

Hobo



My Drift

Title: Hobo

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Date: 23 Jul 2020

Article Number: 338-2020-16

What is the difference between Hobos, Tramps and Bums?

This article is about “Hobos”, but before we get into that, we need to know what a Hobo is. Most people think Hobos, Tramps and Bums are the same. This is not true!

In A Nutshell - Hobo, tramp, and bum are all terms for a person who is homeless and without a steady job. While most folks use these words interchangeably, there is a difference between the three—especially to those who live the Hobo lifestyle. To be precise, a **Hobo** is someone who travels from place to place looking for work, a **Tramp** is someone who travels but avoids work whenever possible, and a **Bum** does not care to work or travel.

Hobo, tramp, and bum are not the only terms used to describe these homeless people. Remember that there can be a lot of overlap with all of these terms. Here is a partial list with a brief description:

A **Vagabond** is a person who wanders from place to place without a fixed home or job. This person is usually poor but could be rich. The term vagabond carries the connotation of a carefree and careless person. While it is usually not desirable to be a vagabond, the word does carry a romantic idea of living outside of the rat race.

A **Drifter** is a person who is continually moving from place to place, without any fixed home or job. Drifters have the desire to travel somewhere (anywhere) to get away from normal everyday life. They want to explore to see new things and meet new people and find new adventures.



A **Vagrant** is a person without a home or regular job who wanders from place to place and lives by begging.

A **Beggar** is a poor person who asks or begs other people for money and/or food. Another word for a beggar is "**Panhandler**," although both terms are quite offensive. No one wants to be known as a beggar. Most beggars are homeless and either don't want to work or have not been able to find a job.

A **Transient** is a person who is staying or working in one place for only a short time before moving to another place.

A **Wanderer** is a person who wanders idly from place to place without a permanent home or employment.

A **Gutter Punk** is a homeless or transient person who displays a variety of specific lifestyle traits and characteristics that are associated with the punk subculture. Attributes may include unkempt dreadlocks, nose rings, Mohawk hairstyles, tattooed faces, etc.



Gutter Punks
What a Lovely Group!

Types of Homeless

As we have learned in my many articles on the homeless, there are four broad types of homelessness:

Chronic Homelessness

This is the best-known type of homelessness. Chronic homelessness is defined as being homeless for longer than a year. These are the dirty bums we all see in Honolulu living in the parks and on the streets. Most of these people are struggling with a mental illness, a physical disability, and/or an addiction.

These homeless are typically older people who only move when forced to do so by the police or other authorities.



Chronic Homeless

These people are BUMS – They don't want to work or move to another place

Episodic Homelessness

Episodic homelessness is defined as a person who has experienced three episodes of homelessness within a given year. Episodic homelessness usually afflicts younger people that are fighting health issues and/or addiction. Many of these people hold jobs for short periods of time. They are not as visible as the chronic homeless and tend to sleep in their car or a tent in an out-of-the-way place.

Transitional Homelessness

This is one of the more common types of homelessness. This form of homelessness is defined as a person going through a major life change or catastrophic event. Many times when people lose their jobs suddenly, they face transitional homelessness while they look for a new job. Some become Hobos.

Hidden Homelessness

Hidden homelessness often goes unreported. These are individuals that are couch-surfing without immediate prospects for permanent housing. They will often rely on relatives or friends for a place to live. Since they never access homeless support resources, they are never included in national statistics. Hobos, tramps, and several of those other similar types of homeless people we discussed earlier also fall into this category.



TRAMPS

Hobo History

With the end of the American Civil War in the 1865, many discharged veterans returning home began hopping freight trains. Others looking for work on the American frontier followed the railways west aboard freight trains in the late 19th century. In the early 1900s, the number of hobos and tramps in the United States was about 500,000 (about 0.6% of the US population at the time).



Most Hobos travel around the United States (except for Hawaii) by Train

During the Great Depression, millions of unemployed men became “hobos,” homeless vagrants who wandered in search of work. Much of this migration took place after the worst years of the Dust Bowl (1931-1935), when millions of acres of farmland became useless after the topsoil was blown off following years of drought, over planting, and severe windstorms. By some accounts, more than 2 million men (and a few ladies) became hobos, often begging for food or work at farmhouses. If a farmer was known to feed or hire hobos, the hobos would mark the lane with a sign that indicated friendliness.

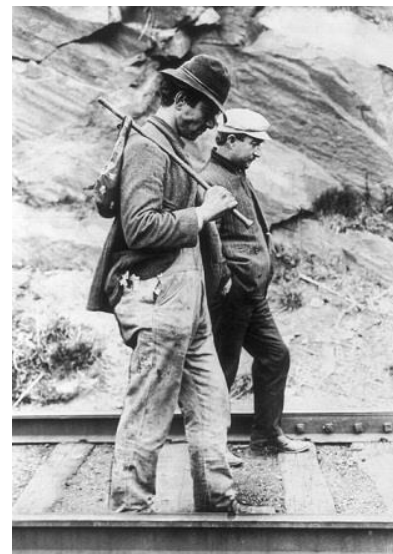


These once-proud men, the hobos rode the rails or hitchhiked their way across America, in search of jobs and a better life. To move from place to place, many hobos jumped into the box cars of moving trains. This practice often led to death or the loss of limbs. Many hobos were killed or lost a foot/leg when they fell under the train wheels when trying to jump aboard a train. It was also easy to be trapped between cars, and one could freeze to death in bad weather.



In response to the increasing numbers of hobos, the railways hired guards, known as "Bulls." Bulls were in charge of beating or arresting hobos who boarded the trains without a ticket.

In 1990, the number of hobos was only about 20,000. Today in 2020, there are less than 10,000 people still living the hobo life in America. Modern freight trains are much faster and thus harder to ride than in the 1930s, but they can still be boarded in or near railroad yards.



Where did the word "Hobo" come from? The origin of the term is unknown. But most Etymologists think that it was derived from the term "hoe-boy", meaning "farmhand", or a greeting such as "Ho, boy", or a syllabic abbreviation of "homeward bound, or it come from the words "homeless boy".



Group of Hobos gather near railroad tracks



LIFE OF A HOBO

Modern Day Hobo Mark Nichols — aka ‘Hobo Shoestring’ — finds freedom, danger in train hopping

Mark Nichols (an Army Veteran) prefers to go by the name “Hobo Shoestring” and he is freight train hopper. It means he rides around from place to place, stowing away onboard trains. He has a modest social media following and regularly uploads videos to his YouTube channel as well as his Facebook.

All of that stopped on October 18th last year, and since then no one has heard from him. His closest friend, a man who wishes to be identified only as “John” says that this is completely unlike Shoestring. “I first met him when I was a train-rider back In New Orleans, in 1993. We’ve been in touch every few days since then,” John said.

People from all over have been looking for Shoestring since he disappeared. He has a community of followers and supporters from all over the country. Some are fellow hobos while others are just people who like watching his YouTube videos. All of them are concerned now for his well-being. People in different cities who are inside the hobo community have been talking to each other, looking for any sign of Shoestring.

“It’s such a fascinating community, and they watch out for each other. They all talk to each other and look out for one another.” Said Wendy, who is a follower of Shoestring’s.

Shoestring was last known to be in Shreveport, Louisiana, under the Common St. overpass. He posted a picture from that location at 5:50 pm Wednesday the 18th.

The hobo community is searching for answers, but so far has come up empty. Several people on his YouTube channel have commented that they are coming to Shreveport to help look for Shoestring. No one is sure if a missing persons report has ever been filed with Shreveport Police or not.

Shoestring is a 47-year old Caucasian male. He has short greying hair and a very long grey beard. He has two tattoos, one on each arm. He is approximately six feet tall and weighs approximately 160 lbs. Shoestring's friends ask if you see him to comment on his YouTube page.

Hobo Culture

Hobos were noted for, among other things, the distinctive lingo that arose among them. Some examples follow:

Hobo Term	Explanation
Accommodation car	the caboose of a train
Bad road	a train line rendered useless by some hobo's bad action or crime
Barnacle	a person who sticks to one job a year or more
Big house	prison
Bindle stick	a collection of belongings wrapped in cloth and tied around a stick
Bo	the common way one hobo referred to another
Boil up	to get oneself as clean as possible
Bone polisher	a mean dog
Bone orchard	a graveyard
Bull	railroad officer
Bullets	beans
Burger	lunch
California blankets	newspapers
Cannonball	a fast train
Catch the westbound	to die
Cooties	body lice
Cover with the moon	sleep out in the open
Cow crate	a railroad stock car
Doggin' it	traveling by Greyhound bus
Flop	place to sleep
Glad rags	one's best clothes
Grease the track	to be runover by a train
Jungle	an area off a railroad where hobos camp
Jungle buzzard	a hobo or tramp who preys on his own
Maeve	young girl hobo
Mulligan stew	a type of stew combining whatever food they have
On the fly	jumping a moving train

Padding the hoof	to travel by foot
Possum belly	to ride on the roof on his/her stomach to avoid being blown off
Punk	any young kid
Road kid	a young hobo
Road stake	small amount of money a hobo may keep in case of an emergency
Rum dum	a drunkard
Sky pilot	a preacher or minister
Snipes	cigarette butts
Spare biscuits	looking for food in a garbage can
Tokay blanket	drinking alcohol to stay warm

So, did you know that Hobos were the first to use these words or phrases?

Ethical Code

Hobo culture—though it has always had many points of contact with the mainstream American culture of its day—has also always been somewhat separate and distinct, with different cultural norms. Hobo culture's ethics have always been subject to disapproval from the mainstream culture; for example, hopping freight trains, an integral part of hobo life, has always been illegal in the U.S. Nonetheless, the ethics of hobo culture can be regarded as fairly coherent and internally consistent, at least to the extent that any culture's various individual people maintain the same ethical standards. That is to say, any attempt to get rid of hobo ethics is bound to be foiled at least to some extent by the diversity of hobos and their ideas of the world. **An ethical code was created by a hobo union created in the mid-1800s to dodge anti-vagrancy laws, which did not apply to union members during its 1889 National Hobo Convention – Here it is:**

1. Decide your own life; don't let another person run or rule you.
2. When in town, always respect the local law and officials, and try to be a gentleman at all times.
3. Don't take advantage of someone who is in a vulnerable situation, locals or other hobos.
4. Always try to find work, even if temporary, and always seek out jobs nobody wants. By doing so you not only help a business along but ensure employment should you return to that town again.
5. When no employment is available, make your own work by using your added talents at crafts.
6. Do not allow yourself to become a stupid drunk and set a bad example for locals' treatment of other hobos.

7. When jungling (staying) in town, respect handouts and do not wear them out; another hobo will be coming along who will need them as badly, if not worse than you.
8. Always respect nature; do not leave garbage where you are jungling.
9. If in a community jungle, always pitch in and help.
10. Try to stay clean and boil up wherever possible.
11. When traveling, ride your train respectfully. Take no personal chances, cause no problems with the operating crew or host railroad; act like an extra crew member.
12. Do not cause problems in a train yard; another hobo will be coming along who will need passage through that yard.
13. Do not allow other hobos to molest children; expose all molesters to authorities – they are the worst garbage to infest any society.
14. Help all runaway children and try to induce them to return home.
15. Help your fellow hobos whenever and wherever needed; you may need their help someday.
16. If present at a hobo court and you have testimony, give it. Whether for or against the accused, your voice counts!



Hobo asking for a job or food

America would be much better off if we all lived by and followed the Hobo Ethical Code. Well, maybe we could do without the riding trains part.

Conventions

There are numerous hobo conventions throughout the United States each year. Some conventions are part of railroad conventions or "railroad days". Others are quasi-private affairs, hosted by long-time hobos. Still others are ad hoc—that is, they are held surreptitiously on private land. Some of these conventions are held in abandoned quarries along major rivers.

Most non-mainstream conventions are held at current or historical railroad stops. The most notable is the National Hobo Convention held in Britt, Iowa. The town first hosted the Convention in 1900, but there followed a hiatus of thirty-three years. Since 1934 the Convention has been held annually in Britt, on the second weekend in August.



2019 National Hobo Convention held in Britt, Iowa

I'm sorry to announce that the 2020 National Hobo Convention has been canceled due to the Coronavirus. The Hobo Museum will also be closed over the summer as well.

Notable hobos and notables who have hoboed



Harry Kirby McClintock
Oct 8, 1882 – Apr 24, 1957
Singer, songwriter, and poet



Bruce "Utah" Phillips
May 15, 1935 – May 23, 2008
Folk singer and storyteller



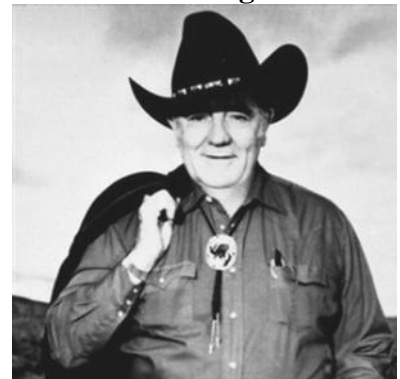
Jack Black
1871 - 1932
Professional burglar/author



Jack Dempsey
Jun 24, 1895 – May 31, 1983
Professional boxer



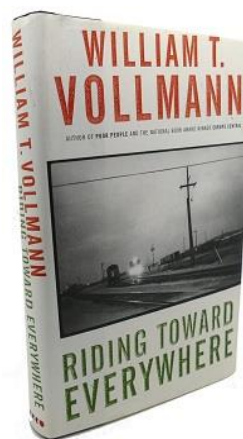
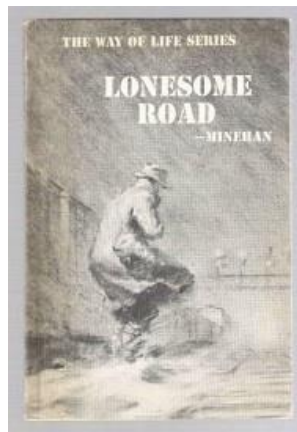
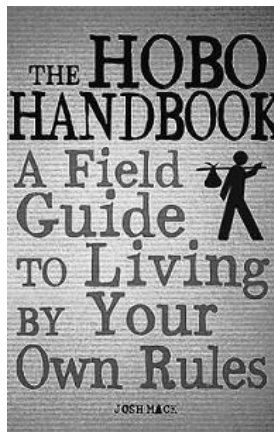
Robert Mitchum
Aug 6, 1917 – Jul 1, 1997
Actor



Louis L'Amour
Mar 22, 1908 – Jun 10, 1988
Novelist and story writer

There are hundreds of BOOKS about Hobos – here are ten (10) good ones:

1. **The Hobo Handbook - A Field Guide to Living by Your Own Rules**, by Josh Mack, 2011
2. **From Coast to Coast** with Jack London
3. **Hard Travellin': The Hobo and His History** by Kenneth Allsop
4. **Hobo** by Eddy Joe Cotton, 2002
5. **On the Road** by Jack Kerouac
6. **One More Train to Ride: The Underground World of Modern American Hobos** by Clifford William
7. **Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes** by Ted Conover, 2001
8. **Sister of The Road: The Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha** - (as told to) Dr. Ben Reitman
9. **You Can't Win** by Jack Black
10. **Riding Toward Everywhere** by William T. Vollmann



There are also many Movies, TV Shows, Songs and Fictional Characters about Hobos and Tramps but I'm not going to list them. Except for this one:

Everybody's Favorite Tramp

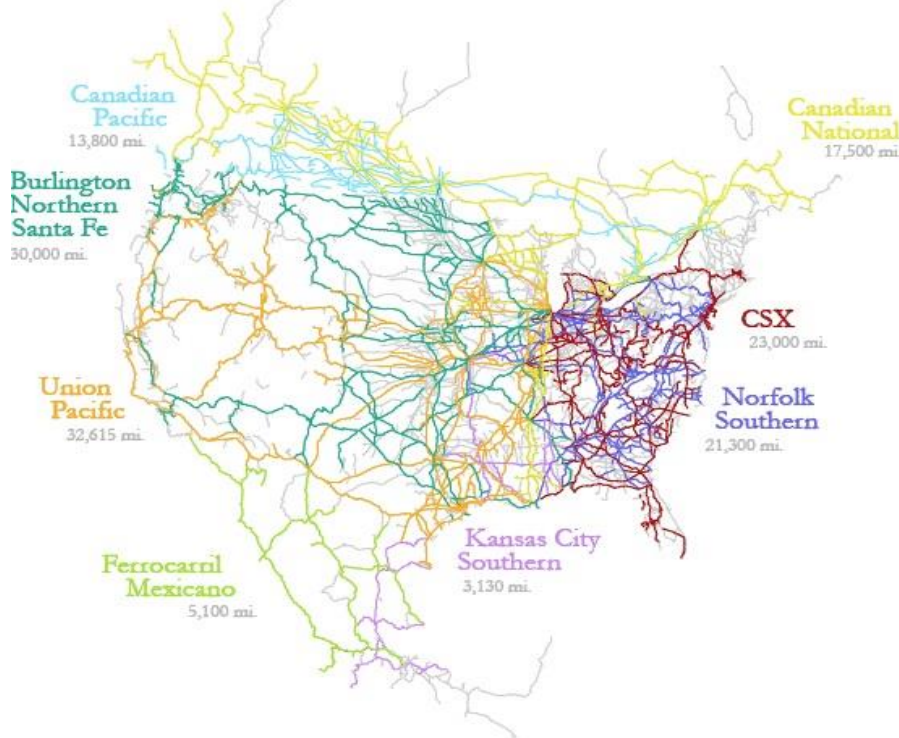


Red Skelton



Freddie the Freeloader

North America Freight Rail Overview



Running on almost 140,000 route miles, the U.S. freight rail network is widely considered the largest, safest, and most cost-efficient freight system in the world. The nearly \$80-billion freight rail industry is operated by seven Class I railroads (railroads with operating revenues of \$490 million or more) and 22 regional and 584 local/short line railroads. It provides more than 167,000 jobs across the United States and offers ancillary benefits that other modes of transportation cannot, including reductions in road congestion, highway fatalities, fuel consumption, greenhouse gases, cost of logistics, and public infrastructure maintenance costs.

Unlike roadways, U.S. freight railroads are owned by private organizations who are responsible for their own maintenance and improvement projects. Compared with other major modes of transportation, railroad owners invest one of the highest percentages of revenues (19 percent) to maintain and add capacity to their system, spending nearly \$25 billion annually.



A Little Hobo Insight

*"My experiences made me a lot more humble
and I appreciate the smaller things in life –
like a good bed and something to eat."*

*"Don't grieve for me my bosom friend
For I have listened to the wind
Blow down the canyons in the night
And chase the shadows in their flight.
I've rode the rails of the old SP
While the Lord above looked after me.
I've look down from the mountains high
And heard the screaming eagles cry.
I've searched for gold and hunted bear
I think I've been most everywhere."*

~ hobo Archie Frost, Missouri.



Hobo Jungle Camp Fire

Some Hobo Poetry

THE PENNSBURG CAMP FIRE

by Totem Pole Rik Palieri

*A young hobo, hopped off a box car, just outside of town,
and found a quiet little jungle where he could lay his bindle down.*

*He gathered some dry firewood, to brighten up the night,
but when he struck his match, he saw an awfully eery sight.
For the campfire glowed and sparkled with a brilliant rainbow flame
flickering and dancing like the headlight of a fast west bound train.*

*Then walking out of the fire's cinders and through the smokey air,
came the ghosts of some old hoboes, he thought he'd met somewhere.*

*They came and shook his hand, as all good hobos do
then offered up a spud or two and started boiling up a stew.
Their calm and friendly manners finally calmed the young Bo's fright.
He asked if they could jungle up together and spend the lonesome night*

*"Each of us caught the Westbound", one Bo said with a tear,
but we all come back to Pennsburg, if only once a year,
On the third week in September when fall is almost near,
we hobo out of heaven and jungle up right here.*

*You see this old hobo jungle is a mighty sacred spot,
where hobos came year after year and camped on this very lot.
It was one of the best hobo gatherings, that you could ever find,
where hobos were respected and townsfolk treated them oh so fine".*

*They all looked into the campfire for it was almost dawn,
then the Bo's made up their packs and said, they'd be moving on.
Then there was a mighty whistle and the camp fire filled with steam,
and all the old hobos vanished, like it was all just a crazy dream.
The young Bo, sat bewildered and said, "How could this really be?
Is it the whisky I've been drinking or is my mind playing tricks on me?"*

*Then he looked into the fire and what he saw could not explain,
for there were his hobo buddies, riding on a fiery train.
The train sounded one last whistle as his hobo pals said, "So Long"
then the wind blew the flames out, and the campfire light was gone
Then the young Bo packed his bindle and walked down to the track.*

*He hopped inside a boxcar, but knew that he'd be back
For the magic of Pennsburg's campfire, still lives in all the hearts,
of every Bo who went there, and camped beneath the stars*

*And someday in the future when all of us are gone,
A space age traveler will light the fire, and the magic will live on.*

MY STORY



Rio Grande Railroad Train

(That is Mount Timpanogos in the background – I grew up in a small town called Pleasant Grove (in Utah) that is located at the base of this mountain)

I have been fascinated with trains for as long as I can remember. While growing up in Pleasant Grove, I could hear the Union Pacific trains going through town. The tracks were only a few blocks southwest of our house and the train would blow its whistle before crossing every street and the highway. The Rio Grande railroad also went through Pleasant Grove, but this was further west closer to Utah Lake where we could not hear it.

We had a Hobo/Tramp Jungle (Campsite) in Pleasant Grove in a small apple orchard. This campsite was just past where the Union Pacific trains crossed over Highway 89. This railroad bridge had an open area under the tracks and a small opening below where we could see the cars going under the bridge. This area was one of our hideouts when I was a kid. Since the tramp campsite (we called them tramps) was close by, sometimes we would go by to check the place out. I don't remember having any problems with the people camping there.

In the summer of 1960, I got one of the best jobs in the World. I was hired as a Fireman on the Rio Grande Railroad. My primary duty was to sit in the engine with the Engineer and wave at the kids as we went by. Actually, I had to walk back through the diesel engines once in a while to check the oil and water gauges. The Fireman was also responsible for watching the right side of the train for any problems. Back in the old days, the fireman had to shovel coal into

the engine to make steam. They give me enough training so that I could operate and stop the train just in case the Engineer dropped dead.

I worked out of Salt Lake City and the primary run was to Helper, Utah (about 100 miles away) and back to Salt Lake. Some of the time, I worked in the rail yard switching train cars around. I worked two years on the railroad while I was going to the University of Utah. This was a great “no stress” job and I had rehiring rights for that job when I got out of the Navy. But, while I was in the Navy, advanced technology, and the need to cut operating costs caused the railroad industry to eliminate the Fireman, the Flagman, the Brakeman and take off the caboose from all railroad freight trains. The Conductor who used to ride in the caboose was moved to the engine to sit in the Fireman’s (my) seat. The railroad industry had really gone to hell while I was away fighting the war. So, instead of this great job, I got a \$2000 severance check when I got out of the Navy.

Just think – if my life would have taken a different turn, I might have ended up working as an Engineer on the railroad instead of coming to Hawaii and working with computers.

It is no secret that my nickname in the Navy and at Tooele Army Depot after getting out of the Navy was **“The Big Drifter”**. Now, why would my friends call me that? I have often thought about that question. The best answer I could come up with is – I was called the Big Drifter during my single years because I would sometimes “drift” from one bar to another. Well, I did volunteer for every TDY trip that come up and I traveled to many places. I guess it was a good nickname, but I let it die after I moved to Hawaii.



Yes, me and Clint were Big Drifters

I don't think I qualify for being a Hobo, Tramp, or Bum. I have always had a job and worked since I was 10-years old. As you are reading this article, I just turned 80 on 23 July 2020. So, that pretty much eliminates tramp and bum since they don't like to work. Plus, I have never been homeless. However, since the Coronavirus caused a stay at home order, I only shave once a week and my wife has told me several times that I look like a BUM. That might be true – but I don't care – my dog still likes me. I could be a Hobo since I like trains, like to travel to a lot of new places, and I like to work. No, probably not, I wouldn't like jumping into open boxcars on speeding trains and sleeping out under the stars every night.

Conclusions

I think we all learned that Hobos are an honorable group of people and a higher-class than the lazy able-bodied people drawing welfare checks.

We learned that the number of Hobos has been steadily decreasing from a high of 2 million during the Great Depression to less than 10,000 today in 2020. But, do you know what? The number of Hobos has recently started going up fast due to the economic effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic. The country has lost 21 million jobs since mid-March, resulting in an unemployment rate of about 15%, a level not seen since the Great Depression in the 1930s.



American Hobos are again catching rides to places unknown looking for work

“Stay Safe, Healthy, and Happy”

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