

## News from the Rum River Watershed

Volume #2 Issue #4  
July/August 2006

### *The Source of the Rum: Mille Lacs Lake and its Environs*

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#### Editor's Note

I have been rather remiss in acknowledging the wonderful supporters who have donated time, effort, and thought-power in order to make this newsletter possible! First, of course, my advisory committee, who took this newsletter through its first year. Second, those organizations and individuals that have donated monetarily so that this year's issues could come out in hard copy, and be made available at schools, coffee shops and government centers. These include: the Isanti County Sportsman's Club (Jan/Feb issue), John and Bonnie Schlagel of Cambridge (Mar/Apr and May/June issues), and the Spectacle Lake Improvement Association (also towards the May/June issue.) Ideally, we like to print up 300 copies per issue for distribution. This comes to a cost of \$415 per issue. If I have not knocked on your door yet, it is because I have been a bit short on time early this summer!

Therefore, this issue (July/August) will be available mainly by email, and also accessible on the Mille Lacs SWCD website, at [www.millelacsswcd.org/water\\_group\\_news.htm](http://www.millelacsswcd.org/water_group_news.htm). Susan Shaw, water planner for Mille Lacs County, kindly offered that their office put the most current issues online for us, and Barbara Zeroth, conservation technician, has done so. We hope to have our own website within a year.

Feel free to consider a donation to help "Friends of the Rum River" cover publication costs and contact us, even before you hear from one of our members or me. We would definitely appreciate it. It's a great service that we enjoy providing. Our fiscal agent is the Onanegozie RC & D out of Mora, so donations are tax deductible.

Moving on, I am excited to present this issue of "News from the Rum River Watershed", where you will be introduced to another very active group at the north end of the watershed, the Mille Lacs Lake Watershed Management Group. This organization of residents and other interested people have the health of Mille Lacs Lake and its environs at their heart. Those living in lake subwatersheds have a different vantage point of their part of a drainage system than do people living in river subwatersheds. That's because lakeshore residents are all looking towards one "central" drainage point (the lake) while riverside residents tend to see just the portion of the river immediately adjacent to their property, and tend to be more concerned about what's happening upriver to their property than downriver.

It is good to expand that perspective to include one's impact on the *whole* watershed – think of your neighbors. That is why more and more people and organizations are "boning up" on the watershed approach, and are working cooperatively to address challenges. Let's see now what the Mille Lacs Lake people are up to! Most of this is History, which we are making all the time...



*Nathan and his Northern*

*The following articles were submitted by Janet Smude, Aitkin SWCD.*

**Mille Lacs Lake Watershed: Area History (compiled by Joe Felleggy, Mille Lacs Historian)**

Non-native settlement and development in the Mille Lacs Lake watershed was seeded in the 1870s. That decade preceded the peak 20 years of pine logging at Mille Lacs, and predated establishment of lake towns, farms, autos and roads, a 30-year steamboat era, railroad connections to Mille Lacs, lakeshore alteration and shoreland development, and the start of a sportfishing and tourism industry. Nevertheless, as pine harvests crept northward up the Rum River and its tributaries in the 1860s and 1870s, large stands of towering white pine within a few miles of the big lake beckoned the timber interests. And Mille Lacs as a potential "summer resort" began drawing notice among would-be boomers and investors – especially after the establishment of towns in the greater Mille Lacs region.

Intersections of the new Northern Pacific Railroad and the Mississippi River spawned Aitkin (1871), 14 miles north of Mille Lacs; and Brainerd (1870), 20 miles west of the lake. The rise of other towns similarly brought people and commerce to the lake, which in turn encouraged better roads and trails, economic activity, and population growth. These included Mora (1882) to the southeast, and Milaca (1892) and its forerunner "Oak City" (1882) to the south. Prior to the 1870s and 1880s, the more distant communities of Little Falls and Princeton, both dating to the 1850s and about 50 miles from the lake, were the nearest trading centers. Their historic contributions to Mille Lacs development aside, all these towns lie outside the Mille Lacs Lake watershed.

The small lake towns – including Garrison, Isle, Malmo, and Wahkon – trace their histories to the 1880s. Also beginning in the 1880s, settlements evolved at Nichols and Wealthwood on the north shore, and Cove on the south shore. There were other small settlement-era (circa 1900) trading places – often with a store and post office, and maybe a blacksmith shop and sawmill – located in or near the watershed within several miles of Mille Lacs Lake. Glory and Bennettville in Aitkin County; Dykeman, Flak, and Neutral in Crow Wing County; and Opstead and Redtop east of the lake in Mille Lacs County, are examples of such short-lived "towns."

Onamia, 4 miles south of Mille Lacs Lake, is situated near the Rum River's exit from Onamia Lake, one of three "rice lakes" (also including Ogechie and Shakopee) downstream from the outlet of Mille Lacs. Onamia grew as a "gateway to Mille Lacs" following the arrival of the Soo Line railroad in 1908, and with successive improvements on Highway 169 and its forerunners.

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Indian community on the west shore has seen marked growth in buildings and infrastructure since the 1960s, and especially after the start of Grand Casino Mille Lacs in 1990.

**Pine logging era.** A timber industry in the lake region continues, but "logging" in Mille Lacs history most often refers to the peak era of pine logging operations at the lake beginning about 1885. Much of the pine harvest within several miles of the lake was landed on the ice and later boomed and towed by steamer to the Rum River outlet for drives to sawmills at Anoka and the Twin Cities, and later to the large Foley-Bean mill at Milaca. This large plant closed in 1907, the symbolic end date for major harvesting of the Mille Lacs pineries. Local sawmills inland from Mille Lacs have continued to process hardwoods and other species.

**Roads, railroads, and resorts.** Article 3 of the 1855 Treaty, which created the original 61,000 acre Mille Lacs Indian Reservation that later included the present Kathio, South Harbor, and Isle Harbor townships, provided that \$5,000 be spent on a road from the mouth of the Rum River (at Anoka) to Mille Lacs. In 1861, the federal government built a "military road" to facilitate the movement of troops and supplies between Fort Ripley (on the Mississippi River between Brainerd and Little Falls) and Lake Superior – via Mille Lacs' north shore.

From the 1870s forward, as settlement in the Mille Lacs region grew, foot trails became wagonroads, some of which transformed into roads and highways capable of carrying auto traffic. The first automobiles reached Mille Lacs before 1910, and road upgrades became essential during the transition from horse-and-buggy to autos and trucks. The Soo Line (Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Sault Ste. Marie Railway) was completed between Brooten and Duluth in late 1909, reaching the south Mille Lacs area in 1908. The Soo Line connected the lake to the outside world like never before, ending years of speculation about which part of Mille Lacs would most directly benefit from rail service. Over the next several years, depots were built at Onamia, Wahkon, Isle, and Redtop. The railroad contributed to commerce, development, settlement, and tourism at Mille Lacs before auto traffic blossomed, and for several more decades.

As part of the Babcock Plan for Minnesota roads, the Scenic Highway (forerunner of present #169) project reached Mille Lacs about 1920. A resort-building boom followed. Places like Bay View, the Blue Goose Inn, Izatys, Rocky Reef, and Shore Acres date to the 1920s. The next several decades brought more resorts. But since the 1960s, the development trend has been towards fewer resorts and more lakeshore cabins and permanent homes. Now, there are fewer active resorts on the entire west shore than there once were on Wigwam Bay alone!

There is less "main highway" presently hugging the lake than in the early days. Highway 18 on the north shore, built in 1937-38, has fewer close-to-the-lake stretches than the old primitive "lake road." The post-1950s trend is similar for Highway 169 on the west shore.

In the early 1990s, several modern hotel/resort complexes were built, including Eddy's Lake Mille Lacs Resort (southwest shore), and McQuoid's Inn & Conference Center (Isle). Izatys Golf & Yacht Club (south shore) evolved from one of the earliest resorts on Mille Lacs into a large modern resort complex with inland marina, town homes, golf courses, and convention accommodations. The Econolodge (southwest shore) and Garrison Inn & Suites (originally Country Inn & Suites) were built in the 1990s.

**Lake traffic.** Steamboats – sidewheelers and propeller-driven craft – operated on Mille Lacs between 1885 and 1915. There were never more than several steamers in business at a time. These were mainly work boats intended to tow booms of pine logs, landed on the ice in winter, across the lake to the Rum River outlet for downriver drives. The 101-foot Queen Anne, the largest of these steamboats, burned cordwood for fuel. In 1909, envisioning steamboat links between the lake towns and the new Soo Line Railroad at Wahkon, the Mille Lacs Transportation Company built steamboat piers at points around the lake. The scheme soon fizzled because of docking and navigation problems due to severe drought and low water in 1910, and also because of rapid growth in overland transportation. Aside from logging work, Mille Lacs steamers also carried cream, building and household supplies, passengers, and even cows.

The first gasoline-powered launches appeared shortly after 1900. These were private boats, often owned by investors and real estate agents. During the 1910s, at least one party, headquartered at Wahkon, towed a barge for hauling freight. Prior to the later 1920s, much of the "launch service" on Mille Lacs was for excursionists and "joy riders."

**Open-water fishing.** In the pre-1920s, a few places rented rowboats, usually homemade flat bottoms, to sport anglers. By the end of the '20s dozens of fishing resorts maintained fleets of rental boats. Some outboard motors were in evidence, especially among resorters who towed strings of rowboats to and from the walleye fishing grounds, mainly in May and June. Group fishing on gasoline-powered wooden launches gained popularity in the 1930s and 1940s. Launches provided visiting anglers, who lacked seaworthy boats and knowledge about the lake, offshore "deep water" fishing opportunities with a guide. Boat construction has changed from wood to fiberglass and metal. Launch fishing remains popular. Night launch trips increased dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s.

A key trend during a century of sport fishing at Mille Lacs includes angler use of more of the lake. Even for guides, prior to the 1930s, the "fishing season" meant mainly the mid-May through June inshore fishing period. Now, with navigational aids and improved boats, anglers fish anywhere on the lake. Since the 1930s, anglers have become increasingly familiar with offshore mud flats in the north half of the lake and deep gravel structure in the south portion, thus creating a summer walleye fishery. A summer-fall shallow reef-top fishery, night trolling with artificial lures, slip bobbering deep and shallow with leeches, and other methods, have combined to equip the Mille Lacs devotee with a season-long fishing repertoire. Nevertheless, May, June, and early July remain the busiest, while mid-July through fall see far less lake traffic.

Mille Lacs experienced two periods of market fishing. From the 1880s until 1912, settlers participated in a spring commercial fishery (often with hook and line) which saw barrels of iced down fish hauled by team and wagon to railroad connections in Aitkin, Brainerd, Milaca, and other towns. For several years at the end of World War I, a state fish-buying agent, located at Wahkon, facilitated the sale of Mille Lacs fish as a wartime public health measure.

**Ice fishing.** Prior to 1950, much of the "ice fishing" on Mille Lacs was really spearing for northern pike, typically within walking distance of shore. Winter angling for walleyes – with resorters plowing lake roads, renting fish houses, and storing fish houses for private parties – mushroomed in the 1950s. Annual fish house counts rose from about 500 in 1950 to 5,000 a decade later. Since then, the annual counts have typically fluctuated from 2,500 to 6,000 - about 3,500 in the 2002-03 season. The first resort roads to the mud flats, with fish house rentals on the flats, date to about 1970. Increased use of snowmobiles in the 1970s, 4-wheel-drive pickups in the 1980s, and ATVs and navigational aids in the 1990s, have spread out the ice-fishing effort.

**Miscellaneous.** Small-scale farming and livestock-raising in all directions from Mille Lacs date to the pre-1900 settlement era, but with no large "operations" right at the lake. A trend over the past 50 or 60 years includes a diminishment of farming directly adjacent to the lake and its intermittent feeder streams. Cattle ranching on the Mille Lacs meadows, north of the lake and in the watershed, is a development of recent decades.

Light industries have variously come, gone, and survived at Mille Lacs. These have included the manufacture of fishing tackle, wild-rice processing, and even a short-lived "pickle factory" at Wahkon. Most local boat-building ceased around 1970. Fort Mille Lacs Village, a popular tourist attraction for almost 50 years, closed in 2000.

The annual mid-summer tullibee die-offs have trended downward since 1970. The tullibee or lake cisco (*coregonus artedii*) is a cold-water species and a relative of the whitefish. Mille Lacs is at the southern extreme of this fish's range. Years ago, summer kills of tullibee at Mille Lacs (and at other central Minnesota walleye lakes) were taken for granted. Thousands of them dotted the lake surface and lined the beaches during July and August hot spells. It still happens, but mainly on a lesser scale.

### A MILLE LACS TIMELINE

<b>1870s</b>	A handful of settlers at Mille Lacs, some pine logging south of the lake
<b>1880s</b>	Lake towns spring up - including settlements at present Garrison, Isle, Malmo, and Wahkon
<b>1885-1915</b>	Steamboats work on Mille Lacs
<b>1880s-1907</b>	Pine logging heyday in the Mille Lacs region
<b>1890s</b>	Original Mille Lacs Indian reservation opened to homesteaders and logging operations
<b>1890s-1912; 1918-21</b>	Commercial fishing and "state fishing" for market, mainly in spring
<b>1900s</b>	Early gasoline launches appear; first autos reach Mille Lacs

- 1908** Soo Line railroad complete through Onamia, Wahkon, and Isle, with spur and dock at Wahkon
- 1910s** Roads begin transition from wagon trails to highways
- 1920s** Scenic Highway (forerunner of #169) brings more traffic to Mille Lacs, launching modern resort era; beginnings of outboard motor use
- 1925-1930s** Electric service comes to Mille Lacs
- 1930s** Start of offshore summer walleye fishery, mainly with launches; local boat building industry develops
- 1935** Lake level hits modern record low
- 1940s** More resorts and private cabins
- 1943, 1972, 2002** Modern record-high water levels on Mille Lacs
- 1950s** Annual winter fish house counts rise from about 500 to 5,000
- 1950s-1970s** Private inland harbors are developed at some resorts and private places; construction of Garrison Creek Marina
- 1980s-1990s** In-the-lake breakwater/marinas built at some resorts
- 1960s-1970s** Fiberglass and metal boats replace wooden rowboats; private boat ownership soars; more resort and public access boat launching ramps
- 1970s** Minnesota enacts lakeshore development guidelines, adopted by counties; more regulation of shoreland use and septic systems
- 1970s-1980s** Traditional annual tullibee summer kills become less noticeable
- 1980s** Mille Lacs Lake Advisory Association (MLLAA) launches "Keep Mille Lacs Clean" campaign, resorts conduct on-lake clean-ups after ice fishing seasons; dumpsters and on-lake restrooms more available for winter anglers.
- 1990** Start of Grand Casino Mille Lacs complex at Vineland, north of Rum River
- 1990s** Loran-C and GPS navigational aids, plus to-scale map of Mille Lacs fishing grounds, encourage more offshore fishing
- 1990s** "Clearer water" is a major discussion point among anglers and DNR fisheries biologists
- 1990s** Several large hotel/resorts built in early 1990s

### **The Lake and its Watershed**

Mille Lacs Lake is the second largest lake in Minnesota with a surface area of 207 square miles. The lake is shallow, with a maximum depth of 43 feet and a mean depth of 21 feet. This means the lake does not stratify (polymictic). The lake's sandy shores and good water quality make it ideally suited for walleye production. Indeed, Mille Lacs Lake is the premier walleye lake in Minnesota. The Mille Lacs Lake watershed is 182 square miles, or 88% of the lake's surface area. MPCA (1982) indicates land use in the watershed is 20% agricultural and 80% hardwood-coniferous forest and marsh. This study has identified 13 subwatershed streams in addition to the direct drainage from the shoreline area. The lake has one surface outlet, the Rum River.

The current water quality is good, although some water quality problems could develop in the future. It has been estimated the lake contributes \$150 to \$200 million dollars to the regional and state economies each year. More than 2,000 recreational-based jobs are maintained by the continued excellence of the area's resources. There is a local desire to promote the further development of this recreation-based economy.

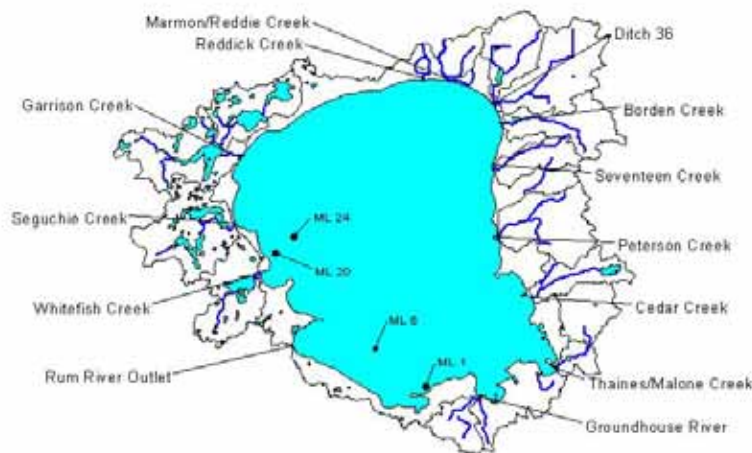
Development around Mille Lacs Lake is continuing at a rapid pace. The shore length is 76 miles with more than 70% being developed with seasonal and year-round homes, businesses and other commercial interests. The majority of these parcels use on-site sewage treatment systems.

While the lake has been studied by many agencies, the available information is incomplete. There have been three main studies. The first report was completed in 1976 by Adams V. Grover and Associates; the second in 1980 by the East Central Regional Development Commission (ECRDC); and the last in 1994 by the MPCA. On the basis of these studies, the lake's water quality appears to have improved. Unfortunately, due to the incomplete nature of

the studies and their different methodologies, it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions regarding the causes of improved water quality. Nonetheless, watershed-wide reduction in agricultural lands as well as the improved design and maintenance of on-site septic systems has probably been important in this regard.

**The Mille Lacs Lake Watershed Management Group (MLLWMG)** was formed in August 1997 to “provide a citizen driven forum encouraging a partnership of stakeholders participating as equals in protecting and enhancing the aesthetic, economic and recreational value of lakes, streams, shoreland and all land classifications in the Mille Lacs Lake Watershed.” The group obtained a Clean Water Partnership Grant in 1999 to assist in the development of a Watershed Management Plan. This grant funded water quality monitoring of watershed lakes and tributaries, planning and zoning discussions, educational newsletters and brochures, septic system inventories, analysis of a sediment core sample, and more. Since this grant was completed in 1993, the watershed group has hosted and partnered with other agencies to share information on shoreland restoration, develop and compile information bags that will share shoreland BMP’s with new lakeshore landowners. This summer volunteers will undertake an inventory of lakeshore parcels in Aitkin County. The MLLWMG is comprised of local volunteers and agency personnel, working together to improve the water quality of lakes and streams in the watershed. More information is available by calling the Aitkin County SWCD at (218) 927-6565.

## Lake & Tributary Sampling Sites



- streams
- watershed boundary
- Lake sampling site



**Excerpt from: Father Hennepin's Description of Louisiana By Canoe to the Upper Mississippi in 1680 (Translated by Marion E. Cross)**

*"The great river (the Colbert, or Mississippi) is a short league wide almost everywhere; but in some places two leagues. It is divided by numerous islands which are covered with trees entwined with so many vines that the islands are almost impenetrable. The river has no important tributaries from the west except the Otontenta (the Des Moines or Iowa River) and another river (the Minnesota River) that comes from the west-northwest to join the Colbert seven or eight leagues from the Falls of St. Anthony of Padua.*

*"On the eastern side there is first a small river, then another beyond it which the Indians call Wisconsin (Hennepin spells this 'Ouisconsin') or Misconsin; this comes from the east and east-northeast. By following the Wisconsin for sixty leagues and portaging to another river (the Fox River), which is extraordinarily winding near its source, Green Bay can be reached. The Wisconsin, almost as wide as the Seignelay or Illinois River, empties into the Colbert a hundred leagues above the Seignelay...*

*"There is a lake thirty leagues farther north (of the Black River) which we named the Lake of Tears (Lake Pepin), because when the Indians who had taken us wanted to kill us, some of them wept all night to make the others consent to our death. The lake, formed by the Colbert River, is seven leagues long and about four leagues wide. There is an appreciable current at its inlet and outlet but not in the center of the lake.*

*"Forty leagues farther on there is a river full of rapids (the St. Croix River)... Navigation is interrupted ten or twelve leagues upstream by a waterfall. I named it the Falls of St. Anthony of Padua in gratitude for favors God did me through the intercession of that great saint, whom we chose as patron and protector of all our enterprises. The waterfall is forty or fifty feet high and has a small rocky island, shaped like a pyramid, in the center.*

*"The mountains bordering the Colbert River extend only as far as the Wisconsin River, about a hundred and twenty leagues. Above that point the river flows from the west and northwest. The Indians have ascended a long distance on this river, but we were unable to learn from them where the river rises. They told us only that twenty to thirty leagues below the source there is a waterfall, at the foot of which are villages where people of the prairies, called the Tinthonha (the Teton), live during part of the year. On the right-hand side, eight leagues above the Falls of St. Anthony of Padua, is the narrow mouth of the Issati or Nadouessioux River (the Rum River.) Ascending this river northward for about seventy leagues, one reaches Lake Baude or Issati (Mille Lacs Lake), its source. We named the river St. Francis.*

*"The lake spreads over vast swamps where wild rice grows. Wild rice is also found in many other places as far as the end of Green Bay. This kind of grain grows in swampy land without being sown. It resembles oats, but tastes better and has longer stems and stalks. The Indians gather it in season, the women binding many stalks together with basswood bark to prevent its being entirely eaten by the flocks of duck and teal found in the region. The Indians lay in a store of it for part of the year, to eat when their hunting season is over.*

*"Lake Baude or Issati is about seventy leagues west of Lake Superior. It is impossible to go by land from one lake to the other because of the spongy marshland. It is possible, though difficult, to go there over the snow on snowshoes. By water there are many portages, and it is more than a hundred and fifty leagues because of necessary detours...*

*"Near Lake Baude are numerous other lakes which give rise to several rivers on the banks of which live the Issati, Nadouessans, Tinthonha or men of the prairie, Oudebathon or men of the river, and Chongaskethon or tribe of the dog or wolf, 'Chonga' in their language meaning 'dog' or 'wolf.' There are also other tribes called as a group Nadouessioux. (Hennepin did not realize that all the preceding listed tribes were all divisions of the Nadouessioux or Dakota.) These*

*Indians can assemble eight to nine thousand warriors who are brave fighters, swift runners, and excellent bowman."*

2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, pp. 88-92. Published for the Minnesota Society of the Colonial Dames of America, The University of Minnesota Press, 1938. Used with permission.

*"We did not think of the open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested with wild animals and savage people.' To us it was tame. Earth was beautiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it 'wild' for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was for us the 'Wild West' began." - Lame Deer 1994. (From K.L. Callahan's 2000 U. of MN thesis, Dept. of Anthropology)*

### **A New Vision: Developments with *Friends of the Rum River***

The FRR focus group has been meeting over the past few months to fine-tune our vision and mission statements, and to pull together a few core values and set goals. That is challenging work, but fun. Upon Fran Munday's suggestion, we have combined the FRR vision and mission statements with that of this newsletter. I think the result is better than ever. How about you?



Even more fun, is planning events! Our first "Friends" shindig is to Canoe/Kayak/Cleanup the Rum, on Saturday, August 26<sup>th</sup>, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., putting in at the Cambridge City Park and pulling out at Isanti. Wally Hed is the coordinator for this event, and can be reached at 763-689-9619, or [wallyandchar@aol.com](mailto:wallyandchar@aol.com) to reserve your spot and answer questions. I'm the back-up contact, at 612-309-5838, or [kaericsson@cs.com](mailto:kaericsson@cs.com) (Kriste.) If we have too many sunny days in the next month, our back-up date is tentatively planned for Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>. Otherwise, I suppose we could just "walk the Rum"! (9 miles.) Stay tuned!

### **Mission Statement:**

To provide a base of knowledge that we can use to make wise decisions concerning the Rum River watershed, and to preserve, enhance, and enjoy its resources.

### **Vision Statement**

To improve our ability to care for the Rum River watershed and all of the associated watersheds which make up the Mississippi River system.

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