. Toby Giles, who is the

main character of the story, was a member of a Texas-bound caravan that was delayed in Washington due to Spring floods. Toby and the wagon train that he was on were part of the hundreds that were going to claim land being given away by Stephen F. Austin. Toby's trip is described as a historically accurate fiction:

All the way from Memphis to Washington Texasbound settlers had heard the rumor that the money Congress had appropriated for the improvement of the Southwest Trail was really to be used to help finance American families headed for Mexican territory, people with enough spirit to take the land and hold it. At Arkansas Post, before he began the trek through the wilderness, Toby Giles had been given a saddle horse, a new long rifle, powder and lead, and a bedding roll. Like the others he had signed a statement to the effect that he had worked out the value of these articles on the Southwest Trail, though in fact neither Toby nor any of the others had done a lick of work on the Trail. Congress wanted American settlers who crossed into Texas to be well-armed and prepared to defend themselves.

Garner's fiction which was in the form of books, was the same type as Ruth Stuart's short stories. These two writers can be labeled as local colorists or regionalist writers. These two terms often refer to the same style of writing, depending on the time period that is being discussed. Between the period of 1930 and 1940 new forms of what had once been called local color began then to be called regionalism. The differences between them could be accounted for by the changes in literary attitude over fifty years. There were after 1929 still local or regional literary experts at work. These writers wanted to make obscure sections known to the country at large. The writers wanted to find fresh resources so they could exploit them to their benefit. On the other hand, regionalism looked for robust drama, and preferred epic to idyllic dimensions in its stories. In the days when local color was the term used, these writers considered it customary to use a dialect that

was peculiar to a language for the reference to the past and another for the present, writers very seldom brought these two idioms into the same novel. The regional novelists often studied their regions through long periods of time, interested in learning how this present had come from that past. 9

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Ruth McEnery Stuart was born on February 19, 1852, in Marksville, Louisiana. She was born into a world of Southern gentility that set much of the tone of her writing, as the lifestyle influenced most of the Southern writers of her generation. 10 This antebellum way of life is described in "The Women's Exchange of Simpkinsville":

The Misses Simpkins were twins and at the time of the Civil War they had been fair blooming country maidens, both, and they were now, since the death, a year ago, of "Sonny", their bachelor brother, the sole representatives of a family that had stood with the best in the Arkansas community in which they lived; a family whose standards and traditions had been religiously observed in all things by the twin daughters upon whose frail maiden shoulders had developed responsibilities hitherto unknown to the women of the name Simpkins. Their mother and grandmother had had slaves at their call, and by frugal care had accumulated what here in those days was counted as wealth. 11

The values she reflected in her stories, sketches and poems rose from a tradition of family life and pride in her origin. 12 Mrs. Stuart's literary career began in 1887 when she took a trip to North Carolina. In North Carolina she met Charles Dudley Warner, then the editor of Harper's Magazine. She returned home and anonymously sent "Uncle Mingo's Speculations" and "Lamentations of Jeremiah Johnson." Harper published "Lamentations" and sent "Uncle Mingo" to the New Princeton. Review for publication. 13

In 1893, Harper and Brothers published a collection of eleven of Stuart's short stories and two of her poems under the title A Golden Wedding and Other Tales. With the exception of "Cameilla Riccardo" and "The Woman's Exchange of Simpkins-

ville," the characters in the collection were black. Stuart developed her stories about blacks for the next twenty-nine years, along with stories set in New Orleans and in Simpkinsville or Washington. During the years Ruth Stuart's career as a writer and a platform speaker was successful. 14

For the rest of her life, Stuart traveled in the United States, giving public readings from her works, appearing at various clubs, and making tours. 15 When she wasn't traveling, Stuart lived in New York.

Although Ruth McEnery Stuart is virtually unknown today as a writer, in her own time she enjoyed considerable popular and critical reviews. Between 1888 and 1917 Stuart published more than seventy-five stories, along with her dialect verse. The tale "The Women's Exchange of Simpkins-ville" is a fine example of the use of Southern dialect:

Jest so it don't tas'e hoppy. I ain't pertic'lar; but from hoppy bread deliver me! Well, good-by, Miss Sarey Mirandy, honey-good-by, an' I'm going to pray for you to succeed. Lemme know who buys my cake. I do wish I could be there to see it cut. Well good-by again. Law! here comes Mis' Brooks with a bundle as big as a Chris'mas tree. I must stop an' see what she's fetchin'. I do declare this here Women's Exchange does tickle me all but to death. Simpkinsville ain't been so stirred up sence the fire. Howdy, Mis Brooks? I see you keepin' the ball a-movin'! 16

Her dialect, which was written in her stories "In Simpkins-ville..." and in her New Orleans tales, received critical notice. In Chicago a local columnist said, "Mrs. Stuart's negro dialect comes nearer to perfection than that of any other contemporaneous writer. 17

When Ruth Stuart died in 1917, an era had ended. The World War and the social changes that followed it made the local-color school irretrievable. Readers began to reject literature written with sentimental or romantic tone. There are other reasons that can be attributed to the decline of Stuart's popularity. The Great Depression, the

Dust Bowl, and the dislocation that accompanied World War II made it very difficult to romanticize the life on plantations, small black settlements, and white communities in the South. 18 This decay of the public's attitude toward that type of literature coincided with the change in terminology used to label writers that used the home-front as a topic. As mentioned before local-color began to be referred to as regionalism. Many writers alter their style to satisfy the reader. People in the short stories included in <u>Simpkinsville and Vicinity</u> could be poor but proud; however, the next generation might be poor and able to seek a brighter future through higher education and in a large city. The small town of Simpkinsville represented the dead past. The country was ready for changes and progression. Just as the town of Washington, Arkansas drindled down so did Stuart's style of writing.

No matter what the reasons were for Stuart's decline, it is apparent that her waning success coincided with the diminishing feelings of the sentimental tradition in American literature and the myth of the Old South. Despite the retrogression of Ruth Stuart's writing style, she was still a nationally known and successful writer who contributed an important development in American literature. Her contribution to the local-color tradition as well as to Southern literature merits attention. The particular locales of her stories, her narrative method, and her techniques of characterization demonstrate the qualities of most successful local color writers. 19 Mrs. Stuart's narrators were usually townspecple who had gathered and began a tale. The readers of these pieces become involved from the narrators point of view and the characters that the stories are actually about.

Although this paper will focus on Mrs. Stuart's collection of short stories that are set in Washington, Arkansas, Mrs. Stuart's fiction falls into three main groups each set in a different locale: New Orleans, the plantations of south or central Louisiana, and the imaginary village in Arkansas- Simpkinsville. The reasons or motives that Ruth Stuart chose these places to write about are numerous, and include topographic features and vegetation, dialect,

ethnic traits, and the mores and habits of thought of a specific region. These traits provide the material for local-color fiction. 20 Present day Washington is much the same atmosphere as it was at the turn of the century, with of course, some modernization. Washington, Arkansas:

History on the Southwest Trail states that:

Washington, Arkansas, is a very small town. It never did become anything more than a very small town. In the beginning it was laid off to be one mile square and it is the same size today. The population of the town correlates with the size today. Most of the people living there now are descendents of the first families who came and raised their children in the blackland plantations around the hill. Some of the first families went to the area as land owners; others went as slaves. All are a part of heritage that aided in shaping Washington's place in history and in literature. 21

The climate continues to regulate the lives of the area's inhabitants, and the land around the town is still devoted to farming. This atmosphere was of great importance to the development of the regional characters of Stuart's stories. The predominantly rural setting of the stories was the basis for many of the cultural values they reflect.²²

The characters in Stuart's stories are common everyday people that make her tales believable and entertaining. Some are women married to storekeepers, preachers, doctors, and farmers. Deuteronomy Jones, who is the narrator of the "Sonny" stories, is an elderly planter whose son now manages the family farms and writes nature books. Some of the men are involved in politics, government, or the military.

Women in the stories are usually in the home except those that are school teachers or that occasional occurance when Stuart portrays herself as a missionary or a public lecturer. 23 Family life and family activities are stressed in Stuart's stories. The "Sonny" stories are one of the best examples of this. Family members cared for older ones in their old age, sharing the home responsibilities.

region being written about were negro. Stuart used this tool extensively. Dialect and local manners that are depicted through literature and depicted in a real and entertaining manner were major goals of all regional writers, but achieved by few. Stuart portrayed characters that were common, such as the black preacher, an elderly black man that knew everything and had humor for all. An example of black humor is shown in "Queen O'Sheba's Triumph":

What's de matter wid drawin' dis fun'al in advance, I'd like to know?" she muttered presently. "I ain't got much longer to live no how, an' I kin pay on it long as I hold out, an' take to de potter's field when I die. It's as good a place to lie as any, ef a pusson don't try to ca'y name an' station into it. Jes so I'm in hearin' o' Gab'iel's horn--" 27

Stuart's stories were written in such a way that the reader(s) felt as though the character was talking to them in their everyday southwest Arkansas tongue. Stuart is consistent and accurate with her use of dialect which adds to the vividmess of her stories of Washington.

Mrs. Stuart's stories of Simpkinsville are not only important due to their literary contributions that they make to the history of local-color fiction, but her stories also provide the world with a link with the past that can be found nowhere else in such an artistic way. Life is depicted as it was. Mrs. Stuart observed the events that she wrote about. The books are considered fiction, but the events, such as the New Year's Eve party or the strange traditions these families have, were perceived by Mrs. Stuart during her stay there in the community that these tales are actually set it.

Claud Garner was born on August 29, 1891, in Hope, Arkansas. In 1896 Garner moved to Washington and lived there until he graduated from high-school in 1906. He left Washington for about two or three years, but returned to live there once again by 1909. Garner lived in Washington until he moved to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas in about 1935. 28

Garner's literary career did not begin until the 1940's. While he was in Texas he began collecting material for Wetback, that was published in 1947. Wetback became a best seller and was named by Texas Institute of Letters as Best Texas Book of 1947. While Garner lived in the Rio Grande Valley, he worked for or with the American Fruit Growers Association where he developed co-ops so the growers could sell their produce at the best price, along with other benefits. During these years Garner experienced and observed what he included in the novel, Wetback.

Just as the title suggests, the book is about aliens and their true lives as fugitives, men and crop pickers. The book expressed the life of both Mexicans and whites who lived along the Rio Grande Border. Mexicans were often mistreated by whites who considered themselves superior to their laborers, the Mexicans. The book Wetback exploited the white foreman that took advantage of the illegal aliens, even though these aliens were trying to better themselves. Garner was considered a crusader by writing about the harsh treatment that Mexicans actually received while they labored for very meager wages in the Rio Grande Valley. Few writers have had a desire to express the life they knew, and few have shown more conscientiousness in depicting the lifestyle as they interpreted it. Garner's theme is the border area of Texas and Mexico. Garner depicts the area and its inhabitants in all of its harshness and with an impartial objectivity that is notable. His book has historical value and is remembered for providing an accurate portrayal of life in Texas in the twentieth century in the Rio Grande Valley region of the state.

Conclusions and comments made by critic Allen Hagen about Claud Garner's book <u>Wetback</u> is that the book proved Garner to be a crusader. Garner was against the wrongs that society was seemingly condoning involving illegal immigration and labor habits of a large majority of white farmers in the agricultural industry. Garner's book attempted to expose illegal Mexican immigration and labor habits of

a large majority of white farmers in the agricultural industry. The folly of white supremacy, illegal Mexican immigration and oil field greed were other topics that Garner exploited, 30 Garner's own life pointed out the fact that he was a promoter of fair and equal treatment of laborers by setting up farm coops which were mentioned earlier, and by promoting his own literature so people would have the opportunity to read objectively written literature concerning the lives of Mexicans in that area of the country. Hagen also noted that Garner did basic research to support his intuitions, themes and exposes.31

A major contrast between Garner and Stuart is that the time span between their literary careers made a big difference in their style. This contrast is dealt with mainly in Garner's first book published.

Stuart dealt with a specific locale, people were close friends, family and very rarely ventured further than their community whereas Garner's main character, Dionioso, in Wetback had left his homeland (Mexico) to try to become a U.S. citizen. Dionioso risked life and limb to get into the country also forsaking his family, never knowing if he would ever see them again. Stuart's characters were treated kindly although the period in which she wrote didn't always hold blacks in high regard. The shift from slave to citizen in Stuart's stories was contradicted in Claud Garner's story where the main character traded citizenship to an illegal form of slavery.

Stuart and Garner differed several other ways in that Garner's personalities in <u>Wetback</u> were the "underdog" type, where Stuart's were accepted citizens of Simpkinsville. Garner did not deal with the family in depth, his characters were shifting and were able to move about as they saw fit. Stuart's, on the other hand, felt as though Simpkinsville was home, and they may want a change, but waited for the change to occur in the community. Garner tended to avoid young people

in his novels while Stuart's imagination had no limit concerning the schemes that the juveniles in Simpkins-ville could create. Garner's book was more of an attempt to crusade against a cause rather than Stuart's humorous, warm and entertaining novellas of a country neighborhood and its activities.

Claud Garner's second novel published was Cornbread Aristocrat. This book was written in the late 1940's and completed in 1950. This book of Garner's also became a best seller that sold over twenty thousand copies and was for sale in five foreign countries. 32 This book. which was set in Washington, Arkansas, seemed to revert to the style more similar to that of Stuart than the style Garner employed writing Wetback. The book's main character was a young man, approximately twenty years old, who was a Tidewater Virginian. He came from a very poor family with very little social status or class. Toby left Virginia and its plantation life and headed west with the thoughts and determination of becoming a wealthy aristocrat. The plot was one that could be compared to that of Horatio Anger. Both Alger's characters and Garner's were self made. This trait of personalities is typical in books containing local color. Alger's books, which had the theme of rags to riches and selfmade success, furthered the National legend that America was the place to become whatever one's heart desired. 33 This theme was intensified by Toby not only being in America but by moving "out west." The time set plays a major role since it coincides with the Southwest expansion. Toby went Westward, arriving in Washington with nothing except a horse, the clothes on his back, and some big dreams. The story is built around episodes and dealings that Toby Giles had to go through to get what he ultimately wanted. Toby matures through all the traumas of his young adulthood and his character was questionable at times. The reader tends to doubt whether Giles will

ever become an aristocrat, much less a reputable one. Qualities which made Toby's character questionable are revealed throughout the book Cornbread Aristocrat:

Toby, in truth, was a man whose life was lived on three levels. In business, he was all action, all drive, every inch of him living up to his nickname-Ten Per Cent Toby. In his own house, with Josephine, he engaged in warfare, in a constant battle involving his will against hers. In Stoge's house, he relaxed. The goodness in his nature, the generosity, the spark of idealism that had been dulled by the hardness of his life, all emerged, and in the truest sense he was most a man during these daily noontime visits with his son and his dead wife's Aunt. 34

Local colorists or regionalists had a tendency to neglect giving their characters any roots. Characters were bent on seeing life rather than knowing it. 35 This characteristic is very evident in Cornbread Aristocrat. Toby left his birthplace to better his life with his intentions originally being to return to own his own plantation, but not because Virginia was his homeland. Toby's roots were mere strands that he would have rather forgotten. As Toby found success in Washington, he had no desire to go back, he would stay and own a plantation there. Toby's thoughts of seeing life were achieved through various methods of trickery and deceit, but as life dealt its dealings, Toby realized that his life wasn't what it should be, and although he had reached his goals materialistically, he had not spiritually. He died knowing life from a distance:

He realized that there was in his life one great lack that made everything else meaning-less. That was the lack of a spiritual prop, lack of love for God. He turned over in his mind the characters of the people he had known and loved. Each of them had loved God. Agatha, his first wife, had been a good Christian woman. Stoge had turned to God for guidance. Miss Agatha told him she would rather be a child of God than an aristocrat. Tommy

Jeff had said that he preferred withered legs to a withered soul. Even old Sam Houston had felt that the Lord was on his side when he rode away to free Texas. 36

The character of the Southern highlander was stereotyped as ruthless and wild and was seen sympathetically by a well-known local colorist, Mary Noailles Murfree. 37 One of her themes was that all people possess qualities of friendliness, charity and domestic virtues that can be found in abundance in the hill and mountain country of the south. The local color qualities that Mrs. Murfree wrote about are summed up in the introduction to Mrs. Stuart's book by Ethel C. Simpson:

Many readers find Stuart's depiction of daily life and work appealing. Her characters tend their children and their gardens and manage their own affairs and those of their neighbors, with fortitude and good humor. Their life can be narrow, but in the best of these stories, they are enlivened in numous small ways. Family celebrations and holidays build a sense of community. Blacks and whites alike know how to have fun, and pride in thrift and work is balanced with generous hospitality and the joy of fellowship. These idealized traits of country life engage the imaginations of readers who are seeking alternatives to complex, alienating life-style of the late twentieth century. Stuart's imaginary village of Simpkinsville offers a haven where life is slower and simpler, and where people know and care about one another. 38

The goodness was natural goodness not produced by schools or higher education, but by nature herself; therefore, the qualities were deserving of more recognition and respect. This again reflects Horatio Alger's idea of self-made success, society educating the man as he lives and learning as life goes on. Alger said, "The grace of culture is, in its way a fine thing" from the Tennessee Mountains "but the best that art can do- the polish of a gentleman- is hardly equal to the best that nature can do in her higher moods." This theme was clear in that Stoge saw good in Toby and helped him both

directly and indirectly become a polished gentleman.

The time frame that Garner and Stuart wrote in had several characteristics that regionalist writers adhered to. One of the more distinct is that scenes are no longer unlocalized; custom and dialect had to be reported with accuracy; characters and plots must consequently be fitted, more or less to the accurate circumstances among which they moved. 40 This quality in writing would have been easier for Stuart to achieve since she lived during the period which her stories reflected. This would explain one example of this local color brought out in the character of Chris Rowton who owned a store in the tale "An Arkansas Prophet." He was obviously a character carved after Wash Rowton who actually owned a salcon in Washington, Arkansas, in the year 1910.41 The man, Stoge Rowdon, who owned a store in Washington, is also a character in the book by Garner, Cornbread Aristocrat. The ordinary methods of local color, no less than doctrines on realism imported from Europe, cleared the way for a critical conflict between Romance and Realism. 42 The controversy determined that real persons and events should of course be represented, they ought to be merely everyday persons and events exhibited to the life or ought to be selected with a view of making more heightened moments and outstanding men and women than could be made of commonplace. Both Stuart and Garner achieved this in their works which makes their literature invaluable to this region of Southwest Arkansas. The following passage is an example of this:

Toby had the day off, and spent most of it giving the town a thorough looking over. It was a growing frontier community, given added importance by the fact that it stood at the crossroads of four major wilderness trails. The oldest and most important was the Southwest Trail, leading north through the woods to Missouri

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and Tennessee. Another wandered south, into Louisiana and Texas. Another went east, into Mississippi. The newest was the freshly blazed wilderness track that led into Indian Territory. There were fifty families in the town itself, and on each trail there were settlers here and there. In every direction, flanking out from the town, land was being cleared for the planting of corn. 43

In conclusion the fictionist of the local color and regionalist school contributed to the same end by drawing attention to the innate virtues of Americans e verywhere and their attempts to understand one another. 44 Garner and Stuart were both characterized as local colorists because of their writing style that seemed to paint the scenes in the reader's mind. The atmosphere, the background of the story, the environment and the setting all appeared to reflect spontaneous life that went on around them. Their style was natural and unrestrained.

Claud Garner and Ruth Stuart both wrote of the South in a simple yet complex fashion. It was simple in that the lifestyle described encompasses a "laid back" and slow attitude toward life. The depth of their writing was found in the techniques they used. Their pieces were not lengthy novels but were concise and condensed descriptive stories. At the same time their art created an atmosphere appropriate for the time period represented in the story. The characters were depicted as members of a typical Southern community. The pieces voiced not only dialect, but also habits of a people or locality.

Readers that have never been exposed to the town of Washington, Arkansas, or even to the Southern region of the United States, could read Stuart's and Garner's books and obtain an accurate idea of what the community or areas were actually like. There is humor, love, anger, lust and pride in the characters. The people represented do express their true feelings and the reader empathizes with the people in the story. All types of citizens are

included in the stories. These two Arkansas writers show human nature may place its values on different material goods in different time periods, but human qualities such as the ones mentioned previously do not change. The time represented in Garner's and Stuart's books is long ago, but the citizens of Washington and those that read their books today are able to relate to the emotions of the characters.

It was not too much to say that the writers of the period 1875-1960 contributed to national unity through their style. The local stories, in particular, were for many readers a fresh and exciting discovery of America. 45 Stories such as the ones written by Southwest Arkansas' own Claud Garner and Ruth McEnery Stuart added depth to the history of Southwest Arkansas with fiction and imaginative writing style. Many people who have read Garner's and Stuart's works do not realize what an impact they have had; they have merely enjoyed the dialect, setting, theme, and colorful and memorable characters of such pieces as the short stories of Simpkinsville and Vicinity, Cornbread Aristocrat and Wetback by these two artists.

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