

BELLINGHAM BAY & BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Little Railroad that Thought It Could

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The 20th century was eight months old when a reconnaissance party of seven men and a string of pack mules headed up Ruth Creek and over Hannegan Pass into the wet and fog of what is now North Cascades National Park. Their job: locate a rail extension into eastern Washington linking Bellingham Bay with Spokane.

The exploration continued over three years, with crews lugging heavy surveying gear across steep mountainsides and bone-numbing streams. Then, on July 19, 1903, an official announcement appeared on the front page of the Whatcom *Daily Reveille*: "The Bellingham Bay & British Columbia Railroad Company will positively extend their line through eastern Washington to Spokane." At Spokane, it said, the BB&BC would connect directly with transcontinental railroads. This North Cascades route, the story added, would be shorter than competing lines across the mountains and elevate Whatcom (soon to become the city of Bellingham) "to a point of supremacy on Puget Sound."

It seemed as if an old dream was finally coming true. Nothing so ambitious had been attempted in the Cascades—not by the Northern Pacific Railway through Stampede Pass, nor by the Great Northern Railway at Stevens Pass. For one thing, this northern route would cross a much wider stretch of mountainous terrain. Tunnels would have to be bored in awkward places, outcrops blasted, trestles erected.

The man behind this vision was a New Hampshire-born civil engineer named John Joseph Donovan, no stranger to building railroads. J. J., as he was called, stood a solid five feet eight inches tall. He was a gifted orator, and he could be shrewd and tenacious about what he wanted to accomplish. If Bellingham Bay and eastern Washington could be linked by rail, Donovan told people, greatness would follow. Bellingham (incorporated out of Whatcom and Fairhaven later in 1903) would grow and prosper. Pacific and transcontinental trade would converge. If not, he warned, Bellingham's prospects would be limited.

Expectations had been raised before with bitter results. In 1873 local residents felt abandoned when the Northern Pacific picked Tacoma as its Puget Sound terminus. Later, locals mistakenly pinned hopes on the Great Northern's transcontinental route ending at Fairhaven. Now the modest BB&BC, with some 45 miles of track ending at a creek downstream from Mount Baker, was promising what the two rail giants had failed to deliver.

The track started at the Sehome Wharf on Bellingham Bay, ran up Railroad Avenue past the BB&BC's gabled depot, then turned northeast to Sumas and the United States-Canadian border. There, it swung abruptly southeast, ascending Saar Creek Canyon and "Big Hill" on a tough 3 percent grade. The route then dropped into Columbia Valley, through virgin forests to Kendall

where it turned east, paralleling the braided North Fork of the Nooksack River until reaching Glacier Creek. Logs, cedar shakes, and the occasional passenger riding in wooden, open-platform coaches were the BB&BC's bread and butter. Freight stops appeared about every mile at places like Strandell Siding, Watson No. 2, Mogul, and Badger.

The railroad was headquartered over 900 miles south on the second floor of the Mills Building in San Francisco. The impressive structure belonged to Darius Ogden Mills, multimillionaire financier and major stockholder of both the BB&BC and its sister firm, the Bellingham Bay Improvement Company (BBIC). It was here at 220 Montgomery Street in the city's financial district that decisions were made affecting not only the future of the railroad, but Bellingham as well.

Why the distant interest in Whatcom County? Back in the 1860s a syndicate of California investors, Mills included, began acquiring West Coast coal mining operations, the Bellingham Bay Coal Company among them. The lower grade coal was mined under what is now downtown Bellingham, then stored in waterfront bunkers before being shipped by schooner to lucrative markets on San Francisco Bay.

The shareholder list of Bellingham Bay Coal and its parent, Black Diamond Coal Company, was a Who's Who of San Francisco wealth during the Gilded Age. Mills and William C. Ralston presided over the Bank of California. J. B. Haggin, Lloyd Tevis, and Alvinza Hayward had amassed fortunes in mining. Louis McLane was Wells Fargo's chief of West Coast operations. W. R. Hartshorne owned a steamship line.

By the late 1870s, the Sehome venture had become problematic. The coal's high sulfur content resulted in mine fires, prompting the Californians to close the operation in January 1878. Despite this, coal company president Pierre Barlow Cornwall suggested the owners hang onto the several thousand acres of real estate owned by the coal company. Cornwall, according to his son and biographer, Bruce Cornwall, was convinced that, based on "natural advantages...someday Bellingham Bay would become the site of a great city."

The elder Cornwall was an optimist. So were newcomers arriving by boat, many buoyed by hopes that the Northern Pacific, or some railroad, would still terminate at Bellingham Bay. The decade of the 1880s saw the largest expansion of railroads in the history of the country, particularly in Washington Territory. From 1880 to 1890 track mileage in Washington increased more than sixfold. Nowhere did anticipation and speculation run higher than in the communities along Puget Sound from Olympia to Bellingham Bay.

Lottie Roeder Roth, in her two-volume *History of Whatcom County* explains the phenomenon: "It was the day of paper railroads and paper town sites and paper bonuses. Thousands of men came to the West without a definite destination, but with the wild hope that they might 'strike oil' by locating in some future great railroad terminus." James Blaine Hedges, in his book, *Henry Villard and the Railways of the Northwest*, describes "a veritable orgy of bidding" among Puget Sound communities to be the terminal city. Some Bellingham Bay businessmen in the 1880s offered the value equal to a quarter of their property to anyone who would build a railroad across the mountains, terminating at the bay.

Farther north, across the border, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was building its transcontinental line, which would run along the north bank of the lower Fraser River on its way to the future Vancouver, B.C. The Fraser, in places, flows less than 10 miles north of the Canadian border. If a railroad were to be built from Bellingham Bay into British Columbia,

connecting with the Canadian Pacific, transcontinental traffic could be diverted south to a nearby United States port.

On June 21, 1883, the California syndicate created the BB&BC Railroad Company, installing Cornwall as president. The articles of incorporation promised to "construct, equip and maintain a railroad to be operated by steam power" from Bellingham Bay northeast to where it would join with the CPR at Mission, B.C. What the BB&BC owners had apparently overlooked was that the Canadian Pacific claimed an exclusive right to build railroads in British Columbia. As a result, BB&BC construction toward Canada was temporarily slowed.

The Canadian government intervened in 1888, forcing the CPR to relinquish its monopoly. The railroad then made a clever move. It built a spur line off its transcontinental route at Mission, B.C., to Sumas, providing a junction there with American lines. On March 1, 1891, the BB&BC reached Sumas and the beginning of the CPR track. The Seattle Lake Shore & Eastern Railroad (which became the Seattle & International and eventually the Northern Pacific) followed suit later that year. While the BB&BC's 23-mile route from New Whatcom to Sumas carried some transcontinental Canadian traffic, it was not the bonanza railroad owners had counted on; neither was the outcome of the June 22, 1891, celebration in New Whatcom welcoming the arrival of the first CPR train.

Preparations for the train's arrival included bands and displays of the American flag and Britain's Union Jack. The plan was for a "grand arch of water" to frame the locomotive and cars of the train coming down Railroad Avenue. What ensued was an out-of-control water fight between two local fire companies entrusted with creating the aquatic arch. Published accounts say the windows of some of the CPR's finest passenger cars were broken by cannonades of water, dousing Canadian dignitaries.

Just as the chaos settled, some locals "inspired, perhaps, by something even stronger than patriotism," according to Lottie Roth, decided the British flag was displayed higher than the American flag and endeavored to correct the oversight. In doing so, the Union Jack fell to the ground and was trampled. Suddenly, the BB&BC had an international incident on its hands.

What effect this had on relations between the BB&BC and CPR has long been the subject of debate. Local promoters continued to bill New Whatcom as "the American terminus of the Canadian Pacific" even though the CPR was also moving freight and passengers over the competing Seattle, Lake Shore and Eastern line.

The railroad map was constantly changing as one line attempted to outflank the other. Nelson Bennett, the Northern Pacific's contractor on the Cascade Division and Stampede Pass tunnel, built his Fairhaven and Southern Railroad from Fairhaven to the Skagit coalfields and Sedro (later Sedro Wooley) in the late 1880s. By acquiring the failed Bellingham Bay Railroad and Navigation Company, which had largely existed on promises and paper, he built to the Canadian border at Blaine by 1890. Bennett then sold his railroad holdings to the Great Northern, which was maneuvering north along Puget Sound into British Columbia.

By 1891, the Bellingham Bay & Eastern Railroad was laying track to the Blue Canyon coal mines at nearby Lake Whatcom, extending the line to Wickersham and the Northern Pacific's Seattle-Sumas line 10 years later. The much ballyhooed Puget Sound & Idaho would never leave Bellingham Bay.

Railroads, real or imagined, were driving local economies and land values. "No single factor...will tend to put fat on the price of real estate as rapidly as the coming of a railroad," wrote the editor of the *Palmer Mountain Prospector* in Loomis. During this period of expectation, the BB&BC was selling off former Bellingham Bay Coal Company land as house lots. It changed the name of Sehome to the more marketable New Whatcom. By 1889 the railroad had created the Bellingham Bay Improvement Company (BBIC) to handle real estate sales and build one of the largest lumber mills on the coast. The company would also provide the town with electricity and water.

Cornwall's "vision city," as Lottie Roth described it, was gaining credence. What was missing was the long-awaited major rail terminus and port. Across the mountains in Okanogan County, farming and stock raising were becoming widespread, but growers and ranchers lacked direct access to Puget Sound markets. At the same time, gold and silver mining was drawing thousands to isolated pockets in and around the North Cascades. The work was tough, but getting there was sometimes even tougher. One man who saw opportunity in finding a way across the vast mountain barrier was J.J. Donovan.

In 1898 Donovan came on board as BB&BC superintendent and chief engineer. Soon he was locating an extension from Sumas to the North Fork of the Nooksack River and beyond. J. J. was born September 8, 1858, in Rumney, New Hampshire. His parents, Patrick and Julia Donovan, were Irish immigrants. Patrick worked as a laborer and later foreman on construction of the Boston Concord & Montreal Railroad (BC&M) through the foothills of the White Mountains. When the boy was four, the family moved to a small farm along the BC&M tracks in neighboring Plymouth. There, young Donovan, the eldest of six surviving children, could watch the early afternoon mail train, pulled by a wood-burning steam locomotive, head northeast along the Baker River toward Wentworth and Warren.

With little money, Donovan entered the state normal school in Plymouth (now Plymouth State University) in 1875. There he met his future wife, Clara Isabel Nichols. After graduation in 1877, Donovan fulfilled his obligation to teach two years in the state, then enrolled in what is now Worcester (Massachusetts) Polytechnic Institute (WPI) in 1880 to become an engineer, graduating valedictorian of his class in 1882.

He was among a generation of bright young civil engineers from the Northeast drawn to railroad building in the West. WPI classmate and friend John Q. Barlow, of Northampton, Massachusetts, became a senior engineer for the Union Pacific. Virgil G. Bogue, a graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, at Troy, New York, discovered Stampede Pass for the Northern Pacific. John F. Stevens, of West Gardiner, Maine, who, like Donovan, originally trained at a state normal school to become a teacher, was a locating engineer for the Great Northern Railway when he chose the Cascade pass later named after him.

Fresh out of WPI, Donovan went to work for the Northern Pacific's transcontinental construction in western Montana. He started as a rod man and leveler with the NP, then worked his way up to supervising engineer on the Cascade Division of the railroad over Stampede Pass and on to Tacoma. He moved north to Whatcom County with his new bride in 1889, first going to work for Nelson Bennett as chief engineer of the Fairhaven Land Company, the Skagit Coal and Transportation Company, and the Fairhaven & Southern Railway, for which he also supervised construction.

When he joined the BB&BC at age 44, Donovan was part owner of the Lake Whatcom Logging Company and vice president of the Bellingham Bay & Eastern. He had also been hired in 1890 by the Great Northern to look over sources of the Skagit for a northern rail route over the Cascades. Despite the Great Northern's selection of Stevens Pass, Donovan did not give up his quest. BB&BC construction hadn't progressed beyond Sumas in the summer of 1900 when Donovan sent his assistant engineer, John J. Cryderman, and six others to reconnoiter the North Cascades as far as the upper Skagit River (now Ross Lake) for a cross-state railroad route. It was a wet journey.

They were not the first white men to explore this overwhelming country of glacier-shrouded peaks and deep valleys. Members of Henry Custer's Northwest Boundary Survey had been there in the late 1850s. Prospectors followed. Attempts to locate a wagon route through these mountains in the 1890s fizzled. The Cryderman party covered similar ground but with an eye toward railroad grade and what Arthur M. Wellington, author of the 1887 bible, *Economic Theory of Railway Location*, called "the most value for a dollar which nature permits."

In a diary kept on the 1900 trip, surveyor H. M. Wellman described how he and S. C. Anderson on a rare clear day climbed to within 1,000 feet of the summit of a 7,574-foot peak (later named Whatcom Peak) to take sightings.¹ On their return, the two were socked in at Easy Pass for three days and nights by fierce wind, rain and snow. Cryderman predicted in his reconnaissance report that a route over Hannegan, Whatcom, and possibly Beaver passes "would be the scenic route of the United States." He described "a succession of unequalled views. There are still mountain goats and numerous bear in the mountains...and abundant picturesque peaks for the mountain climber to struggle with."

The assistant engineer concluded that tunneling would be required at two passes west of the upper Skagit—a 3,000-foot bore under the summit of Hannegan Pass (5,066 feet) and at Whatcom Pass a 4,000-foot tunnel below the 5,206-foot summit. The BB&BC would still have to negotiate the crest of the Cascades some miles distant to the east.

Cryderman recommended the use of hydroelectric power for locomotives pulling loads over steeper mountain grades. "Beginning with the Falls of the Nooksack (Nooksack Falls)," he wrote, "the power stations could be located so that at no place need...to exceed 10 miles apart, and power could be doubtless furnished to the mines in the vicinity sufficient to pay for all operating expenses."

Today, a premier backpacking trail covers the nearly 40 miles Cryderman described as a route between Ruth Creek and the upper Skagit River (now Ross Lake). From the Skagit, Cryderman and Donovan decided on a course up Ruby Creek. From there, they considered any one of three or four approaches to the Cascade crest and then down to the Methow River, according to available preliminary survey maps and notes.

East of the Cascades, Donovan intended to follow the Columbia River from the mouth of the Methow to the Spokane River and up that body of water to the city of Spokane. Preferences for a Cascade crossing would change.

¹ The diary, along with engineers' field notes, maps, and BB&BC correspondence, is part of the Bellingham Bay Improvement Company Collection at Western Washington University's Center for Pacific Northwest Studies in Bellingham.

Okanogan and Whatcom county newspapers watched developments closely. Reports on the railroad's lofty ambitions routinely made front page headlines in the *Reveille*, a newspaper given to florid speculation. On December 19, 1902, the *Reveille's* front page story read, "There now appear to be very plausible reasons for believing that the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railway will connect with the BB&BC in Spokane in place of the Santa Fe [Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad]." And "BB&BC Surveyors Find a Route Across the Range Far Superior to G.N. or N.P. Passes," a *Reveille* headline proclaimed on August 27, 1903.

The *Reveille* on July 19, 1903, predicted that Bellingham Bay would become a port of the Edward H. Harriman lines (Union Pacific, Oregon Short Line, Southern Pacific), which would meet the BB&BC at Spokane. If that happened, the *Reveille* stated, "It will mean that Bellingham Bay will outstrip Seattle and all other points on Puget Sound for commercial supremacy and the vast trade of the Orient."

These were heady times. Donovan was telling people in Spokane in November 1903 that construction on the cross-state extension would begin the following spring. Two to three years would be required for completion. Traffic carried across the state by the BB&BC, Donovan said, "will come from the building up of the territory directly opened by our line."

While Donovan was waxing optimistic in Spokane, across the country on Wall Street the stock market had been on a sharp decline, making borrowing difficult for railroads. The first hint that the extension might be in trouble came on November 24, 1903, when BB&BC vice president H. H. Taylor told a *Reveille* reporter, "A great deal depends on our obtaining money.... At present there is a stringency in all money centers. Money is tight and no one knows when it will loosen up."

Donovan, nevertheless, felt the railroad should begin construction on an extension as soon as possible. "The country along the line of this planned road from Bellingham to Spokane is the most promising from a railway point of view that I have ever seen." he said in a February 23, 1904, letter to Taylor. He went on to say he had "spent nearly three weeks in November on horseback, on foot, and in wagons with the engineers...and the forest, mineral, agricultural, and animal freight in sight impressed me more than any investigation I ever made in 22 years of railroading in the West.... "

Donovan even proposed a less costly and slightly longer alternate route utilizing the Skagit River downstream from its confluence with Ruby Creek to the mouth of the Baker River, then over an unspecified low pass to the South Fork of the Nooksack River. He predicted a \$7.5 million cost but said, "The company's real estate (value) would be worth more" than that figure within three years.

Anxious to get started, Donovan recommended beginning construction immediately in the Methow Valley from Twisp to Pateras at the mouth of the river. There, the line would connect with steamers on the Columbia River and the Great Northern Railway 50 miles downstream at Wenatchee. "It will pay from the start," Donovan, went on. "I can secure the right of way, locate and cross-section the line and do a large amount of grading for . . . \$50,000, and next year we can complete the work. There is no danger of losing money." The week after Donovan wrote that letter he traveled to San Francisco for meetings with the railroad board of trustees.

On his return to Bellingham March 4, 1904, the normally self-assured Donovan told reporters that plans to start work on the Spokane extension had been placed on hold. He blamed anti-railroad sentiment in the state and the lack of available money. But there were also changes

taking place within the organization. Cornwall, who had overseen the BB&BC and the BBIC as president and had taken a paternal interest in the fledgling bay communities, fell ill and retired in June 1904. He died the following September 25. One of the original principal stockholders, Alvinza Hayward, had died seven months earlier.

The presidencies of the railroad and improvement company went to H. H. Taylor, a nephew of Mills. The new president's distant, calculating manner contrasted sharply with the upbeat nature of Cornwall, who visited Bellingham Bay on numerous occasions. Taylor demonstrated little enthusiasm for the BB&BC, and even less for the Spokane extension. "I don't think the plan connected with the proposed railroad to Spokane is a possibility," he wrote to Glen C. Hyatt, land agent for the BBIC in October 1905. Taylor added, "The agitation (for the extension) cannot do any harm, and one can see where it might do us considerable good."

Business people in both Bellingham and Spokane attempted to raise the necessary financing to keep the Spokane extension alive. Donovan urged the California syndicate to participate, but the owners declined. The effort fell short. Donovan played his last card in early 1906. He traveled to New York seeking financing or a buyer willing to undertake the ambitious construction project. However, a condition Mills placed on the sale of the railroad was that real estate of the BB&BC and the improvement company be part of any transaction. "This package deal did not generate any enthusiasm among the Easterners," wrote Beth M. Kraig in a 1981 master's degree thesis for Western Washington University entitled, "A Slow Game." It is the most detailed account of the California syndicate's efforts to turn Bellingham into a major Pacific Coast city.

Taylor wrote Hyatt on March 20, 1906, complaining, "The present situation [of the BB&BC] is most unsatisfactory," adding, "There is nothing to do but to await developments." He recommended "managing the property at a minimum expense consistent with safety." On March 31, 1906, Donovan resigned. "I am somewhat disappointed in that I failed to interest some Eastern capital here [in the Spokane extension], but that is a condition which may change before long," he told the *Reveille*. The condition never changed.

Taylor expressed little sorrow over Donovan's departure. Donovan resumed his timber business interests with Julius Bloedel. Their company, eventually named the Bloedel-Donovan Lumber Mills, went on to become one of the largest forest products firms on the West Coast. Still, Donovan maintained that a Spokane extension, regardless who built it, would be the one thing "that would make this [Bellingham] a great city," he said in a letter to a friend in 1911.

When he returned to Worcester Polytechnic Institute in 1913 for his son John's graduation, the elder Donovan presented a thesis for his delayed professional degree in civil engineering. It was titled: "Proposed Railroad from Bellingham to Spokane." This paper suggested a route farther south to Lake Chelan, then up the Stehekin River to the portal of a 7.2-mile long tunnel under Pelton Basin and 5,400-foot Cascade Pass. The line he called the "Bellingham & Spokane" would then follow the Cascade River to the Skagit at Marblemount and continue to Bellingham.²

What changed Donovan's mind about the earlier, more dramatic routes? One factor must surely have been cost. Another seemed to be the threat of avalanches. In his thesis Donovan stressed that the Stehekin route will "be free of all danger of snow during the winter. The importance of

² Donovan's paper is on file at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. Unfortunately, maps, charts and photographs he submitted in support of his thesis are missing.

the last consideration will be realized by all who remember the loss of trains with so many lives in 1910."

At Stevens Pass, a giant snow slide roared down Windy Mountain early March 1, 1910, sending cars and locomotives of two Great Northern trains into the ravine below. The death toll from the Wellington Disaster was 96. Just three days later a Canadian Pacific Railway crew was digging out the track from one avalanche at Rogers Pass in British Columbia when a second slide came down, burying and killing 62. Donovan's earlier suggested routes would have run below steep mountainsides, some prone to avalanches. The North Cascades Highway is closed during winter months for the very same reason. Rock slides and mud slides continue to pose hazards.

Donovan's dream never materialized. Glacier Creek became the end of the line, initially a jumping off point for miners heading up into the Mount Baker mining district. Originally called Cornell, the little settlement there took the name of Glacier in 1904. One passenger train a day operated each way between Glacier and Bellingham, according to a 1907 timetable. The roundabout trip took three and a half hours, a travel time eventually shortened by the automobile and the more direct Mount Baker Highway (State Route 542).

BB&BC passenger and freight revenues, which had tripled during the first three years of the 20th century, declined after 1904. With BB&BC ownership passing to the next generation, the heirs were less interested in holding onto a railroad that was not going anywhere financially. Darius Ogden Mills died January 2, 1910, leaving his interest in the BB&BC to his daughter, Elizabeth Reid (wife of Whitelaw Reid, the United States ambassador to Great Britain) and son Ogden Mills, a New York philanthropist and financier. Ogden Mills was looking for a buyer.

By March of the following year the Chicago, Milwaukee & Puget Sound Railroad (subsidiary of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul) was making inquiries about the availability of the road and its sister line, the Bellingham Terminals Railroad. There were also discussions later in 1911 with prominent Pacific Northwest businessmen. The outcome was the sale of the two railroads to a newly formed holding company, Bellingham Securities Syndicate. The principals included Inland Navigation owner Joshua Green, Tacoma Smelting Company owner W. R. Rust, Julius Bloedel, J. J. Donovan, and Bellingham banker E. W. Purdy and Hyatt, who became president.

Bellingham Securities then transferred the railroads to the Bellingham Northern (BN), a new subsidiary of the Chicago, Milwaukee & Puget Sound, netting a handsome profit. In 1918 the BN was absorbed into the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul's (Milwaukee Road's) Puget Sound Extension, a system of short rail lines that fed into the trunk line at Tacoma and Seattle.

J. J. Donovan remained in Bellingham where he died January 27, 1937, at his Garden Street home. He was 78. Much was made of his accomplishments as a businessman and civic leader, but little about his unfulfilled dream.

By the 1960s the former BB&BC line had been shortened to terminate at Limestone Junction, eight miles southeast of Sumas. An 11-mile spur line built for log trains in 1916 from Goshen Junction up the Nooksack's Middle Fork to Kulshan was abandoned in 1942. The end came in 1980 when the bankrupt Milwaukee Road shut down its Puget Sound Extension routes.

The BB&BC was one of several schemes to build railroads across the half-million acres of mountain wilderness that today make up North Cascades National Park. None of these endeavors was successful, which is why today one cannot hear the groans of diesels pulling

trains up steady mountain grades or see scars of rail development. The only traces are the trails—once used by railroad surveyors—now turned over to outdoor enthusiasts.

Today, a stretch of track between Sumas and Lynden is used as a spur line by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe two or three times a week. The old Bellingham Terminals right-of-way remains along the waterfront and up Squaticum Creek. Most of the mountain routes Donovan envisioned have been under the protection of the North Cascades National Park since 1968. In the 21st century Glacier is a town tailored to year-round mountain recreation. Gary and Heather Graham occupy the original Glacier depot, which his grandfather purchased from the Milwaukee Road in 1932. Railroad Avenue in Bellingham remains, but without the tracks that once defined the broad thoroughfare.

Ceremonial water arches are no longer encouraged on city streets.

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