For forty-one years, from 1849 to 1890, Fort Laramie was at the center of continuous friction between westering Anglo-Americans and American Indians. Early Indian battles were fought in the environs of the fort, located at the confluence of the North Platte and Laramie rivers in what is now Wyoming. Two of the major presaging agreements of the 1876 Great Sioux War, including the famous Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, were negotiated and signed there. The great Black Hills gold rush, cause célèbre of the 1876 war, engulfed the post in the nation’s centennial year. As the largest post in Brig. Gen. George Crook’s five-state military Department of the Platte, Fort Laramie not only ushered forth supplies and campaign troops in traditional fashion in 1876, but it also guarded nearby Sioux agencies, policed major roads, advanced communications, secured immigrant travel, and was at the heart of a southern operational front of equal importance to that in the Powder and Yellowstone river country far to the north.

In spite of Fort Laramie’s significance, or that of other frontier posts, scholarship on the dramatic Sioux War of 1876-1877 has tended to focus on the army’s successive spring and summer field actions, on violent confrontations like those at Little Bighorn and Slim Buttes, and on the war’s prominent military and Indian per-

*This essay is a revised version of a paper originally presented on 16 October 1986 at the annual conference of the Western History Association in Billings, Mont.
sonalities. One need only reflect on the ever-growing bibliography on George A. Custer and his last stand, which is a list with thousands of entries, to comprehend the disproportionate research values in this field. As a result, there is a paucity of information on other interrelated and equally important aspects of the war. One ignored research area certainly involves the histories of military posts.

Traditionally, post histories have given (in almost obituary fashion) founding and abandonment dates, overviews of certain salient actions, and obligatory yet passing heed to an otherwise dull routine. Studies of the forts on the Northern Great Plains have invariably mentioned the Indian war occurring in 1876 and 1877, but the narratives have usually digressed to field operations after cursory descriptions of the forts' springboard and supply roles. The several primary histories of Fort Laramie, the “queen” of western military posts, have fit this mold precisely.¹

¹. There are four important general histories of Fort Laramie: LeRoy R. Hafen and Francis M. Young, *Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West, 1834-1890* (Glen...
Yet, a different approach to writing post history could result in new perspectives on both the Indian war and the post itself.

One can measure the pulse and meaning of the Great Sioux War and a supporting post like Fort Laramie in many different ways. At the most elemental level, officers like Maj. Edwin Franklin Townsend, Ninth United States Infantry, or Maj. Andrew Wallace Evans, Third United States Cavalry, who successively commanded the fort in 1876 and 1877, probably paid little heed to any larger societal roles. For them, pushing forward supplies, guarding the telegraph, and campaigning in the field were duties enough for regular army soldiers. Still, they received unusual reminders of the broader scope of the war when equip-
ment lost by Fort Laramie’s Company K, Second United States Cavalry, in the fight with the Cheyenne at the Powder River in Montana on 17 March 1876 was recovered immediately north of the fort on 3 August; or when K Company, which had lost two of its horses in the 16 October Richard Creek fight southwest of the fort, recovered those same horses at the Dull Knife Battlefield in northern Wyoming on 26 November.²

Beyond battlefield surprises like these, the Fort Laramie troops may have equated the war more with garrison, regimental, or army casualties than any other factors. The American army of the 1870s was not so large that the loss of a single soldier at the hands of Indians went unnoticed. During the various movements of the Sioux War, every company in Fort Laramie’s garrison experienced a turn in the field with General Crook. Although casualties in the general’s three expeditions were not as high in number as those borne by the Seventh United States Cavalry at the Little Bighorn, both of Fort Laramie’s Second Cavalry companies and their replacements, five companies of Third Cavalrymen, experienced combat deaths or multiple woundings in the Powder River, Rosebud Creek, and Slim Buttes engagements. Of the various officers killed or wounded in Crook’s campaigns, Capt. Guy V. Henry and 1st Lt. A. H. Von Luettwitz nominally belonged to the Third Cavalry companies garrisoning the post after the summer operation. Campaign grief was felt at every frontier station, of course. At nearby Camp Robinson, Nebraska, for example, 2d Lt. Frederic S. Calhoun, Fourteenth United States Infantry, lost his brother, 1st Lt. James Calhoun, Seventh Cavalry, who died with Custer at the Little Bighorn.³

In addition to the recognition all soldiers merited for actual field and combat service, Fort Laramie’s garrison could boast a number of recognized heroes. Charles A. Bessey, a spirited corporal of Company A, Third Cavalry, commanded an outnumbered detail at Elkhorn Creek, Wyoming, in an aggressive action against Indians in mid-January 1877 and was later awarded a Medal of Honor for his valor. Two other Third Cavalrymen, Joseph Robinson and Michael A. McGann, first sergeants of Com-

panies D and F respectively, also received Medals of Honor for their gallantry under fire at the Battle of the Rosebud.4

For all the attention given the actions in the north, however, Fort Laramie's most significant role in the Great Sioux War was not that of a combat post, a status in the whole of the Department of the Platte most nearly accorded to Fort Fetterman. Instead, Fort Laramie emerged with a three-part combination of duties that was unique to the Department of the Platte and the Great Sioux War. In addition to its regular combat role, the post assumed responsibilities for monitoring traffic into the Black Hills of Dakota Territory and for overseeing activities at a number of Sioux agencies in northwestern Nebraska.

Fort Laramie's protectorate duties during the Black Hills gold rush emerged as her most visible success in 1876. Gold had been discovered in the Hills in 1874, and with its graceful three-span iron bridge over the North Platte River, Fort Laramie quickly became the most popular gateway to the new El Dorado. Over the Cheyenne to Custer City and Deadwood route traveled the first scheduled stage service to the Hills. Paralleling this same road, the first telegraph connected Cheyenne and Custer City by November 1876 and the "Magic City" and Deadwood by the first of December.5 These were significant accomplishments, making settlement of the area possible. "The coming of the Cheyenne and Black Hills Telegraph Line," said Black Hills pioneer Richard B. Hughes, "was welcomed by everyone and this, with the running of regular coaches, made us feel that we were not altogether out of touch with the outside world."6

While the road and telegraph line north of Fort Laramie were built mostly by others, Townsend's and Evans's cavalrymen made those enterprises as secure as possible through routine patrols, repeated dashes after renegade raiders, and the formal es-


5. Cheyenne Daily Leader (Wyo.), 8 Nov., 2 Dec. 1876.

corting of civilian trains. The Fort Laramie subposts at Sage Creek, Wyoming, and Red Canyon, Dakota Territory, also offered invaluable protection to travelers. Moreover, these small doughboy garrisons investigated their own share of emergencies, participated in several clashes with Indians, and with a good measure of sweat helped construct and maintain the new telegraph. The tedium of that chore is evident in the bare statistics recorded about this telegraph line: poles averaged eighteen feet long, with four-inch diameter tops; they were buried three and one-half feet deep; placement averaged twenty poles per mile; fifty percent of the poles were cottonwood.\(^7\)

Important, too, was Fort Laramie's position on the main road to the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies in northwestern Nebraska. The powerful Oglala and Brulé Sioux lived there, along with the Northern Cheyenne and some Arapahoe. Despite the peaceable intents of chiefs Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, many of their people belonged to the northern camps during the war, and the coming and going of these roamers and others was a constant worry to the army. Legislative action in 1877 and 1878 guaranteed a western Dakota home for the Oglala and Brulé, despite interest in moving them to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma or to the Missouri River in central Dakota.\(^8\) Before the agencies were relocated to the lands we know today as the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations, however, Fort Laramie protected the advance of annuities, beef herds, agency supplies, and Indian commissioners and other emissaries as they came north from the Union Pacific Railroad in Cheyenne.

The fort's involvement with these agencies included direct military interaction as well. Until August 1876, Fort Laramie served as headquarters of the army's District of the Black Hills, an administrative unit that embraced parts of western Nebraska and Dakota along with eastern Wyoming. As a result, Fort Laramie commanders exercised direct administrative oversight of Camps Robinson and Sheridan, the two army stations adjacent to the agencies. In August, Col. Ranald S. Mackenzie, Fourth United States Cavalry, removed the district headquarters from the fort to Camp Robinson, but telegraphic connection to Camp Robinson

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7. Fort Laramie Letter Received, 6 Feb. 1880, RG 393, NA.
was not completed until April 1877. Until then, the Fort Laramie station remained the end of the wire, with official dispatches forwarded by mounted courier. Fort Laramie soldiers shared the duty with their Robinson counterparts of protecting the Laramie-Robinson road, safeguarding the mails, and escorting military notables to and from the agencies. Before transferring to the command of Fort Laramie, Major Evans and companies of the Third Cavalry were stationed at Camp Robinson, from where they participated in one of the closing episodes of the Sioux War—the deliberate disarming and unhorsing of the Sioux of the Red Cloud Agency in October 1876. In September 1877, many of these same cavalrymen dashed northeastward from the fort as the Crazy Horse saga boiled to its tragic conclusion with the chief's arrest and death at Camp Robinson.

Whenever the tempo of the Great Sioux War picked up, that could be measured at Fort Laramie in various ways. After dispatching most of her resident infantry and cavalry to General Crook's successive Big Horn, Big Horn and Yellowstone, and Powder River expeditions, for instance, the fort retained only a small corps of soldiers who tended a sometimes overwhelming range of duties. Crook used Fort Laramie as the initial staging area for his third campaign, but the actual jumping-off point for each of these movements was Fort Fetterman. Supplies bound for Fetterman and these campaigns during warm weather months came directly from Cheyenne or Medicine Bow. During cold months, snow blocked the roads, and nearly all shipments traveled via Fort Laramie. Her soldiers protected these trains, dug them out when they were snowbound, and faithfully led them to their destinations.

The transshipment of stores often required the convening of an official board of survey, consisting of three officers, to inspect and inventory goods. No less than forty-nine such boards were assembled in 1876 to attend supply shipments. While some of this material was intended for routine internal use, much more went to outfit General Crook's soldiers during the formation of his ex-
peditions, to resupply such units as the Fifth United States Cavalry when it paused briefly after its month of patrolling the Black Hills road, or, when the Sioux proved more elusive than expected, to reequip the general's decimated forces after the notorious Starvation March and Battle at Slim Buttes in Dakota Territory.  

Although no battles on the scale of the Rosebud were fought in the environs of Fort Laramie, throughout 1876 her resident garrison saw ample field service against Indians. Capt. James Egan's chance encounter north of the fort with eight or nine hundred Sioux in late May 1876 underscored the overwhelming odds of the war. While Egan's Company K, Second Cavalry, did not clash with these Indians who had defected from the agencies, the men of "K" did engage the Indians in October 1876 at Richard Creek, where one cavalryman was killed. Cpl. Charles A. Bessey and a small detachment of Third Cavalrymen under his command had their own sharp clash in January 1877. These troopers had already survived, unscathed, the battles at Rosebud Creek and Slim Buttes, but on the Elkhorn, Bessey and two others were seriously wounded. Capt. William Collier led his Company K, Fourth United States Infantry, against marauding Indians south of their Red Canyon camp on 1 August. First Lt. George Taylor's doughboys of the Twenty-third United States Infantry at the Sage Creek cantonment, fifty miles north of Fort Laramie, had their own combat experience protecting Col. Wesley Merritt's wagon train during the movement and fight at Warbonnet Creek, Nebraska, in mid-July 1876.

Between these significant, reportable incidents were dozens of ten-, twenty-, and thirty-man sorties in the wake of Indian attacks.

11. Fort Laramie Special Orders, 1876, RG 393, NA. Boards of survey were convened by special order. By comparison, Fort Laramie Special Orders for 1871 showed fewer than twenty shipments received from Cheyenne Depot. For accounts of the Fifth Cavalry and the Starvation March, see Charles King, Campaigning with Crook and Stories of Army Life (New York: Harper & Bros., 1890); Paul L. Hedren, First Scalp for Custer: The Skirmish at Warbonnet Creek, Nebraska, July 17, 1876 (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1980); and Jerome A. Greene, Slim Buttes, 1876: An Episode of the Great Sioux War (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

on settlers, stage coaches, or immigrants. During the war, Fort Laramie’s extended garrison (including the troops at its subposts) responded to twenty-one such emergencies. In these cases, Indians were rarely ever seen, but their trails were often quite obvious, and the soldiers occasionally recovered stolen horses and other booty. Indian harassments of this type were much the same elsewhere in Nebraska and Wyoming. At Fort Fetterman, for instance, post commander Capt. Edwin M. Coates’s troops frequently responded to minor emergencies. Some indeed were real,
but many were Indian “scares” that caused Coates to complain to Omaha that “extravagant rumors” regarding the Indians only caused him unnecessary work.\(^{13}\)

Fort Laramie commander Maj. Edwin Townsend met these many military obligations in 1876 with a skeleton garrison. At the peak of the summer, he actually had only two companies at his im-

mediate disposal when the post was otherwise rated a seven- or eight-company installation. From mid-June onward, a detachment (usually from Company K, Second Cavalry) was posted to the Chugwater Valley, southwest of Fort Laramie; other subunits from that company or from Company F, Ninth United States Infantry, were dispatched as escorts, telegraph repairmen, and messengers; and only a tiny reserve was maintained for internal security.

Small as this resident garrison occasionally was, those remaining at Fort Laramie were treated to an "America on parade." Thousands of Hillers streamed through on the Cheyenne to Black Hills road. Many were worthy of mention—noncombatants like Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Jack Langrishe, Spotted Tail, Bill Cody, and Jack Crawford; newsmen and writers like Robert Strahorn, Reuben Davenport, Leander Richardson, and John Finerty; and such military chroniclers as John Bourke, Charles King, and Anson Mills. General Crook, present so many times, was nearly a permanent resident, and Lt. Gen. Philip Sheridan, commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, visited Fort Laramie in 1876 more than he did any other post in the Northern Great Plains war zone. Colonels Merritt and Mackenzie each passed through repeatedly, and the men under these senior commanders represented each branch of the United States Army and nine different regiments, including Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Cavalry; Fourth, Ninth, Fourteenth, and Twenty-third Infantry; and Fourth Artillery.14

If these soldiers fought the Great Sioux War, Fort Laramie women like Cynthia Capron, Mary Anna Egan, and Elizabeth Burt endured it. Reading Burt's melancholy note about how hard it was "to sit and think and think and imagine all kinds of disasters," one can easily picture the apprehensions present in a northern plains garrison while troops were on campaign.15 No Fort Laramie husbands were lost in 1876 at the hands of the Sioux or Cheyenne, but death was an ever-present note, and the loss of Cynthia Capron's two-year-old son to disease and the drowning of 1st Sgt. John McGregor, Company K, Second Cavalry, while chasing deserters were constant reminders of the fragility of life.16

14. Fort Laramie Post Returns, 1876, RG 393, NA.
16. Cynthia Capron, Journal No. 12, pp. 33-38, Thaddeus Hurlbut Capron Collection, American Heritage Center Archives, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyo.; Fort Laramie Medical History, 1876, RG 393, NA.
While Fort Laramie's role in the Great Sioux War can thus be viewed through the eyes of its residents, it must also be viewed from a national perspective. In 1876, Fort Laramie was the largest military post in the Department of the Platte, a component of the Military Division of the Missouri. At that time, the United States Army was organized into three military/geographical divisions: the Atlantic, with headquarters in New York City; the Pacific, with headquarters in San Francisco; and the Missouri, with headquarters in Chicago. The Division of the Missouri embraced the states and territories bordering the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and extended westward to include the Rocky Mountain states. It was further divided into five departments: that of Dakota, of the Platte, of Missouri, of Texas, and of the Gulf. The two departments that figured in the Sioux War of 1876-1877 were the Department of Dakota (commanded by Brig. Gen. Alfred Terry), which included Minnesota, Dakota, and Montana, and the Department of the Platte (commanded by Brig. Gen. George Crook), which consisted of Iowa, Nebraska, Utah, Wyoming, and part of Idaho.  

As commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, Lt. Gen. Philip Sheridan was the officer in charge of the campaign of 1876-1877. He orchestrated the Sioux War almost as a textbook operation. While the United States Army had not yet reduced Indian fighting to written narrative or study, Sheridan organized a tactical campaign markedly similar to those he had waged against the southern plains tribes in the late 1860s and again in the Red River War of 1874-1875. In each instance, independent commands had deployed from different military posts and relentlessly tracked down their foes, Sheridan's troops closing with Indians in numerous pitched battles.  

Of striking difference, however, between these earlier campaigns and the 1876 war was the multiplicity and intensity of the operations. When hoped-for wintertime success against the Sioux eluded Sheridan's field commanders, Brig. Gen. George Crook, Brig. Gen. Alfred Terry, and Col. John Gibbon, these officers waged a protracted summer and fall war, and Col. Nelson A.

Miles continued it into yet another winter. After combat embarrassments at Powder River and Rosebud Creek and the annihilation at the Little Bighorn, all in Montana, the commanders reorganized, pressed again, and ultimately collected major victories at Slim Buttes in Dakota; on the Red Fork of the Powder River in Wyoming; and in several winter engagements along the Yellowstone in Montana.¹⁹

To facilitate permanent removal of what was perceived as a Sioux barrier to Northern Great Plains settlement, Sheridan also organized a second military front in mid-1876 when he posted battalions of Fifth and Fourth Cavalry on the southern extremes of the Black Hills. The Dakota gold fields had attained national importance, and Col. Wesley Merritt's and Col. Ranald Mackenzie's cavalymen offered politically valuable and reassuring military presence on the important southern routes to the Hills. These soldiers, who were under the administrative oversight of the officers at Fort Laramie until August 1876, watched over the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies of Nebraska; they interfered with the traffic of Indian reinforcements to the northern roamers, posting a combat victory at Warbonnet Creek, Nebraska, in the process; and they effected the dismountings, disarms, and surrenders at these agencies in the fall and winter of 1876-1877.

This overall campaign had not been waged without enormous expense. In December 1877, the United States Senate, in fact, asked the commander of the army, Gen. William T. Sherman, for information related to the costs of the Sioux War, measured in both cash expense and casualties among rank and file. These figures were not immediately available, but Sherman quickly obtained pertinent data from his supply departments, the adjutant-general, and Generals Terry and Crook. Terry estimated the total costs of the Sioux War in his Department of Dakota at $992,808. Crook estimated the Department of the Platte's costs at $1,319,720. Total war-related costs equaled $2,312,531, of which $1,894,311 were charges against the Quartermaster's Department, $23,798 were charges to the Subsistence Department, and $70,466 were expenses of the Ordnance Department.²⁰

Edward D. Townsend, adjutant-general of the army, provided a summary of casualties. By his tally, 16 commissioned officers

¹⁹. See Utley, Frontier Regulars, pp. 236-95.
were killed in the Sioux War and 2 were wounded, while 267 enlisted men were killed and 123 wounded. Aggregate casualties among the regular forces totaled 408. Townsend did not provide data on Indian casualties, and even today estimates are woefully lacking. Curiously, none of the casualty figures provided in the official tally included war-related statistics at Fort Laramie or any other military post. With one Second Cavalry trooper killed by Indians at Richard Creek in October 1876 and the wounding of three Third Cavalrymen on nearby Elkhorn Creek in January 1877 as specific examples from Fort Laramie, casualty totals would surely have increased if detailed polling had been done of the military posts in the northern plains war zone.

The Sioux War of 1876-1877 had a profound impact on the national deployment of the United States Army. Line strength of the army was fixed at five regiments of artillery, ten regiments of cavalry, and twenty-five regiments of infantry, totaling just over fifteen hundred officers and twenty-four thousand enlisted men in four hundred forty scattered companies. In 1875, General Terry controlled in his Department of Dakota 63 companies of cavalry and infantry totaling 3,647 officers and men. Crook's Department of the Platte was of comparable size: 60 companies of cavalry and infantry aggregating 3,537 officers and men. At the height of the war in 1876, deployment of the nation's four hundred forty army companies had shifted dramatically. Terry, much bolstered with the transfer of all or parts of several infantry regiments, commanded 92 companies totaling 4,686 men. Increases in Crook's department came as a result of the transfer of the entire Fifth Cavalry and parts of the Fourth Cavalry and Fourth Artillery, these movements bringing his authorized totals to 82 companies and 4,391 men.\textsuperscript{22} In effect, two-fifths of the entire United States Army was deployed on the strife-torn northern plains. Troop rotations, particularly evident in the Department of the Platte, brought nearly every one of Crook's companies into the fray.\textsuperscript{23} While all soldiers could not campaign personally with their department chief, time spent in supply or protectorate duty at Medicine Bow Station, Wyoming, or Red Canyon, Dakota Territory, or Camp Sheridan, Nebraska, was just as war-related as service at Powder River or on the famous Starvation March in Dakota Territory.

By the final quarter of 1877, statistics for Crook's Department of the Platte clearly reflected a return to normal. In that fiscal year, his troops garrisoned one additional military post, Cantonment Reno, Wyoming (soon to be called Fort McKinney); yet, he met his obligations with but 54 companies comprising 3,026 officers and men. Terry, meanwhile, reported sizeable increases in troop strength—104 companies and 5,100 men—but his figures require interpretation. The Department of Dakota boasted two new military posts, known in mid-1877 as Bighorn Barracks and Tongue River Barracks (later Fort Custer and Fort Keogh, respectively) and had abandoned one in Minnesota. Terry's department now bore the brunt of the Nez Perce flight from Oregon and

\textsuperscript{22} Report of the Secretary of War (1875), p. 56, and (1876), pp. 42-45, 48-49.
\textsuperscript{23} Department of the Platte General Orders, 1876, RG 393, NA.
Idaho toward Canada, however, and dozens of its companies were involved in that emergency.24

General Sherman, commander of the army, trumpeted the establishment of new military posts in the midst of unceded Indian land as a leading success of the Sioux War. He had worked toward this action at least as early as 1874 when he sent Custer and the Seventh Cavalry into the Black Hills to find a location for a new military post in the heart of Sioux country. In his annual report for 1875, Sheridan had begged for authority to construct posts at the mouths of the Bighorn and Tongue rivers in Montana as essential to the “settlement of the Sioux Indian question.”25 In recounting the military disasters of 1876, Sheridan again labored the issue. “This advice, if adopted,” he wrote, “would have given us abundant supplies at convenient points, to operate in the very heart of the country from whence all our troubles came.”26 It took the debacle at the Little Bighorn for Congress to authorize the desired expenditures, and by mid-1877, three permanent posts—Custer and Keogh in southeastern Montana and McKinney near present-day Buffalo, Wyoming—were well under construction. In the next several years, the Division of the Missouri acquired Fort Meade in the northern Black Hills, Fort Assiniboine on the Milk River in northern Montana, Fort Maginnis in the Judith Basin of central Montana, and Fort Niobrara in northern Nebraska. Each joined Fort Laramie in watching over various bands of the Sioux and isolating Sitting Bull’s followers in Canada.27

In any study of the larger framework of the Great Sioux War, the story of a single military post diminishes from center stage to become that of an overshadowed participant. In Sherman’s or Sheridan’s view, the successful advance of Anglo-American interests in the Black Hills and on the Northern Great Plains were at the center of the war effort and not the famous personalities, the great battles, the roads, agencies, or forts. Yet, if viewed in juxtaposition, each single component’s participation in such a climactic

cultural saga might easily be of enough importance to rank it highly in the overall accomplishments of the war. Such is the case with Fort Laramie, Wyoming.

Fort Laramie, of course, already had a long and illustrious history. Its role in the American fur trade and the great overland migrations, as an Indian treaty ground and annuity distribution point, as a station for the pony express and the first transcontinental telegraph, and as a military base following the Grattan debacle of 1854, during the uprisings of the Civil War, and through the terrible Bozeman trail war had already filled its history with nationally significant episodes. In no earlier period, however, was there such an aggregation of duties as Fort Laramie handled in the nation’s centennial year. Its service as the gateway to the Black Hills gold fields alone was a distinguished accomplishment. Yet, post commanders Townsend and Evans advanced communications and transportation. They participated in direct interaction with two of the most important agencies in the whole of the Sioux country. And they shared fully in every facet of General Crook’s varied field operations originating in the Department of the Platte. In this multifaceted story lies the prime significance of the venerable army post nestled in a bend of the Laramie River. For Fort Laramie, 1876 was a year like no other.
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