

A HISTORY OF GRAIN VALLEY

By Michael Gillespie
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Prehistoric Evidence

Six years ago, a most remarkable and serendipitous discovery shed light on some very early activity in the area. It was not human activity, for the evidence uncovered is thousands of years old. In the summer of 2004, work crews excavating for a pond behind the original Sni-A-Bar farmhouse unearthed what appeared to be large animal bones.

A paleontologist from the University of Kansas came to the site and began a close examination, with the help of local volunteers. They unearthed several pieces of bone, identified as belonging to a mastodon, an elephant-like creature that once roamed much of North America. The diggers also found a metacarpal bone belonging to a prehistoric relative of the modern horse, and a large tooth that was later identified as coming from a megalonyx, an ancient ground sloth. Additional analysis of the subsurface seems to indicate that the immediate area was low ground with a stream running through it, surrounded by higher, dry land composed of sand or dry gravel. The bones and fragments are estimated to be close to 50,000 years old.

It would be a long, long time before the arrival of any humans in the vicinity. The oldest evidence of human activity in the immediate area comes from fragments of chert that were discovered on either side of Blue Branch creek, along today's Buckner-Tarsney Road. In 1991, cultural research specialists who were examining the area prior to the construction of a replacement bridge over Blue Branch Creek discovered two areas, each containing a small concentration of chips and flakes. These pieces were indicative of campsites where native hunters may have used the material to make tools and weapons, and to cut leather. Generally, this type of activity is associated with native peoples of the Woodland period of pre-Columbian culture, which would date the site anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 years ago.

The Early Frontier

The first Europeans came to the area in the late 1600s. They were French *couriers d' bois*, woodsmen, who came not so much to explore or conquer, but rather to hunt for furs, especially beaver fur. Beaver peltries, with their thick mat of inner hair, made a splendid felt material. That felt was much in demand in Europe for making coats and hats. As the French trappers made their way across Missouri, they soon came upon a scattered tribe of natives who were willing to trade peltries for manufactured goods. These tall, handsome red men called themselves the *Ni-U-Ko'n-ska*, meaning "Children of the Middle Waters". But to the whites, they were the Osage.

In 1808, the Americans built a fort and trading post for the Osages. Fort Osage was constructed on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River, directly north of present-day Grain Valley. This was the extreme northern range of Osage lands, but the Osage were instructed to move there. If they

would do so, and sign a treaty, the Americans would provide them with all the trade goods they could possibly want, in exchange for furs.

In the treaty, the Osage ceded nearly all of their land from the Missouri River to the Arkansas River. In exchange, they would receive a one-time payment of \$1,200 plus a yearly annuity of \$1,500 in merchandise, in addition to trading rights at the fort and the protection of the American government.

But that protection was not forthcoming, and it was not long before enemies of the Osage — primarily the Ioway — began raids against the Osage in present-day Jackson County. And any white hunters who had the misfortune of being caught in the vicinity of these warring nations were apt to fall victim to them. One such encounter involved Daniel Boone.

The famed frontiersman, who was now well into his 70s, had moved to Missouri, near St. Charles, in 1799. Never one to remain still, Boone frequently went on season-long hunting trips into western Missouri. On one such trip in 1808, Boone, his grandson, and a servant — all leading pack horses — encountered a lone Indian near Sni-A-Bar Creek, which runs along the east side of today's Grain Valley.

The Indian invited Boone and his party to accompany him to his camp, which was understood to be near the head of the Sni. As they drew close to the camp, the Indian asked, through signs, if he might ride one of the lead horses. Boone consented. But when the group came within sight of the camp, the Indian galloped ahead and twenty or thirty of his comrades came charging out with hostile intent. Boone and party jumped onto the remaining pack horses and made good their escape, but not before having to cut loose their traps and pelts. The next spring, Boone returned to the site in hopes of finding his traps, but without success.

Boone never said which tribe had ambushed him, but in 1812 the Osages themselves were attacked by other Indians along the Sni near Grain Valley. In the words of Captain Eli Clemson, commander of Fort Osage, the ambush resulted in “the defeat of the Osages, the slaughter of many of their people, and the loss of the great part of their goods and horses. The survivors of this horrid carnage were driven back to the fort and were truly objects of pity. They would not start again until a guard from the garrison accompanied them twelve or fifteen miles out.”

Pioneer Days

Though Missouri was admitted to the Union in 1821, what is now Jackson County would not come into being for another five years. The 1808 Osage treaty had designated all the land west of today's Buckner-Tarsney Road to be Indian land. But in a newer treaty signed in the 1820s, the Osage gave up all rights to land in Missouri.

After its organization in 1826, Jackson County, which included the former Osage lands and the westernmost portion of the original Lafayette County, was further divided into townships. These townships — eventually there would be nine of them — were political and judicial subdivisions whose boundaries were mostly the result of local topography. Since traveling though the county

could be a cumbersome undertaking in any weather or season, each township had its own constables and justices of the peace, as well as polling precincts.

Sni-A-Bar township was created in 1834. It covered the area from the Little Blue River to the east county line; by today's references, it encompassed an area of some 4 miles either side of I-70, from Blue Springs to Oak Grove. Today's Grain Valley is very much in the center of it.

Most of the land in the township is drained by the Sni-A-Bar Creek, which flows in a northeasterly direction. Rising just north of Lone Jack and flowing some twenty miles hence, it empties into the Missouri River at Wellington.

The name "Sni-A-Bar" comes from the accidental discovery of the creek. Sometime around 1800, a trapper of German or French origin — the historical sources disagree on his nationality — worked his Mackinaw boat up the Missouri River during a season of high water. The heavy Mackinaw, laden with provisions and implements of the trapper's trade, made very poor progress against the swollen river. At one point, the trapper discovered the mouth of a stream, which he believed was the slough or chute coming from behind an island. He headed the boat into the slough, where the water was running much easier. But instead of leading him back into the river, the stream continued southwestward through a narrow valley. Realizing his error, he turned around to retrace his route. The trapper's name was either Aber, or Hebért — both of which had a similar pronunciation. The trapper told others of his navigation mistake, and the stream channel got the French name of Chanel Aber (or Hebért).

But American frontiersmen had a dismaying talent for corrupting words and phrases, no matter what the language. So as the name was passed by word of mouth, it gradually morphed into Sni-A-Bar. This process led one nineteenth century historian to conclude that the term was merely gibberish, without meaning, "manufactured by the old pioneers out of Indian, French, and German."

Pink Hill and Stony Point

It would be 50 years after the organization of Jackson County before Grain Valley came into being. In those intervening years, there were two small post office villages located nearby — Pink Hill to the north, and Stony Point to the south. The hamlet of Pink Hill, so named because of colorful wildflowers that dotted the landscape, was platted in 1854. It consisted of two streets, Main and Locust, and at its zenith it contained about ten houses, a church, a school, and a store. It was located, by today's reckoning, at the intersection of Pink Hill and Howell Roads.

Today, the only obvious relic of old Pink Hill is the church building, which is now a private residence. Constructed in 1871, the old church was the site of a deadly shooting spree that same year. It took place during a worship service when veterans of the Civil War — Union and Confederate — took each other to task. At that time, men still carried sidearms and something was said or done to provoke gunplay. Three men were killed. Many residents of Sni-A-Bar Township afterward circulated a petition to ban the carrying of weapons in town.

Stony Point was also a post office town, though never platted. Located south of Grain Valley on

today's Stony Point School Road, three-quarters of a mile west of Buckner-Tarsney Road, it was once the site of two general stores.

One of the stores was owned by Jacob Gregg. The elder Gregg had been sheriff of Jackson County before 1840, and was postmaster at Stony Point. His son, J.F. Gregg, was born at Stony Point. Both men were arrested and confined for a brief period of time by the Yankees in 1862 for their Southern sympathies. Upon release, the younger Gregg, just 18 years old, joined a Confederate guerrilla company and saw action from Missouri to Texas for the remaining three years of the war.

After the war, he returned to farming near Stony Point, only to be arrested once again by federal authorities and held in custody for more than a year. Afterward, he fled to Texas for seven years before returning home. In 1880, he purchased a grocery store in the new town of Grain Valley. That same year, Grave's & Ashcroft's addition was platted in Grain Valley, and included a street named for Gregg.

Stony Point's other store was owned by J.H. Cannon. He was born in Virginia in 1840 and served in a Confederate cavalry regiment during the Civil War. After the war, he took up teaching and cattle-raising, and even spent a year as a miner in Colorado. He came to Stony Point as a teacher and stockman in 1871.

Two years later, Cannon opened a grocery and dry goods store there. When the railroad came through the Sni Valley in 1879, he moved to Grain Valley, and purchased over 100 acres of land in the name of his wife, Mary. Much of that land was soon platted into two subdivisions on the south side of the railroad tracks, and would include Cannon Street. In 1881, he was listed as a merchant, postmaster, magistrate, notary public, and grain dealer.

The Civil War

Though the town of Grain Valley was not in existence during the Civil War years, 1861-1865, there was a great deal of fighting in the area. Jackson County saw no less than 68 battles and skirmishes, while over 1,100 actions took place throughout Missouri. That was the third highest total of all the states.

Missouri was an accident of geography. Neither north nor south, the vast majority of its people nevertheless could claim southern parentage. Jackson County was typical: nearly 80 percent of the county's population in 1860 came from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, or North Carolina. Missouri was a slave state. After 1861, when Kansas was admitted to the Union, Missouri was bordered on three sides by free states. And many in those free states, especially in Kansas, were quite willing to come into Missouri to steal slaves and punish those who owned them. Missourians were as equally willing to retaliate. So men were killed on both sides of the state line, and that had been going on for six years before the nation as a whole fell into civil war.

After a season of campaigning in 1861, the Union army had more or less overrun Missouri. From that time on, Confederate incursions were limited mostly to recruiting raids. But though dominated by Union forces, Missourians were not pacified by them. The conquering Yankees —

they came here from at least seven different states and territories — tended to regard all Missourians as the enemy. Prominent Jackson County citizens such as Judge Henry Younger and Dr. Pleasant Lea were gunned down in cold blood. Many others saw their homes and livelihoods destroyed, leaving them destitute. More often than not the deeds were attributed to Kansas Union regiments — redlegs and jayhawkers. To many Jackson Countians, those names were synonymous with murderers and thieves. This was the west, and the west had its share of bad men.

Nor were those evil-doers limited to Kansas. Missouri had its dark knights; some were ostensibly fighting for the Confederacy, others were merely outlaws hiding behind a cause. Legend and lore has so well covered their tracks that it is hard to say who among them were southern patriots and who were low-bred cutthroats. Names such as William Quantrill, Bill Anderson, and Frank and Jesse James, were counted among the “bushwackers” — the Confederate guerrillas who operated mostly along the Missouri-Kansas border, and made rural Jackson County a place to be feared by any Union soldier. These guerrillas would strike at targets of opportunity — mail escorts, supply wagon trains, weakly defended outposts. And then they would seemingly vanish into the countryside. And often as not, that countryside was the very Sni Hills that border today’s Grain Valley.

Beginning in 1862, confrontations between Union scouting patrols and Confederate guerrillas took place nearly every week. One of these skirmishes occurred on April 1, 1862, at the village of Pink Hill.

Upon hearing that some of Quantrill’s Confederate guerrillas were in Pink Hill, Captain Albert Peabody, commanding a company of Union cavalry, started from Independence to pursue them. When nearing a double-log house that stood on elevated ground alongside the Pink Hill Road, Peabody’s men were fired on by “a perfect volley of shots.” Peabody dismounted his men and directed their fire on the windows and doors of the house. The guerrillas inside were apparently unharmed by the tactic and returned fire from loop holes knocked in the plaster between the logs. During the hour and a half engagement, neighboring farmers, all well armed, came to the assistance of the guerrillas.

Finally, Peabody ordered an all-out rush on the house, which, he reported, resulted in the death of six guerrillas, and the wounding of three of his men. According to Peabody’s report, the guerrillas then fled in “all imaginable directions into a timbered, rough, and hilly country where a pursuit was not an easy task, the enemy was but too well acquainted with the road and district.” In retaliation, Peabody set fire to four buildings in Pink Hill. A subsequent pursuit by Union reinforcements carried the fight into the Sni Valley.

A report written by a Union officer in 1863 summarizes the frustration felt by most Yankee commanders in the field who had the misfortune to chase the guerrillas through the area. The report stated: “The guerrillas, as usual, have scattered all over the county in twos, threes, etc. It will be impossible for United States soldiers to drive them out of this county unless the government can afford to send ten soldiers for one guerrilla. The only way to get them out is to destroy all subsistence in rocky and brushy parts of the country, and send off their wives and the children; also the wives and children of sympathizers who are aiding and abetting them.”

The Confederate guerrillas were generally so adept at disappearing into the Sni Hills of eastern Jackson and western Lafayette counties, that the Federal commanders came to believe that there must have been a cave large enough to hide the guerrillas and their mounts somewhere in those hills. That rumor still circulated twenty years after the war.

In August, 1863, the federal commander of all of western Missouri, Thomas Ewing, issued General Order Number 11. That edict called for the forced removal of all civilians in a 2,000-square mile area comprising Jackson, Cass, Bates, and the northern half of Vernon counties. The order exempted only those living in Kansas City proper and those within a mile of a Yankee garrison, which were few and far between. It was bad enough that the order came just before harvest time, but it was made much crueler when Kansas troops were authorized to enforce the order.

Avenging a recent devastating raid by Quantrill on Lawrence, Kansas, these jayhawkers took to their work with a malevolent will. It was not enough to merely evict hundreds of families; the Kansans routinely robbed them, then burned their homes, barns, and crops in the fields. Any man suspected of aiding the guerrillas was murdered on the spot.

Order Number 11 was meant to deprive the guerrillas of comfort and subsistence, but it merely drove more young men to join the ranks of the guerrillas.

Throughout 1864 and until the war's end, the Federals continued to hunt the elusive guerrillas in the hills south, east, and north of today's Grain Valley. Generally, the deadly game of cat and mouse repeated itself over and again in a wide area from Pink Hill, east to the Sni-A-Bar Creek, south to Chapel Hill, then west to Lone Jack, and north again to Pink Hill.

The Chicago & Alton Railroad

The war had left Missouri lagging behind neighboring states when it came to railroad development. Through the 1860s, steamboats on the Mississippi and Missouri had been the principal means of heavy transportation. But river traffic was seasonal, and it did little to help inland towns. A railroad, on the other hand, was an all-season road. And it could go where boats never ventured. Little wonder, then, that established towns were thrilled at the notion of becoming a railroad terminus.

The Kansas City, St. Louis, and Chicago Railroad — a wholly owned subsidiary of the Chicago & Alton — obtained a state charter in April, 1877, to build a line from Mexico, Missouri, to Kansas City by way of Glasgow, Slater, Marshall, Higginsville, and Independence. Crews staked out a preliminary survey in the summer of 1877. During the following winter, engineers and draftsmen pored over the survey notes and mapped the most advantageous route along the proposed 163-mile extension.

The work of grading the line westward from Mexico began in March, 1878. By August, the grading and bridge work had reached Jackson County, where 1,000 laborers cut and filled their

way through hills and valleys and over every ditch and stream. Behind them, track gangs laid an average of 1-1/4 miles of rail per day. The tracks reached Grain Valley in January, 1879.

The villages of Odessa, Bates City, Oak Grove, Grain Valley, and Blue Springs all came into being as land speculators platted townsites at each of the planned station locations along the C&A right-of-way. The C&A had a say in naming most of the new towns along the line, including Grain Valley.

The first regularly scheduled passenger trains through Grain Valley began operating in May, 1879. The westbound trains made connections with other railroads in Kansas City; the eastbound runs split at Roodhouse, Illinois, with some cars going to St. Louis, while others went on to Chicago.

Grain Valley's cream and green-trimmed depot was located about 150 feet east of the Main Street crossing, on the north side of the tracks. As initially constructed, there were three tracks crossing Main Street — the main line and a mile-long passing siding, plus a shorter spur to service local businesses. The railroad built livestock pens along the siding in order to encourage farmers to ship their livestock by rail to the Kansas City or Chicago stockyards. The stock pens were located just east of the depot, on the south side of the tracks. After one year of operation, Grain Valley generated over 260 carloads of outbound freight per year — mostly grain and livestock. There are no figures on the number of passengers getting on and off at Grain Valley, but the number was high enough to warrant the building of a hotel next door to the depot.

Over the years, two head-on train collisions have taken place at Grain Valley. The first, in 1879, was caused by misunderstood train orders. Two passenger trains met on the curve about a mile east of town. The second major wreck took place almost a century later, in 1971, when a westbound freight was accidentally switched onto a siding where another freight was standing. This was at the switch just east of the Main street crossing.

The Chicago & Alton became the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Railroad in 1947. The trackage is today owned and operated by Kansas City Southern.

Sni-A-Bar Farms

Most of the subdivisions south of Eagles Parkway sit on land that once was part of a nationally-renowned show farm known as Sni-A-Bar Farms.

As late as 1904, what would become Sni-A-Bar Farms appears on plat maps as a series of moderate sized tracts of 40 or more acres along the Sni and Blue Branch creeks. The largest single tract was a stock farm known as Ravensmere, located on the east side of Buckner-Tarsney road.

In the late 1890s, William Rockhill Nelson, founder and publisher of the *Kansas City Star*, purchased farmland south of his Kansas City home in order to breed cattle as a hobby. One of his bulls was chosen junior champion of Shorthorns at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair.

Nelson sold the Kansas City farm shortly thereafter, due to the demands of his newspaper business, but during his retirement, he again returned to his love of agriculture. In 1912 he

purchased Ravensmere and several other tracts just south of Grain Valley, totaling 1,750 acres. He would call his estate Sni-A-Bar Farms.

Sni-A-Bar Farms stretched from well west of today's airport to Monkey Mountain Park on the east. The main plot included all the land bordered by today's Eagles Parkway, Minter Road, Ryan Road, and Buckner-Tarsney Road. Nelson took great delight in remodeling the existing frame farmhouse, dating back to the 1890s, that stood back from Buckner-Tarsney and turned it into a low, rambling, one-story building surrounded by a white picket fence. He also built several barns, sheds, and silos on the property.

Though some of the land was set aside for growing crops, Nelson's main interest was in raising livestock, and it was his intent to build up a new herd of registered beef cattle. He had long held the theory that superior animals could be produced by mating pure-bred, choice Shorthorn bulls with the best native cows. So Nelson imported Shorthorn bulls from Scotland and bought the best cows he could secure from the Kansas City stockyards. With careful culling of the inferior offspring, he was able to breed animals within five generations that qualified as registered Shorthorns, and in many cases surpassed the established breed in beef production.

Nelson died in 1915, shortly after registering the herd at Sni-A-Bar. In his will, he arranged for funding of the farm for 30 years, "to promote and instill a better knowledge among [the people of Sni-A-Bar township] concerning stock breeding and raising, especially of cattle."

Initially, overall management of the farm was left to his daughter, Laura Kirkwood. During this time, the universities of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma used the farm for agricultural experiments and breeding studies. After Kirkwood's death in 1926, James Napier ran the farm. Napier and his family had come from Scotland at the behest of Nelson, who had hired Napier as chief herdsman.

Charlie Napier, the son of James, became the chief show herdsman from 1934 to 1942. According to Napier, the head of the Bureau of Animal Testing for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1934 reported that more information was gathered from livestock experimentation at Sni-A-Bar Farms than from all of the government experiment stations combined.

When the farm went up for sale thirty years after Nelson's death, bids came from J.C. Penney, Ellen Donnelly Reed (better known as the clothes designer Nelly Don), and actor Fred McMurray. But the farm was sold in November 1945 to Ralph L. Smith, who already owned two neighboring farms. According to information compiled by local historian Dorothy Greene, Smith bought the farm for \$387,000. Charlie Napier said that the cattle, sold separately, brought in a higher dollar amount than the farm, even with all of the buildings and barns that came with it.

In 1947, Smith sold the farm to Ray Batmann. But the glory days of Sni-A-Bar Farms were over, and the spread began to deteriorate. Over the next several years, Batmann sold off the farm piecemeal.

In 1988, real estate investor and developer Steve Gildehaus and partners purchased the remaining 1,150 acres of the old place. Gildehaus remodeled and enlarged the home. Cattle continued to graze on the property until 1999, when construction began on Sni-A-Bar Farms subdivision. One of the original barns remained standing on the Gildehaus property until it burned in 1992. The last silo still stands; it is located just back from the northeast corner of Eagles Parkway and Buckner-Tarsney Road.

Growth

The early growth of Grain Valley came in spurts. The first plat of what would become Grain Valley was filed on September 17, 1878. Over the next ten years, five more adjacent plats were filed with the county. But for the next 22 years, there was no growth whatsoever. Then, in the years just before World War One, five additional plats were added to the townsite. By this time, Grain Valley extended from Yennie avenue to Broadway, and from Smith street to Cypress. On the whole, the town was merely a collection of homes and a few businesses that catered mostly to the surrounding farmers. On one occasion, it was described rather condescendingly by an Independence newspaper as a “promising little village.”

Federal Highway 40 came through Grain Valley in the early 1920s, and the Chicago & Alton Railroad continued to serve the community with two passenger stops per day, but there was no interstate highway. That would not come for another forty years. The only paved roads in and out of Grain Valley were R.D. Mize, the Sibley road (Buckner-Tarsney), and U.S. 40.

Yet Grain Valley was well-suited to its purpose. Though primarily a farm town, it was a necessary one. There were grocery stores, two banks, a shoe repair shop, gas stations, a post office, a hotel, three churches, a lumberyard, and a school.

The first school, built in 1887, was located near the corner of Capelle and Walnut. Though initially an elementary school, it later expanded to include a two-year high school curriculum. The first high school class — consisting of four students — graduated in 1909. Ten years later, the high school program was extended to four years.

The original school was completely destroyed by a fire in November of 1925. Classes were held in local churches and businesses during the remainder of the year. In 1926 a new, two-story brick building opened on Main Street and served all grade levels until 1953. That same year, with the annexation of some outlying rural school districts, Grain Valley Reorganized District #5 was formed. A new elementary school was built immediately north of the existing brick structure, which was now to be used exclusively as a high school. Additions to the campus site, which included all grade levels, came in 1960, 1964, 1969, and 1974.

Matthews Elementary, located on McQuerry road, opened in 1974 as a primary grade school. It soon expanded to accommodate the growing enrollment.

In 1988, the patrons of the school district approved the purchase of 60 acres on AA Highway for a new school project. In 1991 and again in 1994, patrons approved funding for a high school on the tract, along with the construction of the adjacent Sni-A-Bar Elementary. This move marked the end of the old high school campus at 714 Main. Five years later, another area, located on Ryan Road to the south, was purchased for the construction of a middle school and Stony Point Elementary. In 2005, the district expanded to four elementary schools with the completion of Prairie Branch Elementary, north of I-70 on Dillingham Road.

Grain Valley's three original churches — Christian, Methodist, and Baptist — were built in the 1880s, and two of those structures still stand.

Mid-Continent Public Library added a Grain Valley branch in January, 1972. The original building has since been doubled in size.

The Bank of Grain Valley has the distinction of being the town's oldest existing business. It was founded in 1905 and has been in the same building ever since. It was one of the few banks that did not close during the bank holidays of the Great Depression.

Grain Valley is nationally known as the headquarters of OOIDA, the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association. Founded in 1973, the association's original offices were located in a trailer chained to a light pole at the old Grain Valley truck stop. The company moved to Oak Grove for six years, but in 1979 it came back to Grain Valley and took over the

former truck stop. That building was torn down in 1998 to make way for a modern, three-story headquarters, which was expanded to its current size in 2004.

Grain Valley was incorporated as a fourth class city on April 13, 1954, and continues in that status. Citizens are represented by a mayor and a board of aldermen. The city is divided into three wards, with two aldermen elected from each ward; the mayor is elected at large. The present city hall was built in 2000.

Grain Valley's population growth over the past few decades has been nothing short of remarkable. From a few hundred residents during the immediate post-war years, Grain Valley's population jumped to 1,077 in 1980 — due mostly to the construction of new homes in the Valley Heights and Golfview developments. The population grew to 1,901 in 1990. After that, with the development of homes and duplexes on the former Sni-A-Bar Farms, as well as new growth north of I-70 and on either side of 40 Highway, the town registered a dramatic population increase. The census bureau counted 5,160 residents in 2000, and the most recent estimate places the population at 13,000. From a few square blocks a century ago, Grain Valley now encompasses an area of just under five square miles. The "promising little village" has all grown up.

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