

Schenectady County Historical Society

Newsletter

Volume 42 Number 3-4

March - April 2005

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DON RITTNER NAMED NEW COUNTY HISTORIAN-



Don Rittner standing near a 19th century Paper Press in an abandoned paper mill.

Don Rittner, a long time historian and archeologist of the Capital District, was recently named official Schenectady County Historian.

Rittner began his career while a student at the University at Albany continuing the work of William B. Efner, Schenectady City Historian. Efner, during the 1930's and 40's, spent much of his time studying the old colonial roads and taverns of the famous Pine Bush region between Albany and Schenectady.

Rittner continued Efner's work when he became the Albany City Archeologist in 1973 and began excavating colonial tavern sites in the Pine Bush. He also finished Efner's work in relocating the old King's Highway and in 1975 erected sixteen King's Highway markers that are still visible along the entire route.

He published his first book in 1975, *Pine Bush – Albany's Last Frontier*, while at SUNYA, which helped save hundreds of acres of endangered Pine Bush wilderness. Since then he has published

22 books in history, science, and technology. He wrote the first Internet book in 1990 connecting the world environmental communities. He has written several computer books, five history books (two on Albany, 3 on Troy), and his latest projects were three encyclopedias for reference publisher Facts

on File on Meteorology, Biology and Chemistry. Since 1999, he has written a history column for the Troy Record called *Heritage on the Hudson*.

Besides writing and archeology, Don manages the Capital District Preservation Task Force list serve that provides daily newspaper coverage in history, planning and preservation to more than 80 leading preservation and environmental groups.

The county historian position is a state mandated position since 1919 with responsibilities that include providing guidance and support to the municipal historians in their counties and of serving as a conduit of information between the State Historian in Albany and the local historians in their counties.

Rittner's goals include promoting Schenectady County's rich history to the world through writing, archeology, preservation projects, and promoting heritage tourism. He is working on developing a public archeology project, a Schenectady County Heritage Fair, living Mohican Village, and helping to make the Gillette House in the Stockade a first rate visitor's center.

Rittner and County Clerk John J. Woodward are currently creating a county Bicentennial and Quadricentennial Committee to oversee the county's 200th anniversary and the statewide celebration of the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain anniversary in 2009.

Anyone interested in working on these projects can contact Don at 788-1255.

UPCOMING EVENTS

MARCH 12

The Halve Maan/Half Moon 1:30 pm - Guest Speaker: Skipper Chip Reynolds

APRIL 3-9 CENTENNIAL SYMPOSIUM

APRIL 3RD

Len Tantillo - 1:30 pm Well known historical painter

APRIL 5TH

Town Histories - 7pm Presented by Town Historians

APRIL 7TH

Schenectady Industries - 7pm

APRIL 9TH

History of SCHS - 1:30pm

Please note: April 9th is also the annual meeting 1:00 pm

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Hours:

MUSEUM Monday – Friday 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

LIBRARY Monday – Friday 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. Saturday 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

MABEE FARM Closed for the season Open by appointment.



Sometimes I find it a strange thought process trying to think back two months and ahead two months all at the same time. December we had a big turnout for the holiday program with Mr. Halley. He did a wonderful job displaying his collection of holiday decorations and ornaments. He tells me that he has had calls from several organizations for next Christmas. Unfortunately our January event had to be cancelled because of the weather. The program on the history of the Society has been rescheduled for April as part of Symposium Week. The history which will be published in booklet form will be available in April.

On January 29th the Society celebrated the Tricentennial of the Mabee Farm. It was a blockbuster program with Charles Gehring speaking to an enthusiastic group of over one

hundred people. They were standing in the aisles and doorways. Most exciting!! In March the featured speaker will be Chip Reynolds of the New Netherland Museum and skipper of the Half Moon. The New Netherland Museum is planning and looking forward to the four hundreth anniversary in 2009 of Henry Hudson sailing up the Hudson.

April and Spring seem to be coming up very fast. Our Centennial Symposium will be the first week with a series of talks on the history of the local area, events and people that influenced our lives and actions. By the time you receive this newsletter, the Centennial exhibit will be ready for your viewing pleasure. I hope you can fit us into your busy schedule and visit the exhibit and attend a program that we worked so hard to make appropriate and timely. — *Kim Mabee*



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK _

he role of a historical society or museum is to promote the history of the area it serves. This is done through exhibits, lecture series, research and the written word. Research findings should be published to make them available to a broader audience. However, non profit organizations seldom have the money available to cover the cost of printing and other publication costs.

The society has a collection of paintings, silver, ceramics and furniture that if made available in the form of a catalog would be a teaching tool as well as a venue for promoting the Society's goals. Some money can be obtained through grants from public funds and

foundations but this is limited. Supplemental funds usually have to be raised through tax deductible donations from members and friends.

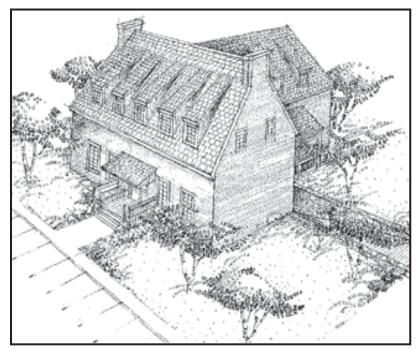
To make the Society's resources more available we urge you to support the Publication Fund. The next time you renew your membership add an additional amount to support the Fund. You can use the form on the back of this newsletter or send a check to the Society at any time and specify it is for publications. All donations are tax deductible and if you are a member of the GE family your donation will be doubled. We do thank you for your continuing support. — Ona Curran



Charles Gehring speaking to a packed house at the Schenectady County Historical Society on January 29th in celebration of the Mabee Farm's 300th anniversary. January 29, 2005 is 300 years to the day when Jan Mabee signed the deed to the property.

Mabee Farm Historic Site

1080 Main Street (Rt. 5S), Rotterdam Jct., NY • (518) 887-5073 • Email: mabee@nycap.rr.com • Web: www.mabeefarm.org



GEORGE E. FRANCHERE EDUCATION CENTER FUND RAISING DRIVE

The Schenectady County Historical Society and its Board of Trustees announces the launch of a drive to raise funds to build a much needed 8,000 square foot Education Center at the Mabee Farm Historic Site on Route 5S in Rotterdam Junction, New York. This Education Center will help this fast growing nonprofit organization better serve the needs of the community, fulfill its educational mission and further develop the historic site into a key component of Schenectady County's Heritage Tourism Program. The new facility will be named the George E. Franchere Education Center after the Mabee Family member who donated the Mabee property and collection. Its design will maintain the historic character of the site while incorporating modern technology in serving the educational needs of its visitors.

The formal fund raising campaign will begin immediately with pledges from individuals solicited over four years. Advanced individual contributions from the Schenectady County Historical Society and Mabee Farm committee members has already resulted in pledges of \$120,000. The goal is \$1.185 million.

Present plans call for construction of the George E. Franchere Education Center to be completed in three phases. Ground breaking is slated for spring 2006, opening in the summer of 2007 and final completion in time for the Henry Hudson Celebration in 2009.

After all phases are completed, the Education Center will comprise:

<u>Basement - 3,280 sq. ft.</u> - Secure separate storage, specimen preparation area for Archaeology classes, classroom/lunchroom for students, community conference room.

First Floor - 3,280 sq. ft. - Visitor and group reception, presentation and video/library with meeting rooms, entrance gallery with displays and exhibits, colonial kitchen for classes, office & gift shop.

Second Floor - 2,880 sq. ft. - Research library, temperature controlled storage, offices.

The center will be fully handicapped accessible and will have lavatory facilities on each floor.

The Mabee Farm has experienced tremendous growth since its opening in 2000. There were 570 visitors in 2000 and 15,600 in 2004. The center is needed in anticipation of continuing growth. The addition of the Education Center to the thriving Mabee Farm Historic Site will allow it to become a regional educational, cultural and historic destination for New York State.

With the support of the members of the Schenectady County Historical Society, we can make this important Education Center come to fruition. Please support us in our efforts to accommodate the ever growing number of people interested in the Mabee Farm, its rich history, events, workshops and educational classes.

Donations are now being accepted. Please make your check to: SCHS/Mabee Farm. Send to Mabee Farm Historic Site 1080 Main St., Rotterdam Junction, N.Y. 12150 Pledges can be made over a 3 year period.

CELEBRATE EARTH DAY



SAT., APRIL 23RD • 11AM-3PM

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Unidentified Gas Station. Price of gas, 22¢

HELPING THOSE IN NEED

SCHENECTADY AND THE 1847 IRISH AND SCOTTISH FAMINE RELIEF FUND by Harvey Strum, Professor of History and Political Science at Russell Sage College

"Please use for the benefit of the 'Starving Irish' the enclosed five dollars being the amount of money contained in my little boy's money box" a parent noted about the contribution of an unknown Schenectady child in March 1847. In response to the famine in Ireland and Scotland Americans across the United States joined in a national movement of voluntary philanthropy. President James Polk, Democrat, viewed it as unconstitutional to use public funds for famine relief so Congress refused to support a proposal for an appropriation of \$500,000. Instead, national political leaders, led by Vice-President George Dallas held a meeting in February 1847 and called upon Americans to create voluntary committees to raise funds and food for Ireland. Americans responded and committees were formed across the nation as the United States emerged for the first time as a leader in international philanthropy. Americans put aside their religious, ethnic, racial, and political differences to join in a national movement to help the victims of the Great Famine in Ireland and the smaller scale food shortage in the western Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Free African-Americans in Richmond, Jewish congregants of Shearith Israel in New York, Cherokees in Oklahoma and Shakers in New Lebanon all joined together as co-workers to aid the starving in Europe.

New York State emerged as the most important state for Irish relief, because half of the relief supplies reaching Ireland went through the port of New York City marking the rise of New York as the leading port in the nation. In response to the crisis, New York City created a committee, headed by a transplanted Albanian, Myndert Van Schaick "as Albany is my native place, I feel proud of the ancient Dutch city," wrote Van Schaick as Albany filled two ships, which became known as the Albany ships for Ireland. In February 1847 Albany created a famine relief committee which also served as the state Irish and Scottish famine relief committee. Responding to appeals from both the national meeting in Washington and the state committee, the residents of Schenectady quickly joined in this national movement to help the starving in Europe. The Schenectady paper, Reflector, informed its readers of the dire conditions in Ireland and noted the start of a national effort for famine relief. After telling its readers of the plans in Albany to ship a cargo of food to Ireland, it asked "who will begin a movement in Schenectady?" On February 15th, citizens gathered at the Court House to hold a meeting and organize a Schenectady Irish Famine Relief Committee. Editors of Schenectady's two newspapers and orators at the famine meeting stressed common themesthey emphasized America's abundance, our blessings of liberty and prosperity, the high death rate in Ireland, Christian charity, and the Irish as neighbors in need of aid. The Schenectady Committee consisted of politicians, lawyers, merchants and clergymen, including the mayor, two



The Grems-Doolittle

Democratic aldermen, a Democratic election inspector, a Whig politician, and members of the executive committee of the Protestant Schenectady County Bible Society. The meeting drafted an appeal to the people of Schenectady County calling on each town to create a committee, asked the clergy to encourage contributions, and reminded citizens that everyone had a responsibility to contribute for famine relief.

Actions of the citizens of Schenectady reinforced the non partisan and non denominational nature of Irish and Scottish famine relief. Both Whigs and Democrats along with Protestant religious leaders took an active role in the campaign. Schenectady's sole Catholic Church, St. John's, raised \$50 which a local paper thought was a significant amount considering the small size of the congregation and the fact that most members were poor Irish laborers. Some of the other contributors included the congregants of the 2nd Reformed Dutch Church and the faculty and students of Union College. At a time when the Nativist and anti Catholic Know Nothing Party did well in the city, it was significant that not only the Irish immigrants themselves contributed to the relief effort but the entire community of all religious persuasions. The relief committee stressed the contribution of the Irish and the part they played in the building of the American mosaic through the construction of public work projects and the building of canals and railroads. Contributions from people in the city and county consisted of both money and in kind donations of flour, corn, beans, rye and clothes, similar to the mix raised by committees across the nation.

In addition to raising over \$1,300 for Irish relief by March local residents gathered on March 10th to organize a committee "to take into consideration the suffering conditions of a large portion of the residents of Scotland" and over the next six weeks the people of the city and county donated to the cause of Scotland. Contributions for Ireland continued as well and another \$450 was sent to the Albany committee of the St. Andrew's Society.

In 1847 the United States became a leader in international philanthropy as Americans contributed over \$1.5 million for famine relief.

Famine relief emerged as an expression of American republicanism and volunteerism at its best as the people of plenty shared their abundance with the less fortunate of Europe.

Judge John Isaac De Graff 1783-1848 Artist - Cornelius Van Patten Signed and Dated 1846. Collection of Schenectady County Historical Society. Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Donald A. Keefer 1955

– Judge De Graff was chairman of the Schenectady Irish Relief Effort.



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Library & Archives

GENEALOGY 101 - Nancy Johnsen Curran

Genealogists love cemeteries almost as much as we love libraries. The gravestones stand, patiently waiting for us to ask questions such as: When did the person live and die? What was her maiden name?

In historic Vale Cemetery, Schenectady, the gravestone of Sarah A. Haverley is a dream come true. Here, etched in stone, is her maiden name, that of an historic Schenectady family, and the name of her husband, William H. Haverley.

Let's start with the last fact to be learned, the date of death, Oct. 26, 1913. We want her death certificate, which ought to be on file with the New York State Department of Health (DOH).

VITAL RECORDS - Vital records reporting - births, marriages and deaths began in 1880. Certificates for deaths and marriages may be ordered up to 50 years ago, for births up to 75 years ago.

What makes a death certificate worth the \$22 fee? Note that the completeness and accuracy of the facts depend upon the knowledge of the informant, the person who answered the questions.

We can learn about the death, facts like the full legal name, the residence address, the date, the place and cause of death, the names of the doctor and the undertaker and the place of burial.

Birth information is there too, such as the date and place of birth and the parents' names and birthplaces.

Information about the person's life includes the occupation and marital status, with the name of the spouse.

You need to know how to acquire a death certificate.

Vital records are filed in the municipality in which the event occurred, so if you propose to order if from Schenectady City Hall, you need to be sure Sarah died in the city rather than while visiting kinfolk in Glenville.

Local clerks are now allowed to provide a modern typed form, not a photocopy of the original document, a fact that allows typographical errors as well as omission of facts for which there's no space on the form.

Caution: don't write to the DOH vital records office unless you want to wait 10 months to a year!

The best way is to order if from the New York State Department of Health. It's a complicated process at first.

The DOH vital records indexes must be read in person at one of the four locations around the state. The NYS Archives on the 11th floor of the Cultural Education Center, Albany, is one location. The indexes are not on line unfortunately.

When transcribing the name, date and place of death from the indexes, check again to be sure you have written down the all-important state number. That's what speeds the process to two or three weeks.

Enclose the required form in an envelope with your personal check and place it in the drop box at the archives. The procedure takes it to a special category at the

DOH vital records office and you can start watching your mail in two weeks.

If you can't get to Albany, find someone to go through the search process for you. The Archives has a list of qualified independent researchers who can do the job at a fee that is probably less than traveling to Albany.

Sarah's date of death also makes it easier to look for her published obituary a day or two after her date of

Other clues spring to mind, but vital records searching is plenty to learn about in one story.

Nancy Johnsen Curran is a professional genealogist based in Schenectady. Her email address is nancycurran@prodigy.net

Schenectady Railway Company waiting room. State Street -Southside near Lafayette Street



THE EFNER HISTORY RESEARCH **LIBRARY**

During the last quarter of 2004 volunteer hours at the City History Center totaled 225 hours, or 75 hours a month! This was in part due to preparation of a grant application that was put into the mail on November 29th, two days ahead of schedule. Approval of the grant, and funding at the level requested will allow us to perform a much-needed inventory of the City Archives at the History Center, and a needs assessment to help us plan for its future.

Since our last report, a fine collection of World War I posters has been organized, a few walls have been painted, and we have created a map corner. Gary and Jonathan Mabee moved our file cabinets to the dormer window side of the room, and a second map table into our map corner. Their biggest challenge was moving a tall blueprint shelf from one end of the room to the other.

Two exhibits are currently on display in 'the awesome attic.' The first, Local Historians and Local History in the News, can be found just outside the Archives. The second, inside the Archives, and entitled "Abraham, Martin & John...and George, in Schenectady History", is our Colonial Festival offering that recognizes Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Black History Month, and the February birthdays of Washington and Lincoln, and gets its catchy title from the sixties tune, "Abraham, Martin & John". This exhibit focuses on Schenectady visits made by Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy and George Washington. According to historian Frank Taormina, Dr. King lectured to the Freedom Forum at Linton High School sometime during the late 1950's or 1960's. If any of our readers have further documentation on this event, please do share it with us here at City Hall.

SCHS President Kim Mabee and CHC archivist Cindy Seacord are serving on planning committees for City Hall's 75th gala that will also recognize the Historical Society's Centennial, to be held this spring. Cindy has also been assisting many researchers in the Archives. January History Center researchers included Albany painter Len Tantillo, who is working on commissioned paintings of City Hall and the Schenectady Stockade, a Union College student studying the city during the Great Depression, and Gazette reporters Jeff Wilkin and Bill Buell.

Please contact Cindy at 382-5088 if you have some free time and would like to volunteer to help out the History Center during these remaining "gray" weeks of late winter, and early spring. We certainly could use help on our next projects. They include identifying photographs, organizing blueprints and postcards, putting up bookcases and painting. - Cindy Seacord, Archivist.

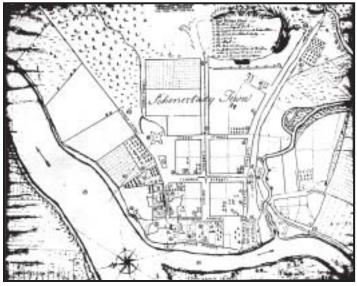


Museum News

CENTENNIAL SYMPOSIUM

As the Schenectady County Historical Society celebrates its centennial, we are looking back to the history of the county and why one hundred years ago a desire to protect the history of the region finally came to fruition. As part of the year long celebration, SCHS will host a week long "Centennial Symposium" starting April 3rd and ending April 9th. Initiating the event is world-renowned historical artist Len Tantillo. His presentation on April 3rd following a wine and cheese reception at 1:30 pm will outline the process he uses to create historical paintings including his present project of depicting Schenectady soon after the 1690 massacre. By using historical "tools" like the 1698 Romer Map of Schenectady and French accounts of the raid on Schenectady, existing Dutch architecture and research into modern Dutch land use technology, Tantillo can create the world of 1690's Schenectady. On Tuesday, April 5th at 7pm, Schenectady County town historians will introduce the histories of their communities. For a history of the businesses and industry that supported Schenectady County residents join us on Thursday, April 7th at 7pm to hear an exciting account of the building of Schenectady batteaus, the growing and marketing of broom corn and later in the century the development of Schenectady Locomotive Works (became American Locomotive in 1901) and General Electric. Closing the Centennial Symposium SCHS' Education Committee will present the one hundred year history of the Society following the annual meeting on April 9th at 1pm. Enjoy a soup and sandwich lunch while the Committee narrates the development of the Society from its earliest days on 13 Union Street to its three-faceted organization comprised of the Museum, the Grems-Doolittle Library and the Mabee Farm. Don Rittner, County Historian will also speak.

All events are free and open to the public. The Society welcomes your participation.



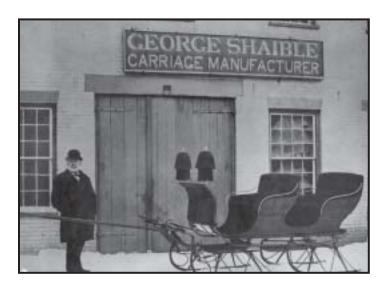
1698 Romer Map



17th Century Dutch Architecture. Jan Vermeer 1632-1676

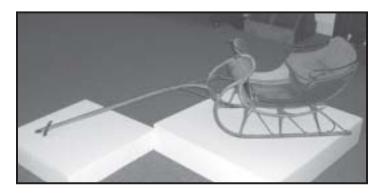
BENEFIT DINNER AT GLEN SANDERS MANSION

The dinner on February 11th was a huge success with about one hundred people attending. The dinner sponsored by the Schenectady Heritage Area was a benefit for the Society's Centennial Exhibit which will commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Society. All of the attendees enjoyed the elegant dinner, the company, the decor and the floral arrangements by the Hugh Platt Garden Club. A sing-along of old tunes lead by Sylvie Briber and Kim Mabee provided lively entertainment and Frank Taormina was an affable and jovial Master of Ceremonies. Thank you to all who attended and all who helped with time, donations and expertise. A special thanks to Marie Gorman for her leadership and advice. SCHS is especially grateful to the Schenectady Heritage Area for sponsoring the event The Society now has enough money to execute a professional looking Centennial exhibit and a few dollars left over to buy much needed supplies for museum projects and programs.



FROM THE SOCIETY'S COLLECTIONS

Soon after the Civil War, George Shaible received an unusual order from Schenectady Locomotive Works President, John C. Ellis. Ellis requested a present for his infant son John E. Ellis, a miniature cutter that could be pulled. Although not a common request, as one of the leading manufacturers of sleighs and carriages in Schenectady, Shaible was the ideal choice to make the unique gift. Shaible's shop flourished on Centre Street for thirty years. He is first listed in the Schenectady City Directory in the 1860-61 edition and his last listing is in 1892.



THE GLENVILLE HISTORY CENTER IS IN NEED OF

VOLUNTEERS. Hours are Tues. 9:00am-1:00pm, Thurs. 12:00 pm-4:00pm; Sat. 9:00 am-1:00 pm. Please contact Joan Szablewski, Glenville Town Historian. Phone 399-8555.

THE SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY is

gathering photographs for an Image of America book about Scotia-Glenville. Anyone interested in contributing photos for the book, please contact the Library at the SCHS. Phone 374-0263.

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GEORGE SHAIBLE, R.T. BUTLER.

YOU ARE NEEDED

Schenectady County Historical Society is in desperate need for volunteers! If you or anyone you know is interested in giving tours of our museum at the Schenectady County Historical Society please contact curator Kathryn Weller. A beginner's training session will take place on March 7th at 10am in the Vrooman Room of the Schenectady County Historical Society. Along with a mock tour, the free session will also provide potential volunteers with information on the historical society, its collections, and other areas where they can volunteer. Please join us!

VOLUNTEER TODAY

Exhibits	Accessioning of Objects
Collections	Guided Tours
Photography	Carpentry
Computer Skills	Other

Mail this form or bring it to the Society at 32 Washington Avenue, Schenectady, NY 12305

E-Mail:



The Schenectady County Historical Society, as a nonprofit organization depends on its members for support. Members provide the means to conduct programs and plan exhibits that relate to the community and tell the story of Schenectady County. Welcome to our new members. We hope you will extend an invitation to your friends to join, so they too can take part in the upcoming Fall and Spring programs.

Please note the List of Contributors as previously listed in each issue will be published yearly at the end of the fiscal year in the Society's expanded Annual Report. The Society thanks each and every one of you for your continued support.



MEMBERSHIP FORM Schenectady County Historical Society

Please indicate one of the following for your membership:

□ \$25 □ \$40 □ \$50	Individual Family Donor	Please mail this form with your check or credit card information to: Schenectady County Historical Society 32 Washington Ave., Schenectady, NY 12305	
\$100	Sponsor	Your Name	
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☐ Check enclosed ☐ Please charge my credit card: ☐ MasterCard ☐ VISA Acct # Exp. Date Signature			
Also enclosed is a gift of \$ for special projects designated as follows:			
Museum: Art Restoration Acquisitions Publications Programs			
Library: Equipment Publications			
Mabee Farm: Preservation Education Building Programs			
Your tax-deductible membership can be matched by G.E. (800) 462-8244			

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