

LABOUR'S CULTURAL IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY* A Cape Breton Perspective

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I believe there are many instances where labour exerts a cultural impact on the community, but in industrial Cape Breton where singing and music-making are still a part of every household and an integral family experience, this impact can be felt even by a casual visitor. My own experience has evolved as a result of my long association with a group of singing coalminers on the island known as The Men of the Deeps.¹ Because of my work with, and my respect for, these outstanding human beings, I have cultivated an interest in industrial and labour songs and their impact on the industrial communities of Cape Breton Island.

Drawing on my experience as musical director of The Men of the Deeps for most of the past twenty years, I would like to demonstrate two ways in which this unique group has made a cultural impact on the community. First, by performing in concert songs which have circulated in the labour community for many years, the group serves as a vehicle to perpetuate traditional folksong. Secondly, the very existence of an organized choir of coalminers has inspired the creation of new songs about our mining heritage which have contributed significantly to the cultural mosaic of the island.

In addition to a rigorous touring schedule, during the summer months The Men of the Deeps performs almost weekly at the Miner's Museum in Glace Bay.² It is here that much of the group's cultural impact is felt. Although hundreds of tourists attend these concerts, I have always been impressed by the large number of residents, particularly children, from the local area who regularly attend. And it is not unusual for the children to join in the singing of many of the tunes after having attended only a few performances. The fact that many of these songs have been introduced to the children by The Men of the Deeps shows that the group is contributing significantly to a singing tradition amongst the people of Cape Breton's mining communities which might have been less in evidence had the group never come into existence.

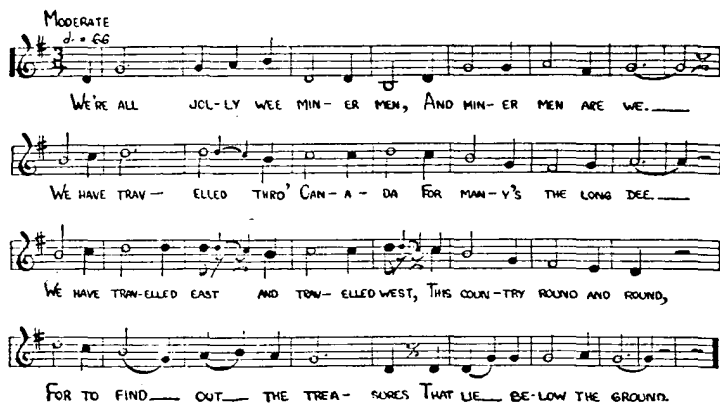
Many of the songs performed were popular among the immigrant miners from Great Britain and Ireland who came to Cape Breton when the coal industry in North America was just beginning.³ The Men of the Deeps has revived these songs and breathed new life into them, thus inspiring a revival of interest in traditional music in the community.

"We're All Jolly Wee Miner Men" is well known in Cape Breton today; it has become virtually a theme song for The Men of the Deeps. But before The Men of the Deeps came along the song had drifted out of circulation and was largely confined to a page in a book: George Korson's *Coal Dust On The Fiddle*. Korson collected it at a convention of the United Mine Workers of America from Bob Stewart, a native of Glace Bay.⁴

*This article is drawn from papers delivered to the International Society for Music Education (Commission on Community Music Activity), Eugene, Oregon, July 1984, and to the Atlantic Canada Workshops, University College of Cape Breton, September 1985, as well as from two lectures delivered to the Atlantic Region Labour Education Centre at the Coady International Institute, Antigonish, October 1985 and February 1986.

WE'RE ALL JOLLY WEE MINER MEN

MODERATE
♩ = 66



WE'RE ALL JOLLY WEE MINER MEN, AND MINER MEN ARE WE. _____

WE HAVE TRAVELLED THRO' CANADA FOR MANY'S THE LONG DEE. _____

WE HAVE TRAVELLED EAST AND TRAVELLED WEST, THIS COUNTRY ROUND AND ROUND,

FOR TO FIND OUT THE TREASURES THAT LIE BELOW THE GROUND.

We're all jolly wee miner men
 And miner men are we.
 We have travelled thro' Canada
 For many's a long dee.
 We have travelled East and travelled West,
 This country round and round,
 For to find out the treasures
 That lie below the ground.

I'll build my love a castle
 A castle of high renown,
 Neither King, Duke nor Earl
 Will pull my castle down;
 For the king loves the queen
 Aye, and the empress does the same;
 Here's my health to every wee miner man
 That goes below the ground.

Oh, some have got money
 And some have none at all;
 But when we've got money
 The bottles we do drown.
 And we'll fill our glasses right up to the brim
 As the toast goes passing round;
 Here's my health to every wee miner man
 That goes below the ground.

That the song has strong ties with Britain can be illustrated by comparing it to the following versions, the first of which was sung for Korson by Mrs. Elizabeth Megann, an immigrant to Pennsylvania from the Durham/Newcastle area of northeast England.⁵ The song as it is known in Cape Breton today probably originated in Scotland where it was collected by A. L. Lloyd.⁶

I LOVE MY MINER LAD (collected by George Korson)

Six jolly miners of mining you shall hear,
Have travelled through this country for many a long year,
They have travelled East and travelled West, the country all 'round,
To find out the treasure that lies in underground.

Two came from Auskland, two from Newcastle town,
Two from Durham City, a place of great renown.
The miners are such clever men — their equal can't be found —
They turn a stony rock into a sovereign of bright gold.

You should see a miner lad as he walks down the street,
Dressed in his best clothes, he looks genteel and neat.
His teeth are white as ivory and eyes as black as sloe —
You may easy know a miner lad wherever that he goes.

Sometimes he has money, sometimes none at all,
When he has money it is on his comrades' call.
He calls for liquor plenty, pays as the toast goes round —
Here's good health to every miner lad that works in underground.

It's the huntsman's delight in the blowing of his horn,
It's the farmer's delight in the sowing of the corn,
It's the miner's delight to strike a rock in two,
And find out the treasure that lies down below.

I'll build my love a castle, a castle of renown,
Neither lords, dukes nor earls will pull my castle down,
The king love the queen, the emperor does the same,
And I love my miner lad — who can me blame?

SIX JOLLY WEE MINERS (collected by A.L. Lloyd)

Six jolly wee miners, an' miner lads are we.
We've travelled broad Scotland for many a long day.
We've travelled east, we've travelled west, the country round and round,
For to find out the treasure that do lie below the ground.

You should see my miner lad as he walks down the street,
All dressed in his best, lookin' gentle and sae neat.
His teeth are white as ivory, his eyes are black as gloss.
You can easy tell a miner lad everywhere he goes.

Some has got money, an' some has none at a',
And them that hae money, the bottle they will draw.
We'll fill our glasses to the tip, the toast goes round and round.
My health to every wee collier lad that works below the ground.

I'll knit my love a grovet, as doggies as it can be,
The colours that I'll put in it will fairly tak his a'e.
His chime will a' come up to him, and say: Where'd ye get that?
Oh, I got it frae ma wee doggie moll, an' whit doe ye think o' that?

I'll build my love a castle, a castle of renown,
Neither kings, dukes nor earls will pull my castle down.
The king loves the queen and the emperor does the same,
I love my wee miner lad an' who can me blame?

Those "teeth white as ivory" which seem to appear in most coal-mining versions of the song were originally "cheeks like the roses red," for the Hebridean and Northumbrian composers simply adapted an ancient Irish ballad to their own situations.

THE BONNY LABOURING BOY⁷

As I roved out one morning
All in the blooming Spring
I overheard a damsel fair
Most grievously did sing,
Saying "Cruel were my parents
Who me did sore annoy
They would not let me tarry
With my bonny Irish boy.

His cheeks are like the roses red,
His eyes are black as sloes,
He is meek in his behaviour
Wherever that he goes.
He is well sized both neat and wise
Like a maiden's chastity,
If I had my will I would be still
In my love's company."

Says the mother to her daughter
"Why do you stoop so low
To marry a poor labouring boy
Around the world to go?
Some noble lord might fancy you
Great riches to enjoy
So do not throw yourself away
On a poor labouring boy."

Says the daughter to the mother
"Your talk is all in vain
For knights, and lords, and dukes,
and earls

Their efforts I disdain.
I'd sooner live a humble life
Where time I would employ
Still waiting happy prospects
With my bonny labouring boy.

"If I had all the riches now
Which great men have in store
'Tis freely I'd bestow them all
On the lad that I adore.

His beauty so entangled me,
The same I'll ne'er deny,
In the arms of my labouring boy
I mean to live and die."

We'll fill our glasses to the brim
And let the toast go round.
Here's health to every labouring boy
That ploughs and sows the ground,
Who, when his work is over
It is home he'll go with joy,
And happy is the girl that weds
The bonny labouring boy.

The tune of the Scottish and English versions is usually similar to Bob Stewart's tune, but in his *Singing Englishmen*, A.L. Lloyd quotes a version sung to the same air as the well-known Newfoundland song, "She's Like a Swallow."⁸

I LOVE MY MINER LAD (collected by A.L. Lloyd)

O bon-ny's my lad as he walks down the street Wi' his lamp in his
hand, all can-ny and neat; His teeth white as iv-'ry, his eyes black as
slaws, I love my min-er lad iv-'ry one knows.

The musical notation consists of three staves of music in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The first staff has chords Cm, Gm, A°, E°, and A°. The second staff has chords A°, Cm, Gm, A°, A°, and Gm. The third staff has chords Cm, Gm, A°, A°, G°, and Cm.

And from the Nova Scotia mainland Helen Creighton provided The Men of the Deeps with yet another version,⁹ but the Stewart tune has been eroded and altered to such an extent that it, too, is now a completely different tune. Compare “We’re All Jolly Wee Miner Men” above with the following.

THE JOLLY MINER
(collected by Helen Creighton)

Allegretto Freeman Young

Oh the hunts-men de-light my boys a sound-ing of his horn, Oh the
farm - er de - lights boys the sow-ing of his corn, But the
min - er's de - light my boys is to split the rock in twain, For his
gain - ing of the trea - sure that lies in the vein.

Oh, the huntsman delight my boys the sounding of his horn.
And the farmer delights my boys the sowing of his corn.
But the miner's delight my boys is to split the rock in twain,
For his gaining of the treasure that lies in the vein.

You can tell the jolly miner as he walks along the street
So snug about his clothes and so neat about his feet,
With his teeth as white as ivory and his eyes as black as sloes
You can tell the jolly miner wherever he goes.

You can tell the jolly miner, he's a roving young blade
When he first fell in love with his handsome young maid
He will toss the glass so merrily, he will drink a health all round
He will drink to the men that work underground.

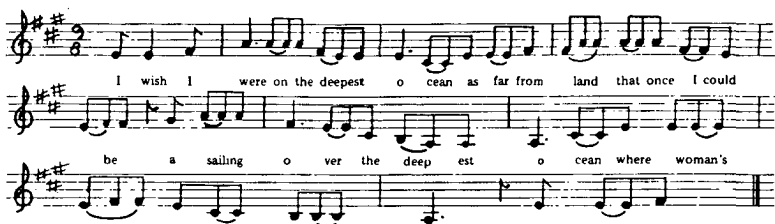
I will build my love a castle on a small piece of ground
Where lord, duke or nobleman can't pull that castle down
The King he can't but love the queen, but I love my love as he
And of all the lads in Covent, the miner is for me.

One more example will suffice to illustrate the capacity of this group of singing coal miners to inspire the perpetuation of traditional folksong, this one with roots which penetrate even deeper into the heart of our European ancestry.

“When I First Went to Caledonia,” collected from Amby Thomas of Deep Cove, Cape Breton, by Ronnie MacEachern,¹⁰ is reminiscent of many Irish/English song-types deriving from the medieval *pastourelle*. Most of the thematic material of these songs probably originated with the troubadours of Provence. Gaelic scholars point out that the French

influence came from the assimilation of Norman and Gaelic culture in the fourteenth century. As a result, many songs which had their origin in the folk poetry of Southern France found their way into the folk repertoire of Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales — and subsequently to the New World. The song has also been collected by Helen Creighton from Mr. Malcolm Blue of Madeira Park, British Columbia, who sang it to the tune of “Peggy Gordon.”¹¹ (Both versions are in the repertoire of The Men of the Deeps.)

WHEN I FIRST WENT TO CALEDONIA
(collected by Ronnie MacEachern)



I wish I were but I wish in vain
 I wish I were a young maid again
 A young maid again I'll never be
 Till an orange grows on an apple tree.
 The sweetest apple will soon get rotten
 The hottest love it will soon grow cold
 Young maiden's promise will be forgotten
 Take care young man do not speak so bold.
 If I had pen from Pennsylvania
 If I had paper of truly white
 If I had ink of the rosy morning
 A true love's promise to you I'd write
 I wish I were on the deepest ocean
 As far from land that once I could be
 A-sailing over the deepest ocean
 Where woman's love would not trouble me.
 I'd lay my head on a cask of brandy
 And it's a dandy I do declare
 For when I'm drinking I'm always thinking
 How can I gain that young lady fair.
 When I first went to Caledonia
 I got loading at number three
 And I got boarding at Donald Norman's
 He had a daughter could make good tea.
 It was I and my brother Charlie
 The biggest shavers you ever did see
 Were spearing eels in the month of April
 And starving slaves out on Scatterie.
 I went to Norman's for a pair of brochans
 A pound of soap and a cake of tea
 But Norman told me he wouldn't give them
 'Till fish got plenty in Scatterie.

I went over to their big harbour
 Just on purpose to see the spray
 I spied a maiden from Boulardrie over
 I surely thought her the Queen of May.

I WENT TO NORMAN'S
 (collected by Helen Creighton)

I want to Norman's for a pair of bro-gans, — a bar of
 soap — and a pound of tea. — But Norman said that he could not
 give them — Till fish got plen-ty — on Scat-ter-ee.

So I went down to Sydney Coalmine
 Loading coal out of Number Three,
 Twas there I boarded with Donald Norman,
 He had the daughters could make good tea.

I laid my head on a cask of brandy,
 It was my fancy I do declare,
 And while I'm drinking I'm always thinking
 How can I win that young lady fair.

I wish that I was on Long Island
 I'd get good board and a cup of tea
 Standing over by Duncan's door
 And gazing over the deep blue sea.

One day I crossed over to Big Harbour,
 On purpose for to see the spray
 I spied a maiden from Boulardree over,
 I surely thought she was Queen of May.

The sweetest apple may soon grow rotten,
 The hottest love it may soon grow cold,
 A young man's promise may be forgotten,
 Take care young lady, don't be too bold.

I wish I was on the ocean sailing
 As far from land as my eye can see,
 Sailing over the deep blue ocean
 Where women's love would not trouble me.

Although the beginning verses of the MacEachern version appear to derive from a woman's song, the song certainly evolves as one intended to be sung by a man. Scaterie is an island off the coast of Main-a-Dieu, Cape Breton. Boulardrie refers to Boularderie Island, separating Great

Bras d'Or and St. Andrew's Channel. And the "Queen of May" is a common image in many Irish songs of the *amour courtois* tradition.

These are only a few of the traditional songs which have found new life through the voices of Cape Breton's singing coal miners. Nearly one-third of the group's repertoire consists of songs which can trace their roots to Great Britain, Ireland, and France.

The Men of the Deeps chorus has also inspired many retired coal miners to pen their experiences in verse. The following example, by Archie MacInnis of Port Hood, is sung to the tune of a very famous North American folk song about slavery and piracy on the high seas known as "The Flying Cloud". Archie used this fine tune to tell of a tragedy which befell one of his co-workers in the pit. Much of the imagery reveals Archie's familiarity with traditional balladry.

COAL MINING DAYS

Archie MacInnis is my name, as you may understand
I was born in the town of New Waterford
In Cape Breton's Highland land;
The year was nineteen sixteen, the world it was at war,
The war to end all world wars which we've never known before.
I entered the mine at an early age to shoot and roll the coal;
There was no other survival then if you weren't loadin' coal.
The face was black, the lights were dim, but the spirit, it was high;
The powder smoke was flourishin', but the air was very shy.
My father bein' a pro miner, he knew his way around;
His guidance bein' the greatest help in the dangers all around.
The danger's so prevailin' that no one ever knows
What time a prop or boom might snap and you may never see your home.
One day my spirit, it had dropped, a tragedy'd occurred:
A friend of mine two rooms away had met his final doom.
His name was Clarence Fraser, no finer man I've known
He didn't have the guidance, and he didn't know what to do.
A fall of stone came from the roof where his air machine was set;
Lack of timber bein' the cause that unfortunately it was
Lack of guidance in this case, the only course to take;
Keep your timber up close, close to that black, black dirty coal face.
The bravest men in the coal mine field are the gallant draegger men;
They search the pits in tragic hours when miners are in tomb.
When men are trapped within their space and lacking food and air,
The only hope the miner has are those men with such a career.
The draegger men successfully can rescue many men.
The miners know in tragic hours they need those gallant men
In order that they may go down and earn their daily bread
Return to home and families and sleep in their own bed.
My own experience was not that bad as my time was not that long;
One or two had broken out and I had said so long,
So long to that deep and black, black face, and smoke and gases, too;
To head to the strait of Canso, that's all that I could do.

The Strait of Canso had a boat that took us to the main.
If we had missed a chance on her we'd have to wait again;
The exodus from the island was not that hard to explain,
But the hills behind were flourishin' in their old, great domain.

Younger songwriters, too, have been motivated by a chorus of authentic coal miners and have provided *The Men of the Deeps* with new songs which commemorate modern-day events and mining practices.

"No. 12, New Waterford" gives a vivid description of the raging underground fire which eventually caused the closing of No. 12 Colliery in New Waterford, N.S. The mine was sealed off in 1973, entombing one of the victims of the tragedy. Today, the grounds above No. 12 have been converted into a beautiful park which stands as a memorial to all who lost their lives in mining disasters. Ray Holland, also a singing member of *The Men of the Deeps*, penned his verses to a traditional American mining tune, "The Old Miner's Refrain".¹²

NO. 12, NEW WATERFORD

- 1) A tale I have to tell you about one of our mines,
And it happened not so very long ago.
They had to seal the mine off for there was a raging fire,
And two men lost their lives way down below.

Chorus

- In Number Twelve, New Waterford, everything was going fine,
They were loading lots of coal, their buddies say.
Then smoke began to gather and they knew there was a fire
And they scrambled for their lives that fateful day.
- 2) The trip it left the road; it caused a terrible smash,
And it caused an awful fire along the deep.
The miners they were worried as they hurried for the top
For the smoke was thick and it was hard to breathe.
 - 3) They had to seal the mine off with one man trapped below,
For the fire it raged and threatened that small town.
We always will remember the men who lost their lives
And respect the men who toil beneath the ground.

Allister MacGillivray, a composer of many fine contemporary Cape Breton songs,¹³ provided *The Men of the Deeps* with "Underneath the Sea," an original song about the dangers which exist in today's mines. (In Cape Breton the coal mines extend miles beneath the floor of the Atlantic Ocean.) Although newly composed, the song has a rhythm similar to the traditional waulking songs heard at Cape Breton milling frolics.

UNDERNEATH THE SEA

We are the lads who ride the rake
In the dark, in the ground
Underneath the sea;
And no apologies we make
In the ground,
Underneath the sea.

To the deep we daily ride,
Sons and fathers side by side.
Arms of iron, hearts of pride,
Underneath the sea.

We are the boys behind the gear,
In the dark, in the ground
Underneath the sea.

Cables slip and motors stall,
Rock and steel twist and fall
But we keep rollin' through it all
Underneath the sea.

Overhead the arches creep
In the dark, in the ground
Underneath the sea.

And heaven help us if they're weak
In the ground
Underneath the sea.

Listen as the timbers crack
Holding tons of rubble back
All the while the gob we pack
Underneath the sea.

And so we slice the Phalen Seam
In the dark, in the ground
Underneath the sea.

With dust a-dancin' in our beams
In the ground
Underneath the sea.

And ev'ry man along the chain

Knows the peace and knows the pain
Any shift below can bring
Underneath the sea.

So watch the methane if it seeps
In the dark, in the ground
Underneath the sea.

Beware the monitor that beeps
In the ground
Underneath the sea.

Keep the water hoses flowin'
Keep the blade away from stone
Just a spark and we're gone
Underneath the sea.

We are the lads who ride the rake
In the dark, in the ground
Underneath the sea.

Pray the Lord our side to take
In the ground
Underneath the sea.

In Wales, England and Japan,
The Ruhr, Kentucky and Lingan
Bless and keep the miner man
Underneath the sea.

In Wales, England and Japan,
The Ruhr, Kentucky and Lingan
Bless and keep the miner man

In the dark, in the ground,
And underneath the sea.

Cape Breton's *The Men of the Deeps* is not the only example of labour's cultural impact on the community in this part of the world. Local artists have traditionally been motivated to represent on canvas the agonizing realities of life in the mines or in the steel plant. Fish plants and railroads, too, are favourite subjects. And I would be remiss if I did not cite as a further example the excellent songs and humour to emerge from the three editions of Cape Breton's musical revue, *The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton*¹⁴: music inspired by Cape Breton's industrial heritage, and written and performed by the sons and daughters of Cape Breton miners and steelworkers.

Perhaps the most successful of all songs to emerge from those revues is Kenzie MacNeil's "The Island" — considered by many to be Industrial Cape Breton's theme song. The words offer a vivid demonstration that labour in Cape Breton has indeed had a deep cultural impact on the community.

THE ISLAND¹⁵

1. Over an ocean and over a sea,
Beyond these great waters, oh, what do I see?
I see the great mountains which climb from the coastline,
The hills of Cape Breton, this new home of mine.

Oh, we come from the countries all over the world
To hack at the forests, to plow the lands down.
Fishermen, farmers and sailors all come
To clear for the future this pioneer ground.

Chorus:

We are an island, a rock in a stream;
We are a people as proud as there's been.
In soft summer breeze or in wild winter wind,
The home of our hearts, Cape Breton.

2. Over the rooftops and over the trees,
Within these new townships, oh, what do I see?
I see the black pitheads; the coal wheels are turning.
The smoke stacks are belching and the blast furnace burning.
And the sweat on the back is no joy to behold
In the heat of the steel plant or mining the coal,
And the foreign-owned companies force us to fight
For our survival and for our rights. (chorus)
3. Over the highways and over the roads,
Over the Causeway stories are told.
They tell of the coming and the going away;
The cities of America draw me away.
And though companies come and though companies go
And the ways of the world we may never know,
We'll follow the footsteps of those on their way
And still ask for the right to leave or to stay. (double chorus)

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NOTES

1. The Men of the Deeps is a chorus of coal miners assembled from the mining communities of New Waterford and Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. The group was organized in 1966 as an effort by the people of Cape Breton to honour Canada's Centennial Year, 1967. Its purpose was, and is, to help preserve in song the rich folklore of that island's coal mining communities. The group has released three long-play recordings on the Waterloo label.
2. Built in 1966-67 as Cape Breton's chief Centennial Project, the original building was destroyed by fire in 1979 and rebuilt in 1980.
3. The first operational coal mine in North America was opened in Cow Bay (now Donkin), Cape Breton in 1720. The coal mined there was shipped to Louisbourg to assist the workers in building the famed French fortress.
4. George Korson, *Coal Dust On The Fiddle* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1965) 103.
5. *Minstrels of The Minepatch* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1964) 282.
6. A.L. Lloyd. *Come All Ye Bold Miners* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1952) 47.
7. Colm O Lachlan. *Irish Street Ballads* (Dublin: Sign of the Three Candles, 1939) 18. Other variants of "The Bonny Labouring Boy" have been collected in Canada as "My Jolly Shantyboy" (Edith Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods*, Austin, Texas, 1970) and "The Jolly Railroad Boy" (Sidney Cowell, *Wolf River Songs*, Folkways FM 4001).
8. A.L. Lloyd. *Singing Englishmen* (London: Workers' Music Association, 1951) 16.
9. John C. O'Donnell. *The Men of the Deeps* (Waterloo: Waterloo Music; 1975) 20.
10. Ron MacEachern. *Songs from Deep Cove, Cape Breton* (Sydney, N.S.: College of Cape Breton Press, 1979) 21.
11. O'Donnell, p. 49.
12. Korson, *Minstrels Of The Minepatch*, p. 272. ("The Old Miner's Refrain" is one of the most popular Pennsylvania anthracite ballads and one of the first ballads George Korson collected in 1925.)

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