



# Historical Society News

FEBRUARY 2009

## Portrait of a Country Dairy—Conover's Guernsey Dairy, Inc., Hightstown, New Jersey

by Leo W. Fenity (July, 1993)

In 1972, after 47 years of serving Mercer County, parts of North Jersey, and several towns along the Jersey shore with milk and other dairy products, a local dairy (with about 50 employees and a purebred herd of more than 400 Guernsey cows) went out of business. What follows is an historical account of that dairy – The Conover's Guernsey Dairy, Inc.

**ORIGIN OF THE NAME:** The Conover name comes from the Dutch name of VanCouwenhoven – farmers who located in Monmouth County in the 1600's.

### CONOVER'S GUERNSEY DAIRY, INC.

Clifford Louis Conover, born in 1885, grew up on a farm in Perrineville, NJ, where his family grew sweet potatoes and peaches. As a young man, Clifford would take a wagon pulled by horses to the Farmer's Market in Trenton, NJ to sell the family's produce.

In 1915, at the age of 31, Clifford purchased a 90 acre farm on Old York Road in Hightstown, NJ, from James Laird. Eventually the farm grew to about 500 acres through the purchasing of adjoining farms. Initially, his cash crop was potatoes. In 1925, after finding that growing potatoes was no longer profitable, he purchased 16 purebred Guernsey cows from Mr. Howard Shivers of Waln's Mills, near Allentown, NJ. The new milking herd also provided fresh milk for the family's new baby girl, Anna May. Instead of growing potatoes, Mr. Conover began to grow corn and hay for his cows.

At the beginning, the dairy started with two local customers: Tracy Dawes, D.D.S. and George Franklin, MD. The two doctors lived on opposite corners of South Street and South Main Street in Hightstown. Those two customers grew rapidly to many customers that used all of the milk produced by the growing herd. At that time, deliveries of milk were made early each morning, seven days a week via a Model T Ford panel truck.

Mrs. Conover's wife, Anna Hancock, having a bookkeeping background, was the first bookkeeper for the growing business. There were a total of six children: three sons—Tunis, Herbert, and Clifford, and three daughters—Evelyn, Esther, and Anna May. The four oldest children put in thirteen hour days during the school year. A typical day would be:

<u>Time</u>	<u>Activity</u>
5 a.m. to 6 a.m.	Milking
6 a.m. to 7 a.m.	Processing
7 a.m. to 8 a.m.	Delivery

Continued on page 2



### CALENDAR OF EVENTS

#### FEBRUARY

- 22 Open House - Conover Dairy Program, 2:00 to 4:00 p.m.

#### MARCH

- 2 Business Meeting, 7:30 p.m., Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center  
29 Elsie the Cow Program, 2:00 p.m.

#### APRIL

- 6 Business Meeting, 7:30 p.m., Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center  
26 Chris Gould - Program on Hightstown Currency, 2:00 p.m.

#### MAY

- 4 Business Meeting, 7:30 p.m., Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center

# Conover's Guernsey Dairy, Inc. , continued from page 1

9 a.m. to 3 p.m.	School
4 p.m. to 5 p.m.	Milking
5 p.m. to 6 p.m.	Processing

Tunis and Herbert, along with their father, did the milking, while Evelyn and Esther would alternate between helping their mother prepare the family meals and processing, i.e., work done in the "milk house" that included washing the milk bottles on a stationary electric brush and then filling the clean bottles with a large bowl of milk that was moved from bottle to bottle. In the early years, all milking was done by hand. It wasn't until the late 1920's that milking machines came into use. While all of the children helped with the family business as well as attending school, only the three sons joined the business upon completion of school.

During the early years, the fresh milk was put into 40 quart cans and hand carried to the milk house where the warm milk was poured into a "surface cooler". This was a wooden tank with pipes inside that was filled with purchased ice. Water was pumped through the pipes and thus cooled, and in turn cooled the milk as it ran across the cool pipes. The raw milk was then bottled in glass milk bottles. Laws requiring pasteurization of raw milk came in around 1934. The "surface cooler" was then replaced with a "cabinet cooler" (a refrigerated tank that cooled the milk as it was pumped thru prior to being pasteurized).

During the 1920's, local residents rarely locked their homes. It was not uncommon for a note to be left for the milkman with a request that the milk be placed inside of the customer's ice-box inside the house. Porch boxes did not appear until the 1930's. Until that time, milk would be left unprotected from the weather on the porch. In those days, the customers watched for the daily deliveries.

In 1931, a disastrous fire, caused by an electrical problem, destroyed the cow barns and the milk house. Fortunately, the milking herd escaped unharmed. The problem was how to milk the cows and then cool and bottle the milk. Herbert, who was a day student at Rutgers University, was requested to stay home to assist with the dilemma. Luckily, there was a stock farm on Monmouth Street in Hightstown, owned by Joe Mongiello, that was not in use. The dairy herd was moved there and for the next few days; the raw milk was bottled at the plant of a local competitor, Decker's Dairy. Within a week, a temporary milk house was set up at the main site and for the next two years, the milk was transported back for processing. The dairy was able to provide milk to all of their regular customers without any interruption—a great accomplishment. Meanwhile, new barns and a state-of-the-art bottling plant were built to replace the lost buildings.

Mr. Conover liked animals. He would often take the time to pet and talk to the dairy's calves, cows, and bulls. In February of 1940, one of the farm's mature bulls got out of his pen. When Mr. Conover attempted to herd him back to where he belonged, the bull attacked him—throwing him up in the air and then stood over him without further aggression. The thinking at the time was that the bull finally recognized him and thus backed off. Mr. Conover was badly shaken up and had two broken wrists; however, it was a miracle that he wasn't fatally injured. Once Mr. Conover got to safety, the dairy's herdsman was able to get the bull back to where he belonged.

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## HIGHTSTOWN EAST WINDSOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Hightstown, New Jersey  
founded 1971

**To educate, while preserving for  
future generations, our people  
and our community's history.**

*Editor, Shirley Olsen*

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## Conover's Guernsey Dairy, Inc. ,continued from page 2

In the 1940's the price of a delivered quart of milk from Conover's Dairy was:

Type	Butterfat Content	Price
Guernsey	5%	.16
Other	4%	.14

After graduating from Hightstown High School, Mr. Conover's youngest son, Clifford H., attended the Delaware College of Science and Agriculture (Doylestown, Pa.) for two years 1949-1950. Afterwards, he joined the family in the running of the business.

In 1950, a new and more efficient bottling plant was built to process the 16,000 quarts of milk required daily for the 12 retail and 4 wholesale routes. The following items were available for home delivery: Guernsey milk, Walker-Gordon specialty milks, homogenized milk, regular pasteurized milk, skim milk, chocolate milk, buttermilk, heavy cream, light cream, sour cream, half & half, cottage cheese, butter, eggnog (in season), eggs, grape drink, orange drink, and orange juice. Each spring, during the eight-day Passover celebration, there were also kosher dairy products available for customers of the Jewish faith. In the early years, Mr. Conover would travel to Hightstown around 4 a.m. to pick up Mr. Konov (a lay person with knowledge of kosher laws) and bring him back to the dairy where he observed every step for the processing of the dairy products. Around 1934, when the new law required that milk be pasteurized, someone from the dairy would travel to Lakewood to pick up a Rabbi to supervise the koshering procedures at the dairy.

During this era, some of the cows were milked three times a day to establish butterfat and pounds (volume) data for production records. It should be noted that several of the cows in the herd did establish records for Guernsey cows.

Later, in the 1950's, another spectacular fire, also caused by an electrical problem, destroyed a large stand-alone hay barn.

In October of 1958, Mr. Conover died of cancer at the age of 72. Mrs. Conover took over the main responsibilities of managing the business with the aid of the three sons. At the personal request of Mrs. Conover, Herbert Junior, came into the business then as the retail route manager. In the late 1950's, the business was incorporated. Even so, the business continued to be family-owned and operated.

Even though the dairy's milking herd grew to over 160 cows, there was almost always a need for purchased milk to cover customer requirements. Up until 1960, a Conover-owned truck would go to surrounding dairy farmers that sold milk and pick up the daily milk in 40 quart metal cans, return to the dairy, empty the cans, and then return them for use the next day. After 1960, a leased tank truck would pick up the bulk milk and take it to the dairy for processing.

If there was a surplus of milk, it would be sold either to Pet Milk to be made into evaporated milk; to Farm-land, a dairy in North Jersey; or to Maggio Cheese Company in Philadelphia, Pa., to be made into processed cheese. Royalties, based on milk volume, were paid annually to the American Guernsey Cattle Club for their authorization to the dairy to advertise "Golden Guernsey Milk and Dairy Products" and to use the Golden Guernsey trademark in ads.

The first milk bottles carried the name "C.L. Conover". They were produced in 1925 by the Thatcher Manufacturing Company. The bottles were clear glass with raised lettering (embossed). In the 1930's the name was changed to "Hightstown Guernsey

Dairy". During the 1940's the name was again changed to "Conover's Hightstown Guernsey Dairy". After World War II, Thatcher began to go out of the milk bottle business. It was about that time that the dairy changed vendors and began to use painted labeling (pyro-glaze) on bottles purchased from the Owens-Illinois Company. For about 10 years, the quart milk bottles, now square versus the former round, continued to carry the name "Conover's Hightstown Guernsey Dairy" in red pyro-glaze. After the business was incorporated in the late 1950's, the name on the bottle changed again to "Conover's Guernsey Dairy".

In later years, the dairy did use some waxed paper cartons ("Pure-Pak produced by International Paper") for about one-third of the milk produced. Pints and one-half gallon cartons were sold to stores, while one-half pint cartons were used for the local school lunch programs. The glass milk bottles continued to be used for home deliveries right up until he dairy ceased operations. During this period of time, the 1960's, the sales of all milk broke down to approximately 48% whole milk and 52% low fat milk. It was during this heyday of the operation that busloads of school children would visit the dairy. The main attraction to the youngsters was the calves.

In the late 1960's there was a dramatic switch from retail door-to-door delivery of milk in glass bottles to wholesale supermarket delivery in waxed paper cartons. No longer able to compete, many small dairies went out of business in the early 1970's. Thus it was that Conover's Dairy closed for business on December 28, 1972. The main reasons for shutting down the operation were:

1. With the industrial giants coming into the area, it became increas-

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## Conover's Guernsey Dairy, Inc. , continued from page 3

ingly difficult to hire qualified help. It was not unusual for family members to be wakened at 4 a.m. to replace "no-shows" in the bottling plant. The dairy provided housing (21 local homes were owned by the corporation) for many of the employees as an incentive to come to work at the dairy farm.

2. Profits were dropping due to the dairy's inability to compete with the supermarkets.

3. The value of the land (via land speculators) reached a point where it was more valuable for housing than for farming.

In the late 1972, all of the land, about 500 acres, and building were sold to land speculators. The old homestead was purchased back by the youngest son, Clifford H., and currently serves as base for his antique and clock business, "The TimeKeepers".

### CLIFFORD L. CONOVER'S PHILOSOPHY

"When going into a business, sell something everyone needs and try to have it better than anyone else."

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Herbert W. Conover, Sr., son of the dairy's founder, provided most of the information for this write up. Without his assistance, this story would not be nearly as complete or accurate. Mr. Conover, who retired as a vice president of Conover's Dairy in 1973, passed away June 14, 1993.

## Behind the Scenes

This editor thought members of the Society might be interested in knowing some of the maintenance projects and improvements completed at the Society headquarters for the last couple of years. We appreciate the continued donation of funds from its members to help sustain and maintain this important and impressive Ely House and Sara Hutchinson West Educational Center. What follows is an overview of recent property repairs that ensure its distinction and pride of the community. We especially thank Warren Olsen, who is in charge of property and buildings.

Exteriors on both the Ely House and freight station were painted in 2008.

Roof, chimney, and gutter repairs to Ely House and freight station.

Front parlor of Ely House painted from water stain from a gutter leak.

Tenant's quarters also painted from water stain from chimney leak.

Section of roof blew off freight station and this was repaired.

A new porch was constructed off the kitchen- 2007

Smoke alarms tested and passed by Borough of Hightstown.

Piano was tuned.

Property was cleaned by a professional cleaning company.

Property is continually landscaped as far as trimming shrubs and maintaining yard.

Because of the moth infestation in the upstairs bedroom, we had to discard the rug up there. If anyone has an area rug that might be suitable for that space, please give us a call.

## Society Acquisition

The Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society is happy to announce that Leo Fenity, resident of Cranbury, NJ, is donating to the Society a complete milk bottle collection from the three dairies that were established in Hightstown and East Windsor. Leo will be giving us his total collection of 90 bottles from Conover's Guernsey Dairy, Davison's Dairy, and Decker's Dairy. They will be placed in the new cabinets purchased in memory of Skip Cox. Leo's father, Wyatt J. Fenity, provided the inspiration for Leo to begin collecting dairy history and artifacts. Wyatt Fenity worked at both the Walker-Gordon farm in 1930 and the Conover Dairy farm from 1940 to 1948.



*Leo Fenity at his Cranbury home with his collection of dairy bottles.*

# Hightstown High School Graduate Speaks at Society Dinner About His Experiences as U.S. Deputy Archivist

by Shirley Olsen

Our Society banquet was held on January 18, 2009, at the Longstreet Library on the Peddie School campus. Dr. Lewis Bellardo, our featured speaker, presented an interesting program about his job as Deputy Archivist and Chief of Staff at the National Archives and Records Administration. He led the redesign of the National Archives records management program for the entire Federal Government and was instrumental in establishing and guiding the current Electronic Records Archives program.

Part of Lewis' presentation dealt with his reminiscences he had growing up in Hightstown and the importance of those experiences in shaping his life in a positive way. Lewis enjoyed seeing some old friends, classmates, and teachers that attended the luncheon and had only good things to say about the Hightstown school system. We all had a great time and enjoyed meeting his wife, Julie. After they left Hightstown, they drove down to Washington for the inauguration, where they had a good view of the President and First Lady near the National Archives Building.

## Editor's Note

It is interesting to note that Lewis Bellardo grew up in the farm house on Whitcomb Road in the "John Chamberlin-Enoch A. Ely" house that was on the Society House Tour in October, 2008.



John Chamberlin - Enoch A. Ely - George B. Whitcomb House, Circa 1750, East Windsor

## Photos from Our Annual Banquet



Steve Worringer, Julie Bellardo, Dr. Bellardo, Jennifer Worringer (one of our librarians and website coordinators)



Eileen Couturier, Suzanne Schafer Coates, Sue Howard and David Coates



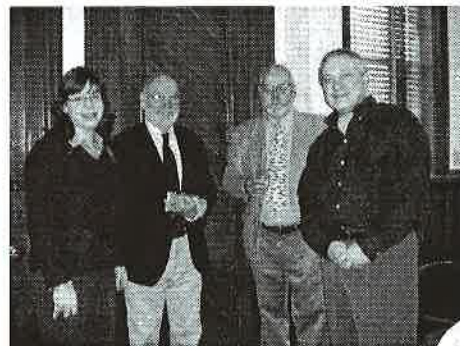
Curtis Crowell and Isabel McGinty, Julie and Jerry Ely, Nancy Laudenberger, Shirley Olsen, John Laudenberger and Sue Howard



Marion Rock, JoAnne Brogus, Dale Grubb, and Fran Cook



Lynda and Bill Harrington, Curtis Crowell and Isabel McGinty



Laura O'Leary, Russ Beaulieu, George Keith and Robert Szychowski

## Growing Up In A Culturally Diverse Hightstown 1940-1960's

by Christian Kirkpatrick

On Monday, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Meadow Lakes hosted a forum entitled "Growing up in a Culturally Diverse Hightstown during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s". Moderated by Russ Beaulieu, it featured reminiscences by area residents Elaine Martin, Horace Brown, and Larry Gunnell. The following paragraphs contain just a few of their recollections.

Russ pointed out that although Hightstown was never formally segregated, residents knew that there were social lines they could not cross. They did not need laws to tell them how to behave. For example, white people sat in their section of the local movie theatre, and black people in theirs.

Elaine, also a former Hightstown High School teacher, talked about growing up on Morrison Avenue, in

a bungalow without running water or an inside bathroom. Although her parents had both been teachers in North Carolina, here they could find work only as a maid and a maintenance man.

Elaine remembered canteen dances for teenagers over the firehouse. One night was for whites and another for blacks. African-American residents could buy food at local restaurants, but they had to take it home to eat it.

Her brother Horace talked about life in the 1940s. In those days, all the land around Hightstown was farmland. Black migrant workers from the South camped throughout the area. Uneducated and desperately poor, they made a bad impression on many people in town, including him. Later, however, after attending the Peddie School (he was the

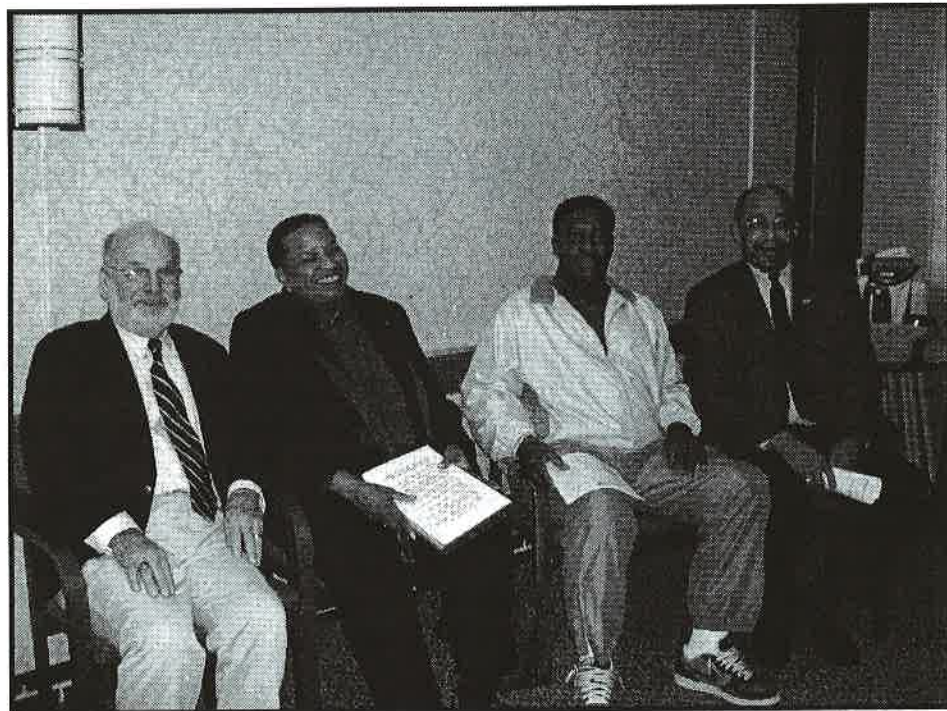
school's first African-American student) and Rutgers University, he became a registered nurse and tended these workers as a visiting nurse in Monmouth County. During this time he got to know them and realized that many were intelligent, decent people who wanted better lives for themselves and their families.

Horace had a varied and successful career in nursing for many years. Then he changed direction, going into marketing for Xerox and becoming an executive there.

Larry talked about growing up in the Academy Street/Rogers Avenue area, with lots of cousins, aunts and uncles all living nearby. It was a very close community. In high school, Russ coached him in soccer. But Larry didn't just play one sport, he played them all.

Today he sponsors sports programs for kids in Dawes Park during summer vacation. Through his efforts, these children can find the joy in sports that he did.

This forum provided a fascinating look into Hightstown's past. Fortunately, one of our hardworking Historical Society members, Julie Ely, videotaped it. Perhaps one day Society members who missed this forum will be able to view it. Until then, those interested in learning more about race relations in Hightstown should read *Deepening the Chasms: A History of Race Relations in the One Square Mile Paradise of Hightstown, N.J.* by James Barlow, which is available in the Society's library.



Seated left to right: Russ Beaulieu, Elaine Martin, Larry Gunnell, and Horace Brown. Photo taken at Meadow Lakes, February 2, 2009.

# Oldest Newspapers Easiest to Search

by Jennifer Worringer

Hightstown and its surrounding communities are historically fortunate. The Historical Society and public library share newspapers for the years 1857 through present day. Other towns had newspapers beginning in the mid-1800, but our ancestors especially enjoyed recording history, according to State Historian Bob Craig.

The oldest newspapers, 1850 to 1900, have been recorded onto a searchable hard drive available at the Hightstown Public Library. While local papers for the last century can be viewed by scrolling through a roll of film, the hard drive is plugged into a USB port and searched.

A search for keywords such as family names and places can be made within a full year of newspapers at one time. The search produces instances where the keyword is surrounded by an additional few words providing context. If the context is reasonable, the searcher opens the PDF file for that paper and reads the text surrounding the highlighted keyword.

The search mechanism is based on image similarity. For example, the keyword of "roof" results in "hits" including proof, thereof and hereof. Researchers are typically glad to receive too many hits rather than not enough. Using this method, many newspaper issues can be searched in a fraction of the time it would take to read the comparable microfilms.

To give this technology a try, make an appointment at the Hightstown Public Library. Call ahead of time and ask for Jennifer. You can reach the Hightstown Memorial Library at 609-448-1474. The hard drive contains the following newspapers: Village Record, 1849-1861, Hightstown Excelsior, 1857-1859 and Hightstown Gazette, 1862, 1865-1898.

## Upcoming Programs

The Hightstown EW Historical Society, 164 North Main Street, will hold their next program on Sunday, March 29, 2009 at 2 p.m. The program will be presented by Edith Perrine Sprague, titled "Elsie the Cow". Edith will be sharing her experiences as a young woman traveling all over the country in the 1940's with Elsie the Cow, raising money for war bonds. The public is invited.

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Another program sponsored by the Society at 164 North Main Street, Hightstown, will be a program on Hightstown currency during the 19th and 20th century. A. Chris Gould from East Windsor will be presenting the program on Sunday, April 26, 2009, at 2 p.m. Everyone is encouraged to attend and see some of the currency the Society has been able to have donated by Norman Pullen in memory of his father, William C. Pullen.



[www.hewhs.org](http://www.hewhs.org)

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- Individual                       Family                       Booster/Patron
- Sustaining                       Life (individual)                       Life (married)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail the completed application, along with a check made payable to the Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society to:

Membership Committee  
Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society  
164 North Main Street  
Hightstown, NJ 08520

# The Christmas Tea

The Christmas Tea at Society was on December 7, 2008. The children from the First Presbyterian Church of Hightstown, under the direction of Susan Howells, played bells and later everyone sang Christmas carols with Lois Smida at the piano. The other photo at the table from left to right is Donna Schmid, Dale Grubb, Judy Macauley, and Nancy Laudenberger.



## Ask Us A Question!

by Jennifer Worringer

Answering questions is an important service provided by the Historical Society. When we answer a question for you, we learn as well and add the new information to our files. Let's look at a few example questions.

I live in an old building on Stockton Street. How old is it and what was its original purpose?

What is the creek that runs through Meadow Lakes and can I get a map of it?

Can you find an old picture of my house? I'd like to frame it for a present.

I am researching previous merger discussions between Hightstown and East Windsor. What can you help me find?

We were given a Bible that had a photo of an unknown man in it. The photo was taken by R.R. Priest. Do you have any information about him or other photographers of the late 1800's or early 1900's?

I spent a couple of weeks in Hightstown in February 1945 at a preparatory farm for young people getting ready for farm living in Israel. Can you find the name and location of the place in Hightstown?

I am trying to find a copy of an obituary for a relative, "John Doe," who died on 03/29/1990 in Hightstown. Can you help?

We invite you to send a question to Jennifer Worringer at [highlander42@comcast.net](mailto:highlander42@comcast.net). She will share your question with other members of the Historical Society.



Mrs. and Mrs. Robert Craig  
4002 Nottingham Way  
Hamilton Square, NJ 08890

**MEMBERSHIP  
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