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Christmases Long Ago

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IS CHRISTMAS COMING EARLY

THIS YEAR? The media has been talking it up since late September and on October 3, I saw that Neiman's famous Christmas catalogue was already out. Santa was sighted soon after Halloween, so thinking the blessed date may have changed, I double checked my calendar and was relieved to find Christmas is still scheduled for December 25th.

All this hustle and bustle, Christmas lights and music set me to wondering how different Christmas was in the early 1900s. To get the answer, I went to the experts, two friends who are old enough to remember those days—one hundred-year-young Ruth Borchardt and Cletus Bristol who celebrated his 104th birthday last July. I asked each of them to share some of their memories and they both agreed that Christmases were very different in the early days. But, they were quick to point out that the world, too, was different then. At the time they were born, average life expectancy in the United States was only 47 years. The average wage in this country was 22 cents per hour. Only 14 percent of U.S. homes had a bathtub and only 8 percent had a telephone.

With that setting in mind, come with me as we travel back in time to relive



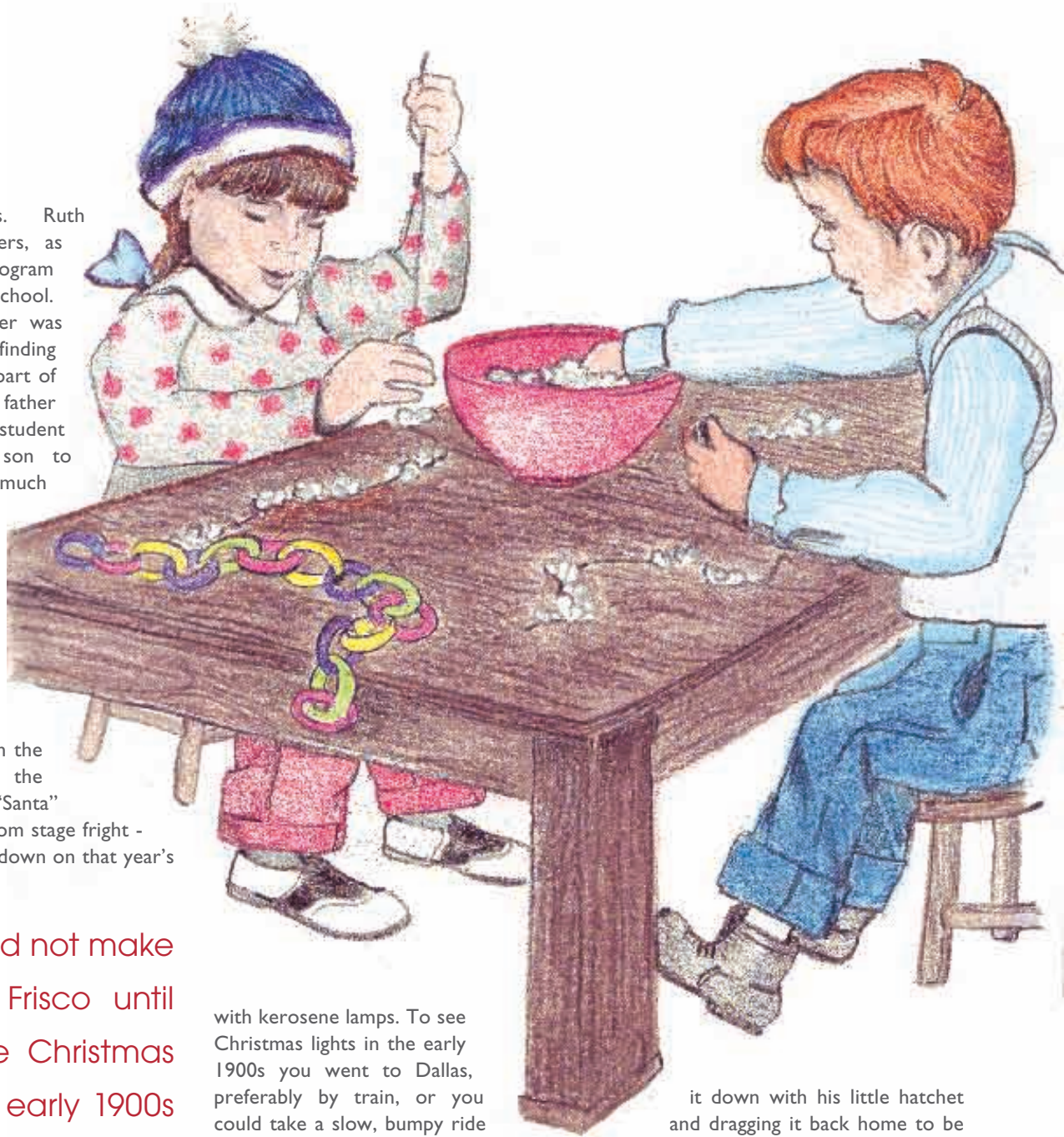
past Christmases with Ruth, Cletus and some of our other old timers.

Looking in on Frisco some eighty to one hundred years ago we see a village of 300 people, a simple place with dirt streets and hard-working, honest people. We find that preparation for Christmas did not begin until long after the last Thanksgiving leftovers had been eaten. Without radio or television, the Christmas season brought little of the hype and glitz we see today. However, in the hearts of the people, especially the children, the spirit of Christmas was very much alive with parties and programs at schools and churches. At school, students usually drew names so they had to buy only one gift for a classmate. Then came the suspense and the whispered question, "Whose name did you get?"

Held on the last day of school before the holidays, the party was a fun time with everyone wanting to see what their friends' presents were. After the party, kids went home praying for snow, always hoping for – but seldom getting – a white Christmas.

Programs at school and church often

brought surprises. Ruth Borchardt remembers, as a child, being in a program in a small country school. It seems the teacher was having trouble finding anyone to play the part of Santa Claus, so the father of a sixteen-year-old student “volunteered” his son to play the part – very much against the boy’s will. When the big night came, all the parents and families crowded into the school’s one room to watch their little darlings perform, and right in the middle of his part the sixteen-year-old “Santa” fainted - probably from stage fright - bringing the curtain down on that year’s Christmas program.



Electricity did not make its way to Frisco until 1913. To see Christmas lights in the early 1900s you went to Dallas, preferably by train, or you could take a slow, bumpy ride in a buggy wagon.

Another thing we notice in early-day Frisco is that there are no Christmas lights – none in the homes or in the downtown businesses. Why? Electricity did not make its way to Frisco until 1913. Until that time businesses had gaslights and most homes were lighted

with kerosene lamps. To see Christmas lights in the early 1900s you went to Dallas, preferably by train, or you could take a slow, bumpy ride in a buggy or wagon. In 1906 there were only 144 miles of paved roads in all of the United States: none in and around Frisco. Regardless of how you got to Dallas, you needed to spend the night so you could gaze after dark at the lighted and beautifully decorated windows of department stores such as Sanger Brothers, E. M. Kahn and Titcher-Goettinger’s.

Quite different from today, you would find no bought Christmas trees in early 1900 Frisco. If your home had one you probably cut it yourself. Cletus Bristol remembers going to a Denton County pasture where small cedar trees grew, picking out just the right one, cutting

it down with his little hatchet and dragging it back home to be decorated. Ruth Borchardt who spent some of her childhood in west Texas tells of decorating a mesquite bush “with not a leaf on it” for her family’s tree. As a child in the early 1920s, I remember my mother cutting a two-foot long limb from a cedar tree and planting it firmly in a gallon syrup can full of wet sand for our tree. She made it look “Christmasy” by covering the can with green paper.

Decorations? All old timers can tell tales of how they made their own tree decorations. Some wadded up bits of colored paper and stuck them on the branches. Others made ropes of popcorn, using a needle and thread to string the fluffy white kernels. The ropes



were then draped carefully on and around the tree's limbs. There were also handmade paper chains. Making them was an annual pre-Christmas event at school. Using our little, round-pointed school scissors (remember them?) we cut strips of paper, colored them with crayons and pasted the ends together to form a colored chain. They, like the popcorn ropes, were draped around otherwise bare trees, making them, in our eyes, look pretty fancy.

THE PREPARATIONS

Christmas shopping was certainly different in those early days. In rural areas like Frisco, most shopping was done from the Sears-Roebuck catalogue. The main catalogue, a large one that came to us early in the year, had few items of interest to me, but we children could hardly wait to receive the special Christmas catalogue that hit our mailboxes in November. It had pictures of all the "good stuff" like toys, so kids of that day practically memorized that little "wish book" as they compiled their optimistically long want list. Then came the job of writing the annual letter to Santa telling him not only what we wanted for Christmas but also what good boys and girls we had been. Giving

the letter to our parents, we trusted them to mail it to Santa at the North Pole while we settled back to wait - not very patiently - to see what part of our wish list would actually show up on Christmas morning.

Six of us kids slept on what they called a pallet on the kitchen floor - three across the head and three at the foot - with nothing but a quilt between us and that hard wooden floor.

Glancing up and down early-day Frisco's Main Street as the big day nears we see none of the last minute frenzy that abounds today. But, inside the homes it's a different story. There we find a buzz

of activity - preparing for company, baking, making candy and wondering if the presents ordered from the Sears catalogue will be delivered in time. The mail sometimes brought disappointing news that, "The item you ordered is no longer in stock, so we have substituted the enclosed item." The replacement item was often unacceptable, but what could you do at that late date?

Mrs. Borchardt tells of the time she helped her mother, Mattie McCormick, make stick candy about a week before Christmas. To make sure the candy was not eaten before its time, Mrs. McCormick locked it in the family's wardrobe. But Ruth's older brother, Lynn, with a key of his own, regularly helped himself to the candy so that little of it was left by Christmas Day.

Like today, families gathered to celebrate Christmas together, exchanging gifts and enjoying a sumptuous Christmas dinner. Large families often "drew names" well in advance of the holiday, so they came, perhaps in the family wagon, bearing gifts and food, arriving in time for a big gift exchange on Christmas Eve. One of my friends recalls the time when thirty-two people, aunts, uncles and cousins, crowded into her family's little four room house the day before

Christmas. She said, “Six of us kids slept on what they called a “pallet” on the kitchen floor – three across the head and three at the foot – with nothing but a quilt between us and that hard wooden floor. We loved having our cousins there to visit, so that made the floor feel a little softer.”

Thinking back to the times I expectantly hung my Christmas stocking, I wondered where that tradition came from and what children of other countries did to prepare for Santa’s visit. A brief search revealed that in North America the traditional Christmas stocking dates back to the 1800s. In Quebec, children hung their stockings at the end of their bed. In Europe, shoes rather than stockings are used to entice Santa. French children place their shoes by the fireplace, expecting them to be filled with gifts – a tradition dating back to the times when peasants wore wooden shoes. In Holland, however, youngsters fill their shoes with hay and a carrot - food for St. Nicholas’ horse. (I guess they don’t know he uses reindeer.) Then, in Puerto Rico, children put greens and flowers in small boxes and place them under their beds for camels of the three kings.

They hung their stockings – “the bigger the better” - expecting them to be filled with gifts. We usually left some milk and cookies for Santa to snack on, and he always ate it.

Mrs. Borchardt and Mr. Bristol told of their Christmas traditions. Both said they hung their stockings – “the bigger the better” – expecting them to be filled with gifts. Mr. Bristol said, “We hung our stockings on the fireplace mantle



and cleared the hearth so Santa could make a safe landing when he came down the chimney.” I asked if Santa had his reindeer way back then, and Mr. Bristol replied, “Oh, yes, but my parents made us kids go to bed early, so I never did actually see them.” He added, “We usually left some milk and cookies for Santa to snack on, and he always ate it.”

GRATEFUL FOR GIFTS

When asked what he usually got for Christmas, Mr. Bristol said, “I never did get a whole lot – just an apple, some nuts and maybe a piece or two of hard candy in my stocking. But, one year I got a half dozen buffalo nickels and a little bronze

elephant bank. I still have the bank. It’s up there on the mantle. I was instructed to put the nickels in the bank to start my savings, so I very carefully put each coin through the slot. A few days after Christmas I spent hours trying to fish my savings out of the bank with a nail file. I finally got them all out – guess I wasn’t much into saving at that age.”

Mr. Bristol’s bank story reminds me of one of my own. When I was seven, Santa brought me a bank shaped like a cash register. It took nickels, dimes and quarters, but to my dismay it could not be opened until it was full. When the little cash register was finally filled I put the money, almost \$20.00, in Frisco’s



in my chair.” She continued, “One year I got this beautifully dressed doll, and I was so proud, but an older cousin grabbed it, took its clothes off and danced the doll around, keeping it away from me until I cried.” She paused and said, “When I was older I usually got clothes as my ‘overflow gift.’”

I asked the two old timers if they ever got fireworks for Christmas. Mrs. Borchardt said her brothers sometimes got a box of sparklers and maybe a package of tiny firecrackers. Mr. Bristol said, “Yes, we got some firecrackers and an occasional Roman candle. In fact, I saw more fireworks shot at Christmas than I did on the fourth of July.”

I believed strongly in Santa. My older brother once told me confidentially that Santa Claus wasn’t real. I didn’t believe him so I told him he was lying and he was never able to change my mind.

Tales of my friends’ Christmas stockings triggered memories of one of my early visits from Santa. When I was six years old, old St. Nick slipped a surprise gift into the toe of my stocking. After emptying all the fruit, nuts and sparklers, I found a “dollar” pocket watch – an Ingersoll, which in those days actually sold for one dollar and came with a one-year warranty. I was so proud of my watch that I volunteered the time of day to everyone I saw. You can imagine my disappointment the following Christmas Day when my Ingersoll quit, never to run again. How’s that for timing a warranty?

THE BIG DAY

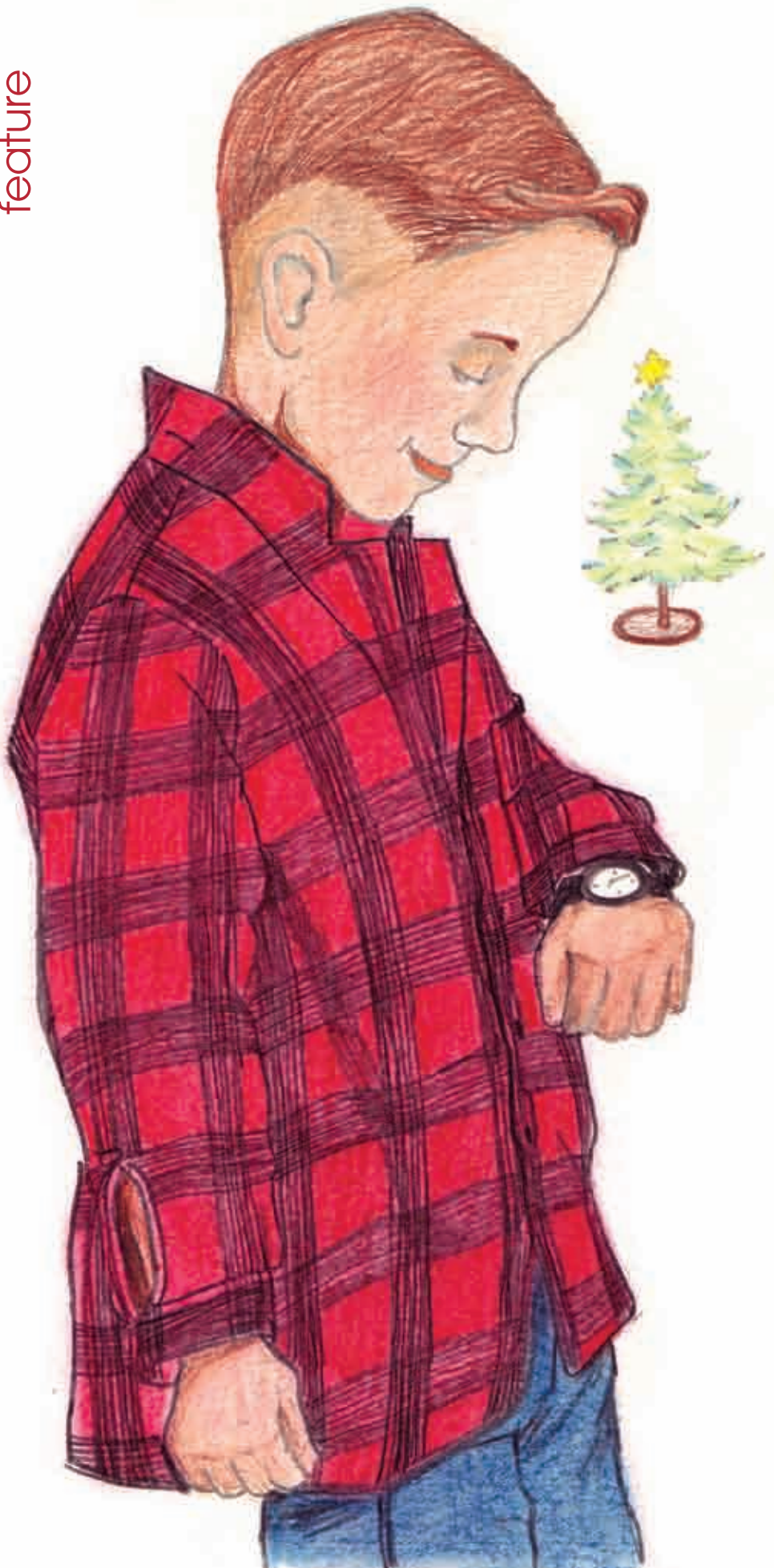
Christmas morning, like today, was an exciting time. The kids were up early – sometimes much earlier than the parents would like – peering around the corner trying to catch Santa in the act. When

Guaranty State Bank - a bad decision on my part, because a few months later the bank failed, taking my life’s savings with it. I vowed right then and there that if I ever got any more money I was going to spend it!

Mrs. Borchardt told of her early day memories about Santa, saying, “I believed strongly in Santa. My older brother once told me confidentially that Santa Claus wasn’t real, but was our parents. I didn’t

believe him, so I told him he was lying, and he was never able to change my mind.”

Mrs. Borchardt and her siblings hung their stockings over the backs of dining room chairs so the chair seat could catch the “overflow.” Asked if there was ever an overflow, she said, “Yes, sometimes. We usually got some fruit and nuts, a rare treat, in our stocking, and I would usually find my main gift, a doll, sitting



the parents finally gave the signal for all to come in, there was a flurry of activity as everyone scurried around, found their gifts, examined them and tried to show them to their brothers, sisters and parents. Santa's presents were never wrapped, but gifts from aunts and uncles were, so wrapping paper flew and lay in heaps as the gifts were opened. When all the presents were opened, children could hardly wait to go out and compare gifts with their friends.

The old oak dining table groaned under the load, and when the call was given to "Come to dinner!" everyone dropped what they were doing and crowded around the table.

But, for the grown ups, the best was yet to come – the big Christmas dinner. Relatives brought food to add to what was being prepared on the big wood burning "cook stove." Pies and cakes, which had been baked days in advance, were added to the mountains of hot food being prepared just in time for the meal. The old oak dining table groaned under the load, and when the call was given to, "Come to dinner!" everyone dropped what they were doing and crowded around the table. Grandpa called for quiet, and all knew to stop their chatter and bow their heads. While he "asked the blessing," children secretly hoped it would be a short prayer this year, because their mouths were watering as they sneaked a peek at the food. When "amen" was finally said, the noise level came back up as food was passed and plates were filled. Women often waited, helping to get the food passed, then found a place at a cabinet or a side table to eat their meal while staying ready to keep order at the main table.

After all had eaten their fill, and with

everyone swearing they couldn't eat another bite, the pies and cakes were brought out. Somehow their vows of "no more room" fell away as they always made room for dessert. It was just too good to pass up – maybe even good enough for "seconds."

So went Christmas dinner. Then, without a word, the men and children drifted away, leaving the women to clean up the dining room and kitchen. Children went back to their toys, and men gathered in the parlor to swap tales, talk farming or perhaps catch a little nap.

As I concluded my interviews with Mrs. Borchartd and Mr. Bristol, they reminded me again that early Christmases saw no big piles of gifts around the tree like we have today. "We were lucky to get one gift each, other than what was in our stocking."

That brought to mind a true story I heard not long ago about a Christian mother and father who were trying to teach their young children, a boy and girl, the true meaning of Christmas. The parents had decided to cut the number of gifts per child to the Biblically traditional number of three; the same number Baby Jesus received. They told the Bible story about the "Three wise men who came bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the young Christ Child," and explained that this year they too would get only three gifts. The children took the news pretty well, but a few days after Christmas someone asked the boy if he and his sister got lots of gifts. The young man thought a minute and said, "No, we just got three gifts each. We got gyped just like Jesus did!"

Yes, Christmases were quite different in the early days – much less commercial but perhaps a whole lot more Biblical, but still plenty of fun.

Frisco native Bob Warren is a humorist, historian and former Frisco mayor.



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