



The Alaskan Shepherd



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Some give by going to the Missions

Some go by giving to the Missions

Without both there are no Missions

Father Joseph Jules Jetté, S.J., 1864-1927

“Bright Star of the Tennah”: Part I

Editor’s Note: This two-part article is indebted to the writings contained in *ALASKANA CATHOLICA* by Father Louis L. Renner, S.J. Both the editors of the respective journals, as well as the authors of the respective reviews, have graciously granted the *Alaskan Shepherd* permission to reprint the two reviews of *ALASKANA CATHOLICA* reprinted in this issue. I sincerely thank all four of them and Father Renner. Proceeds from the purchase of *ALASKANA CATHOLICA*, through the Alaskan Shepherd office, directly benefit this Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks.

--Patty Walter

His life’s trail ended on the bleak, frozen tundra of western Alaska, near the Bering Sea, far from the land of his birth. He was not an old man at the time of his death—only 63—but the 27 years he had spent on the Alaska Mission had taken their toll. Thirteen years before his death, he was already hailed as “the most distinguished scholar in Alaska, the chief authority on the native language, and manners and customs, beliefs and traditions of the middle Yukon,” and, shortly before it, as the “bright star of the Tennah.” Neither as scholar nor as missionary had he labored, at times heroically, and spent his life for human applause, yet this does not dispense those who know of his noble life and extraordinary achievements from keeping alive for posterity the memory of them.

Joseph Jules Jetté—known to the French world as Jules, to the English as Julius—was born in Montreal, Canada, on September 30, 1864, of aristocratic parentage. His father, the Honorable Louis-Amable Jetté, was to become Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Quebec. His saintly mother, Berthe Laflamme, came from a rich Montreal family of long standing. A highly gifted, precocious student, the young Jetté was educated at the Collège de Montréal and at the Collège Sainte-Marie. In 1882,



Le Père Jules Jetté, jésuite (1864-1927)
(Courtesy Jesuit Oregon Province Archives 824.27)

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he entered the Jesuit novitiate at Sault-au-Récollet to begin 14 years of training and studies that led to his ordination to the priesthood on May 26, 1896. During the 12 years following his novitiate, he took the customary courses in the classics, the humanities, the natural sciences, and in philosophy and theology. He also spent three years teaching and two in France studying. On October 24, 1888, the Paris Academy of Sciences conferred on him the Bachelor of Science degree; and, in 1890, he received the Licentiate degree in higher mathematics from the University of Angers. One of Jetté's classmates, who had spent many years with him, attested to his extraordinary memory and intellectual gifts. He wrote of him, "The more difficult a problem was, the more determined he was to solve it."

After his ordination to the priesthood in 1896, and two years at Sault-au-Récollet, Father Jetté left Montreal on May 25, 1898, for San Francisco to take a ship to Alaska. Only on the 10th had he received word from the Jesuit Father General in Rome informing him that his request to be assigned to the Alaska Mission was granted. As far as can be determined, Father Jetté, despite his intellectual accomplishments and his success as a teacher, was allowed to go to Alaska—"at least for a time, as an experiment, to see whether his health is able to bear the rigors of that region"—because, throughout the course of his studies, he had suffered from headaches. What motivated him to volunteer for Alaska in the first place is not known. When Jesuit colleagues of his, who knew him well, learned of his being assigned to Alaska, they said among themselves, "What a loss, to bury such a talent in the snow!"

On June 10, 1898, on the Alaska Commercial Company's ship, the new *St. Paul*, Father Jetté left San Francisco for Alaska. On the 25th, he arrived at St. Michael, where he spent the summer months. As captain of the mission boat, the steamer *St. Joseph*, in company of other Jesuit missionaries, he left St. Michael on September 24th and arrived at Nulato on October 11th. He was to spend only eight of his 27 years in Alaska at Nulato. Nevertheless, it and its people enjoyed ever after "the right of the first born" in his heart.

Immediately upon his arrival at Nulato, Father Jetté set about learning the language of the area, Koyukon Athabaskan. He was to understand the Koyukon and master their language as no other white man before or after him ever did. His early and thorough mastery of

the language was greatly facilitated by his having an excellent memory and a natural gift for languages, and by the fact that from his first days among the Koyukon a bond of mutual respect and affection was established. To his Superior he wrote on July 5, 1902: "I am indeed very much like a native on the point of sensitiveness, and this gives me a wonderful facility to understand them and get along with them, for I have only to treat them as I would be treated." In another letter he wrote, "I was paid the compliment that I was really a born Ten'a, and the Father of the people. In their delight they began to give me geographical information, of which they know I am very fond." By 1902, the *London Tablet* recognized Father Jetté as one who had acquired "a thorough mastery of the Nulato language."

What enabled Father Jetté to accomplish so much both as a missionary and as a scientist was the fact that these two capacities coincided in him. Whenever and in whatever capacity he dealt with his people, he was always ministering to them, observing them, and learning from them. A missionary excursion, or a visit to a hunting or fishing camp, was for him at the same time also a scientific field trip. Little notebooks accompanied him wherever he went, whether in his boat, by dogsled, or on snowshoes. In these he faithfully and carefully noted new words, grammatical details, geographic data, Koyukon behavior, as well as baptisms performed, marriages blessed, last rites administered, burials conducted. Later the contents of these notebooks were meticulously edited and properly recorded in scientific manuscripts and in parish registers.

No ceremonial is more sacred to the Nulato Koyukon than that of the *hi'o*, the "stickdance," or "Feast for the Dead." While some of the subsequent missionaries at Nulato would have nothing to do with this traditional cultural ceremonial and condemned it outright, Father Jetté understood its social implications, and did the people the courtesy of attending it and learning what it was all about. It was in large part because of his attitude toward the people and their culture, coupled with his keen scientific mind, that he achieved pre-eminence as a scholar and anthropologist. One expert in the field of Alaskan anthropology wrote of him: "Leaving some ethnocentric indiscretions aside, the depth, insight, and magnitude of his work are unequalled in all of Alaskan anthropology." Another wrote: "No bibliography of Alaskan ethnology would be complete

TWO REVIEWS OF ALASKANA CATHOLICA:

From the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Summer 2006, Volume 97, Number 3, pp. 151-152

Alaskana Catholica, a History of the Catholic Church in Alaska

A Reference Work in the Format of an Encyclopedia

Louis L. Renner

(Portland Oreg.: Society of Jesus, Oregon Province, 2005, xxxvii, 702 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$82.50)

What most inhabitants of the Lower 48 do not know about Alaska is almost as vast as the Great Land itself. Louis L. Renner, a Jesuit priest who spent most of his teaching and pastoral career in Alaska, has compiled an impressive book that sheds light on one portion of the state's history, that of its Roman Catholic institutions and people. The book is clearly a labor of love, the product of a lifetime's work of preserving and telling the story of those missionaries who followed white settlers north and who also brought their religion to native peoples, scattered across inlands and islands. This is not a narrative history but rather, as its subtitle says, an encyclopedia, presenting short and long entries containing basic facts. The coverage is monumental: 200 biographies of individuals, short histories of Catholic activity in nearly 100 towns, and more than a dozen general topical essays. A comprehensive index, a thorough bibliography, and a user-friendly format—love those boldface cross-references from one entry to another!—make this an indispensable volume on Alaska's Catholic history.

And what a compelling history it is. A few random missionaries visited the territory in its early years, but the church's sustained presence dates only from the 1870s, when the Jesuits assumed responsibility for missions to Alaska. They were joined by small communities of religious sisters—initially the Quebec-based Sisters of Saint Ann, but eventually other groups as well, including the aptly named Sisters of Our Lady of the Snows, a sadly short-lived order made up entirely of Native women. Parish churches were built in settlements large and small: Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, of course, but also Nome, Wrangell, Nulato, and even Unalaska in the Aleutians and Diomed in the Bering Strait. Though far removed from the historic centers of Catholicism, the always-small church in Alaska sometimes had a wider impact. In the 1960s, for example, its officials took the lead in reestablishing worldwide the ancient practice of ordaining Catholic deacons, laymen who were not priests but were nonetheless trained to carry out certain ministerial functions (baptizing, marrying, and so on) for communities that saw a clergyman only rarely. Renner complements all this by including extended quotations from original documents in many entries and with wonderful photographs, both historical and contemporary. How can one not marvel at the photo of a priest saying Mass on an altar made of ice blocks (p. 134), the Stations of the Cross with Jesus depicted in Native dress (p. 318), or the Ursuline sister, in full religious habit, helping Native girls process salmon (p. 654)?

It is churlish and unappreciative to nitpick at such a book, but reviews are expected to, so here are two nits. First, it is admittedly difficult to reduce such a huge territory to the size of even a large format volume such as this, but a map would have enhanced the work's usefulness for those unfamiliar with the state's geography. More seriously, the biographical entries are overwhelmingly weighted toward priests and bishops—many of them heroic, to be sure—and that leaves the reviewer wanting to know more about the ordinary Catholics who made up the church in Alaska. Only 13 laypeople merit their own entries: surely more than that number made significant contributions. This suggests one avenue for those who will continue the work of telling the history of the people who held on to their Catholic religious identity in the face of difficult odds. Those future historians will praise and thank Renner for his work. He has produced the necessary volume, the book from which all subsequent work will begin. Few historians, whatever their field, will ever make such a contribution.

James M. O'Toole

Professor of History, designated holder of the Clough Chair in History at Boston College, and Fellow of the Society of American Archivists

From *Alaska History*, Fall 2006, Volume 21, No. 2, pp. 61-62

Louis L. Renner, S.J., *Alaskana Catholica: A History of the Catholic Church in Alaska, A Reference Work in the Format of an Encyclopedia.*

(Spokane, Washington: Society of Jesus and Arthur H. Clark Company, 2005, xxxvii, 702 pp. Illustrations, introduction, bibliography, index. \$82.50)

A subtitle of *Alaskana Catholica* refers to the volume as “a reference work in the format of an encyclopedia.” True, the organization follows that style, with a wide variety of entries arranged in alphabetical order. The tone and content, however, far transcend the detached, facts-only style of most encyclopedias, making this an exceptional contribution to the genre.

This volume offers a chronology of key dates in Alaska Catholic history from 1779 to 2004, connecting two cultures and many peoples across time and space. The work is well indexed and cross referenced, promising a handy tool for scholar and non-academician alike. The subjects include, among others, Alaska towns, mission stations, key institutions, and significant persons—religious and lay. Given the author’s association with the Society of Jesus, the primary Catholic missionaries of Alaska, the information about the priests and brothers of that organization is the fullest and written with the most personal detail. All entries suggest a friendly intimacy, rich as they are with anecdotes of lives and personalities. They are filled, nonetheless, with larger observations about what the Catholic presence has meant to Alaska. Ample attention is given to the role of the Native people, Catholic nuns and missionaries, and the rising prominence of Native Alaskans in the practice and administration of their religion. Stunning photographs that capture the Alaska world are included, and most illuminating are the accounts of the Alaska Native Sisterhoods.

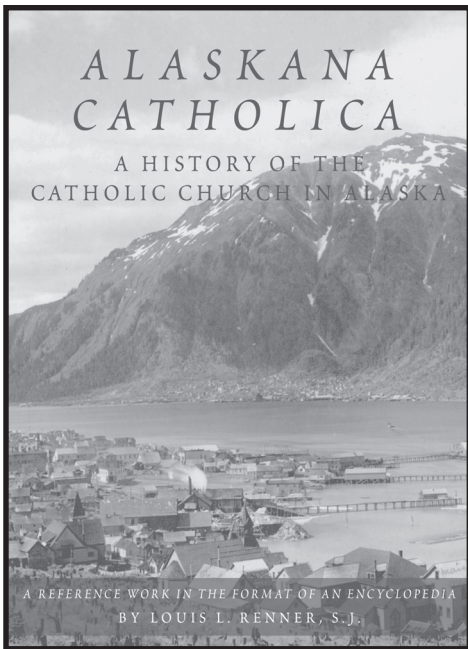
Renner delves widely and deeply into a unique and demanding region, steeped in Native history and ritual. Catholic missionaries brought new forces with European/American linguistics, natural sciences, photographs, medicines, technologies, music, and spirituality that blended into, conflicted with, and changed the world of many Native people, even as this place transformed those who entered the Alaskan landscape. Renner, nonetheless, makes it clear that Alaska is not for every newcomer. Disputes—priest to priest, Native to missionary, nun to priest—inevitably surfaced, sometimes over unexpected issues. Renner addresses these clashes and disagreements with measured language and occasionally a touch of humor.

No reader of this volume could regard Alaska or Catholicism as secondary subjects in the historical canon. This work demonstrates how the mix of the secular and the sacred can produce history to be read thoroughly and savored carefully for important themes and thoughtful analysis. In addition, Renner weaves into an Alaskan fabric the colorful threads of peoples of many cultures across national and international boundaries. This is an “encyclopedia” that delivers far more than the title suggests.

Alaskana Catholica is seven hundred pages in length—a size difficult for today’s budget-minded publishers. Fortunately, many organizations and persons, this reviewer included, contributed to a subvention, so that the work could be printed in its entirety. This is a stand-alone volume, one for everyone with an interest in Alaska, the history of Catholicism, the intersection of the two, and the way a meticulous scholar manages challenging subjects with balance, clarity, inclusiveness, grace, and warmth. *Alaskana Catholica* is the crown jewel in the long career of Louis L. Renner, S.J., Alaska’s most accomplished Catholic historian.

Anne M. Butler

Trustee Professor, Emeritus, Utah State University, served for fourteen years as associate editor, coeditor, or senior editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly*.



ALASKANA CATHOLICA

“Through years of dedicated research, writing, and documentation, Father Renner has created a succinct yet comprehensive guide detailing in total clarity and conciseness the history of the Catholic Church in Alaska. Within this historic documentation the reader can reference over 225 years of Catholicism in Alaska. Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., has accomplished in Alaskana Catholica a momentous feat—a magnum opus.”

Donald J. Kettler
Bishop of Fairbanks

“Father Renner is the foremost authority on Catholic history in Alaska, writing history at its purest, almost exclusively from archival sources.”

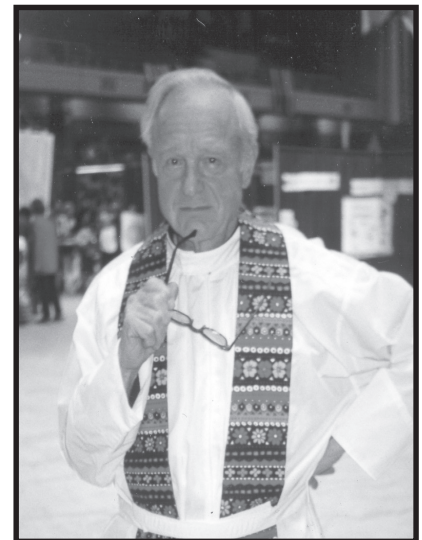
Dr. Dorothy Jean Ray
Historian and Anthropologist

“This fascinating volume offers an intimate picture of the activities of the Catholic Church’s Alaska Mission, from its beginning in the nineteenth century to the present. It is a fact-filled account of people and places with a wonderful array of characters...Father Renner, with a historian’s concern for the facts and a writer’s eye for a good story, has produced a valuable work.”

Francis Paul Prucha, S.J.,
Professor of History Emeritus , Marquette University

“One of the main intents of this volume,” we read in the author’s Preface, *“is to keep alive for posterity the memory of many major Catholic Alaskan figures—clerical and lay, Native and non-Native, living and deceased—by the recording of their lives and deeds.”*

Alaskana Catholica (“a unique gift, whether to give or to receive”) is a reference work in the format of an encyclopedia. It offers its readers something more than mere bare-bones reference data and Who’s Who-s. Moreover, some entries have a story about the given entry’s subject attached to them. Some have a “tapestry” woven out of a series of quotations from the mission diary of the given place attached to them. These stories and tapestries give readers a kind of “you are there” experience, of being present at an event of the past or at a place remote to them. Close to 400 images illustrate *Alaskana Catholica*.



**Yes, please send _____ copy(ies) of *Alaskana Catholica*,
 written by *Father Louis L. Renner, S.J.***

I am enclosing \$80.00 for each book, which includes shipping.

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We invite you to send us your petitions. Both you and your needs will be remembered on each of the nine days of the Novena when Mass is offered for you. The Fathers on the missions also will remember you and your intentions in their Masses and prayers during the Novena.

We invite all of you to join us in this Novena of Grace by reciting--from the 4th of March to the 12th inclusive--the following prayers.

O most amiable and loving St. Francis Xavier, in union with you I adore the Divine Majesty. While joyfully giving thanks to God for the great graces which He conferred upon you in life and for the great glory with which He has gifted you in heaven, I come to you with heartfelt love, begging you to secure for me, by your powerful intercession, the inestimable blessings of living and dying in the state of grace. I also beseech you to obtain for me the favors I ask in this Novena_____.

But if what I ask is not for the Glory of God, or for the good of my soul, do you obtain for me what is most conducive to both. Amen.

Our Father; Hail Mary; Glory be to the Father.

V. Pray for us, St. Francis Xavier,

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.
Let us pray: O God, you chose to bring into your Church peoples of the Orient through the preaching and miracles of St. Francis Xavier, mercifully grant us that we may imitate his virtues, whose glorious merits we hold in veneration.

We ask this through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.





*Nulato Church and Father's house, 1913.
(Courtesy CBNA Archives)*

without the publications of Father Jetté, for they possess the rare combination of scholarship plus sympathetic understanding of the native.”

By the summer of 1903, Father Jetté had spent five fruitful happy years in Alaska. Suddenly, that summer, he was asked to leave “this blessed soil,” as he described Alaska, and to return to Canada. He was perplexed by the summons, all the more so as his health was excellent. Obediently, but reluctantly, he left Nulato, on July 13, 1903, for the Jesuit college of St. Boniface in Winnipeg, where he had taught before his ordination to the priesthood. Here, as a professor of mathematics, he caused a mild sensation by wearing Indian moccasins and smoking his pipe in class. As time allowed, he readied for the press his first work to be published. In the spring of 1904, his modest booklet of prayers and hymns in Koyukon, “Yoyit Rokanaga” (Heavenly Words), was published. While he was “in the land of exile,” as he put it, he also began to compile a short Koyukon grammar.

Back in Alaska again in 1904, Father Jetté accompanied his dear Koyukon on their fall hunt. Normally he stayed at home in autumn, when the people

were scattered far and wide along the rivers, sloughs and ponds across the Yukon from Nulato. Later he wrote why he deviated that year from his general rule: “As I arrived in Nulato after a full year’s absence from my flock, having lost one-half of my Indian language, and my muscles softened by quiet college life, I felt bound to plunge into Indian life again, renew old acquaintances, pick up some strength of limb and some fluency of speech, and above all keep company with the natives and remind them

that there is a God to serve and a religion to practice. I therefore made up my mind to take a trip through Kayar, the Indians being just on the start of their fall outing.”

By 1905, Father Jetté had produced in rough form a small grammar and a dictionary of Koyukon roots, each root accompanied by all the derivatives he could find.

In the summer of 1906, Father Jetté served for short periods of time first in Tanana, then in Fairbanks. In a letter, he wrote that, while on a trip up the Tanana River, because of his “shabby clothes and siwash manners,” he was “dubbed a ‘bum-priest.’” One senses that he felt rather honored to be so dubbed.

By October 1906, Father Jetté was back in Tanana. From a letter he wrote there on November 26th, it is apparent that the life of the scholar on the cold, subarctic frontier of Alaska was not always an easy one. He had to write away for foolscap. He commented on the weather: “It is very cold. My water-hole showed a thickness of ice of 2 ft. 5 inches by actual measurement, and my sourdough was frozen hard on Saturday morning. Just now I hear—and feel—the wind beginning to blow in a storm-fashion that promises a cold night.” Another time he wrote, “I should have answered your letter then and there, but my ink had been frozen and had become

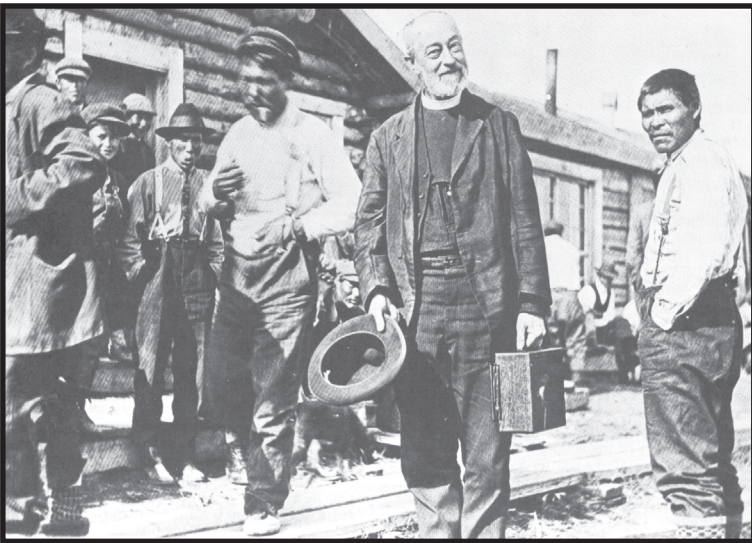
so pale.” And on a November day, “*The days are getting so short that I cannot find time to do much by daylight, and I work much more slowly by lamp light.*”

Toward the end of 1906, Father Jetté was invited to attend an anthropological society meeting in Quebec, or at least to submit a paper. He did not attend, but he did submit an article written in English. It bore the title, “On the Social Condition of the Ten’a.” This was translated into French and read for him at one of the sessions by a fellow Jesuit. It was published in 1907.

In April 1907, the first part of Father Jetté’s grammar was published in *Man*. What makes this article especially significant is that in its first two paragraphs he stakes out most admirably the geographical habitat of the Koyukon people.

On May 14, 1907, Father Jetté became a member of The National Geographic Society. By early 1908, he, an expert cartographer, had ready for publication a manuscript entitled “Geographic Names.” One of his maps covers the entire field of his labors. Over 30 smaller ones deal with more limited areas.

In 1908 and 1909, the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland published his 85-page article, “On Ten’a Folk-Lore.” This consists of a series of Koyukon tales and legends—some still remembered only by the older Koyukon—which he himself heard from people and wrote down. Included among these are tales derived from facts acknowledged as having actually happened. “*These,*” he wrote, “*present*



*Father Julius Jetté, S.J., in Nulato with camera, 1914.
(Courtesy Jesuit Oregon Province Archives 824.03)*

the mythology of the Ten’a and are intimately connected with what may be considered as their historical records. They are especially difficult to obtain, and the natives are very reluctant to let them be taken down in writing. Story-telling is resorted to as an entertainment to pass the long winter evenings. The narrator winds up his tale by stating that he has ‘shortened the winter.’”

On February 25, 1910, Father Jetté wrote: “*My sheep are now scattering towards the hunting grounds, not for any reasonable purpose, for they have no hopes of getting martens, and they have here all the meat they can want, but driven by a blind impulse, irrational and inborn, which makes them crave for the wilds. This instinct is, I believe, irrepressible.*” Something similar may well be said of Father Jetté himself, who, as scholar and scientist, engaged as naturally and instinctively in linguistic and ethnographic research as the Koyukon flock he tended engaged in hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering.

In 1911, Father Jetté’s first of two articles in *Anthropos* appeared. It bears the title, “On the Superstitions of the Ten’a Indians.” His second article in *Anthropos* was the 43-page contribution, “Riddles of the Ten’a Indians.” This is illustrated by seven sketches drawn by himself.

Around this same time, Father Jetté had several other manuscripts almost ready for publication. One, 29 pages long, dated March 25, 1909, is titled, “On the Time-Reckoning of the Ten’a.” It treats the whole broad subject of time as understood by the Koyukon. Their calendar divides the year into 16 months. To illustrate the workings of this calendar, he quoted the proclamations of the Church festivals as he made them to his Kokrines congregation for the year 1909. Here, in translation, is an example: “*On the Sunday following, the seventh day after the moon of the geese has become full, the day on which Christ, who rules over us, rose again, with joy we shall celebrate a great day, that is Easter Sunday (April 11). And then on the second day after the month of the launching of canoes shall have begun (May 20), the day when he ascended back to heaven we shall celebrate.*”

To be continued...

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