

Reminiscing



nerdy kid who lived in the neighborhood. He possessed something that I wanted so very badly to own: a 1927 NY Yankee team signed baseball featuring Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth. The ball at that time was a little over 20 years old. Today, this team is considered to be the best baseball team in history.

So, how would I get it? I had to create enough excitement that would allow Kenny to relinquish the ball. My dad had, in the top drawer of his dresser, about two-dozen authentic Sheriff badges, representing different counties in the state of New York. He would take a particular badge with him on car trips whenever we would drive through those counties. I never saw him pulled over for speeding and never remember him taking one out of his pocket, as it was attached to his wallet. Anyway, how would he ever know that three or four of them were missing? So, I traded the badges to Kenny T. for the baseball. You have to understand that this was like owning the “Hope Diamond”. The possession of this baseball was almost like a religious experience.

The next day, my doorbell rang, and my instincts prepared me for the worst. I kind of knew that there was a problem brewing and it was not going to be good. I went to the door and opened it, and standing there was an older man, holding my Sheriff badges in one hand and holding out his other hand for something in return. I knew exactly who he was by the close resemblance to his son, who was standing next to him. Kenny T. had fear on his face and every part of his body was shaking.

Not a word was exchanged as I sheepishly dropped my short-lived prize baseball into his cupped hands. I got back the Sheriff badges, which went directly into my dad’s top drawer. My dad never knew about this failed transaction. About a year later, I tried again to deal the same badges to my younger cousin, this time for an elaborate Samurai Sword that he had received from his uncle who fought in the battle of Okinawa during World War II. That transaction lasted about two days. My uncle told my mom how I took advantage of my younger cousin with these “two-bit tin badges”. That’s another story, and that action did require a punishment. To this day, I still wonder how my dad got these authentic badges and whatever happened to them.

One of my other interests was writing to *Hollywood Stars*. Since my dad was a motion-picture projectionist, I could get into movies for nothing. I became enamored by the glamour of motion pictures and Hollywood. I also looked forward to receiving photos of the stars, some signed and some unsigned, in the mail on a

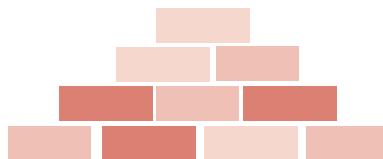
regular basis. They were also valuable for trading for other things that I collected at the time.

Many years later, I was down to just three of these collectible photos. One was an unsigned photo of Jean Tierney in a bathing suit. This photo was always in my wallet. When guys in my freshman class in college would show off photos of their girlfriends who attended out-of-town colleges, I’d pass this photo off as my girlfriend. Whenever my school had that big special dance and the guys’ girlfriends would always appear, I’d have to say that we had just broken up. I even passed her off as my girlfriend when I worked as a waiter in the Catskills. Miss Tierney could never realize the self-esteem that she gave to me during this period of growing up. Note that her fame faded quickly, so nobody ever recognized her as a movie star.

The last two items in my childhood star collection were an autographed photo of Al Jolson and a signed index card from Jim Thorpe (one of the greatest athletes of all time). They were both traded while I was with my wife at a collectible show. They went towards a collage featuring memorabilia and an authentic signature of Babe Ruth. I finally got the Babe, fair and square!

The person who traded with me was an autograph dealer who was a distant cousin of George Gershwin. (See? It all comes full circle!) As a kid, He lived within walking distance of **Yankee Stadium**. He routinely waited patiently at the exit gate used by the Yankee players after the game. He only collected the signatures of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. He was very smart and knew they’d be of great value one day. He had countless authentic signatures and, for many years, exhibited collages featuring these signatures at the collectible shows held at the armory in NYC. His hobby now became a business, which later included celebrities and world figures. The last time I physically saw him was at a collectible show held at a famous hotel in NYC. I went over to his crowded booth, and there on the counter with a “sold” sign was my Jim Thorpe index card with a \$7,500 price tag.

Now, I know that collecting is not always about getting your favorites, but rather accruing those that are rare or most unusual. But what a time I had growing up in The Bronx, wondering whatever happened to that 1927 baseball.



A Bronx Zoo Story

By Jeffrey Mesquita, jkchip@comcast.net

I grew up in the East Bronx and lived a few blocks from the **Soundview Train Station** on **Westchester Avenue**, at **1266 Fteley Avenue**. Second floor on the right, were my bedroom windows. We lived in a block of two- and four-family homes. On the corner up the street was an apartment building. It had six floors and many kids my age. It was very exciting to grow up as a teenager in the '50s. We did not have any cell phones or computers. Each day was a challenge for us, as we had to make up things to do. We would play stickball in the streets, and when the cops showed up, the sticks were hidden. If they saw our sticks, they took them away. We hid the sticks and made believe we were playing punch ball. That solved the problem.

Of course, we did many other things to keep us from getting into trouble. We played marbles (back then we called them "immies"). Some days, we would go into the local lots and play hide-and-go-seek. It was necessary to find something to do outside of our homes.

My mom was a great lady and had many friends. One of those friend's husbands was the Captain of the Police Precinct we lived near. She told me many times that if I got into trouble, she would have to tell the Captain and it would be up to him to do what he thought was necessary to make sure I did not get into trouble again. I never got to see my mom's friend's husband, except when they were together.

I would be remiss if I did not explain why my mom would yell to make sure I heard her calling me to get home. My mom's brother's family lived four blocks from us. One day when I was between four and five years old, I was playing outside with an older cousin who lived next-door to us. She told me she had to run upstairs for a couple of minutes and said, "Just sit here and I will be back shortly." I was sitting on the stoop when a dog came along. Lo and behold, it was Patches, my uncle's dog!

At that time, my family did not have a car. Therefore, wherever we went in the neighborhood, we would walk. I looked at Patches and told him he needed to go home. He was about as tall as I was and was not a pedigree, so we did not know what kind of

dog he was. I took him by the collar and walked him home to my uncle's apartment. At my age, I guess no one saw me and the dog. We got to the apartment and rang the bell, and my aunt opened the door. Shocked, she pulled me and the dog inside and immediately called my mom. I do not think I need to tell you the rest. This should tell you how early on I loved animals. It was also the beginning of my mom yelling for me to get home.

Our neighborhood was awfully close with respect to us kids getting together. There were times when I would be on another block, and my mom (who had a great voice) would open the kitchen window and yell, "Jeff, come home now!" The whole gang would hear that call, no matter where I was, and they would say, "You'd better get out of here *now!*" They all knew how strict she was and made sure I listened to her call. I would leave them and get home as quickly as possible. I knew that if I did not, I was in Big Trouble.

Let us get to **The Bronx Zoo**. We did not live extremely far from one of the entrances to the zoo. Back then, there were days when you could get into the zoo for free. Having gone many times, we decided to find shortcuts to give us something new to do. There were times when we wound up in different parts of The Bronx, but not the zoo. That did not stop us from finding other ways to get there.

It was a nice day and school was out. "Well, what are we going to do today?" we asked each other.

We decided it was time to find another shortcut to the zoo. Since we had so many ways to find ways to get there, one of my friends said, "While riding in the car with my parents, I think I saw a new shortcut."

He took us through streets and places none of us had seen before. We came to a tall wall, and one of the guys said, "I am not climbing that wall; I don't know what's on the other side!"

We all agreed, and then one of the guys said, "Come here! Look what I found." It was a huge concrete cylinder that was probably used to allow water to go through the wall. So, we went through the tunnel. When we got to the other side, we found ourselves in an area that was all grass and woods.



1266 Fteley Avenue

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“Let’s keep going,” one of the guys said. “You never know what we will find.”

We walked for about ten minutes or so and came to a fence. “Let’s climb over and see where it leads us”, someone said.

Now this is the best part of the story. The area over the fence was like many lots of unfinished properties in The Bronx at that time. We felt like we had gotten into someone else’s property. We walked for about five minutes. Much to our surprise, we wound up in the area for wild animals. We saw a few antelopes.

We were not too scared, until one of the antelopes saw us. He looked at us and began to approach. At that point, we knew we were in *Big Trouble*. We all screamed, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

We made it back to the fence just in time to climb over. The antelope made it to the fence a matter of seconds later. Well, at least we could now look at the animal, and some of his buddies. To say the least, that was the last time we looked for shortcuts to **The Bronx Zoo**.

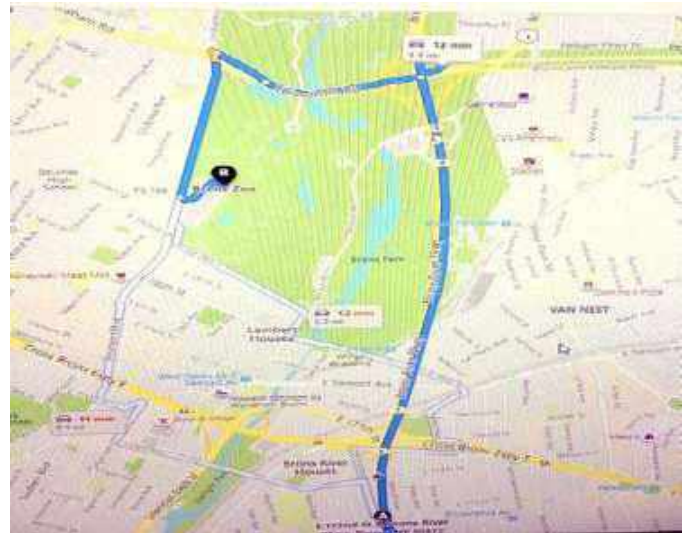
None of us ever told our parents about our adventure, as they would have not let us out for an awfully long time. I was especially careful not to say anything, or I would be in the hands of my mom’s friend’s husband. We all took that as a challenge to make sure what we were doing was mostly safe.

Going to the zoo was always an exciting day for us. Not many of us had dogs or cats in our homes, since our apartments were too small to have pets around. We would go to the small animal areas in the zoo and see lots of great animals. There was an area where we could touch an animal. That was very comforting for us.

The next time we went to the zoo (and yes, we went the right way this time), we made it a point to go to the wild animal area. It was a test to see if any of the antelopes would remember us. Not a one came to the fence. That was a little disappointing to us. We had hoped to have made some animal friends.

That is my true story. Living now in Atlanta, Georgia, I do not get to see any of my old friends anymore. My best friend at the time, Marty, who lived in the next building from us, I could not locate. Subsequently, I found out he had changed his last name, and that is why I could not find him. A cousin of mine found what he had changed his last name to, so I got in touch with him and we talked about the experience, and laughed heartily.

The Bronx Zoo opened in November of 1899. It has been an exciting place for millions of adults and kids to see many different animals from around



Map to Zoo

the world. **The Bronx Zoo** is on TV, and I watch the program very often. When I see the antelopes, it always puts a smile on my face. The things they do now for animals, even the smallest of them, are fantastic. The veterinarians will not let an animal die. They go to the farthest end to find out what is wrong and try to fix it.

Even though it was more than 60 years ago, how can anyone forget being chased by an antelope? It is something I will never forget, and I hope that whomever reads this can remember some experience they had at **The Bronx Zoo**.



Layout of Bronx Zoo

A Stranger is a Friend that You Haven't Met Yet

By Jay Becker, bronxjay@optonline.net

While growing up in The Bronx, at one time or another, we were warned by our parents not to talk to strangers or to go anywhere with anyone we did not know. Yet there were times that many of us violated that caution, for reasons known only to ourselves at the time, including the possibility that there was a necessity, we were lonely, had an ache for adventure, or were just bored.



Hugh Grant Circle, 1940s

A stranger may have helped our mood with a smile or laugh, or kept us company for a short time. Some of us grabbed every opportunity to talk to people we didn't know because we didn't want to be alone. However, if someone didn't want to engage with us, it was usually fine. When they did, it usually enlarged our perspective, even if it turned out to be negative. I found, in many cases, that I was quite happy after talking with someone I didn't know and wanted more of those conversations. It also, maybe naively, increased my sense of trust in other people.

I grew up in **Parkchester** but had friends all over The Bronx. Invited to a party one Saturday evening in the West Bronx, I missed the **180th Street Crosstown Bus (#36)** from **Hugh Grant Circle** by less than a minute, and realized that it was just too far to walk. It would be silly to go to **Tremont Avenue** and wait for that bus (#40).

Desperate to get to **University Avenue** early, and without thinking, I put my thumb up, and at the next change of the traffic light, a man dressed in business clothes stopped and asked me where I was going. When I told him my destination, he said that he was going to New Jersey and I could "jump out" at **University Avenue**. The **Cross-Bronx Expressway**

was not completed that far west yet, so he had to go through the streets after the last exit at **3rd Avenue**. We did not talk at all during the entire ride, and I could see he didn't want to, and that was well and good.

Because I was a subway buff, it was important to me to talk to the engineers and conductors on the different lines that I liked to ride for fun. Many were happy to talk to "another train nut" about the job, the signals,

switches, the voltages, construction, management rules and alleged abuses, passengers, the hours they worked, walking on the elevated structure and in the tunnels, the process of making repairs to the trains, and maintaining the tracks.

I also had a fascination with learning about repairing and maintaining the elevators in **Parkchester** and looked around for these technicians who worked in the different **Parkchester** buildings. It was amazing to me how they were able to make the elevators move through the shafts (which were scary enough) while working on or under these elevators without using the buttons. I wanted to know about all of this, and many of them were accommodating.

Men working in the sewers were interesting to talk with, and they explained that the job wasn't just cleaning or clearing waste. Many of them worked in manholes that had pipes, electrical wiring, and gas lines which either had problems or were just being inspected and maintained. I didn't find them much in **Parkchester**, but I did in the **Castle Hill Avenue** area, **Bronxdale Avenue** near **White Plains Road**, and by **Walton Avenue** at **Marcy Place**.

There was a giant map of The Bronx, showing every street, mounted on the wall in the **43rd Precinct**

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Police Station on Benedict Avenue near **Pugsley Avenue**, which I discovered during a class trip to that building when I was a student at **J.H.S. 127**. I would go in there to check out the map and figure out my way to get to certain streets that I wanted to explore, and though the cops allowed it, they didn't seem too happy about my studying the map. They would ask me, "Why do you want to go to **Seymour Avenue**, or **DeRimer Avenue**? What is happening there?" I usually had no answer, except that I was planning to ride my bike there or get there by train.

Another opportunity to talk to strangers came when any of us, while playing sports, got hurt and went to nearby pharmacies to avail ourselves of the free services to stop the bleeding or get something out of our eyes. You could always depend on Mr. Rosenfeld in the pharmacy on **Watson Avenue** near **Soundview Avenue**, or the pharmacist on **Starling Avenue** near **Purdy Street**, to take care of First Aid.

One man picked me up from the street and carried

me home when I fell in front of his car while racing across **Metropolitan Avenue** with my cousin. I was not injured, just traumatized by finding myself under his car. I think my mother was more traumatized than I was, and she brought me right over to the doctor's office for a checkup.

Other helpful strangers were the bike repairmen in different neighborhoods, who helped fix a flat or make a minor repair to keep us going while far from home. The mommies, strangers to me, who sat outside the apartment buildings all over The Bronx, usually with babies, would help if you got hurt, and as a dividend, many times would chase away bullies. Librarians, who we never really got to know, were in a different category in those days. They were serious stranger- helpers who got us through our school reports, speeches, and required readings, and also suggested enjoyable books.

Talk to strangers? Oh, yes. As Jackie Gleason said: "How sweet it is."

Memories of the Ward Theater

(continued from page 4)

with chocolate. Will someone please tell me why we can't buy them anymore?

I remember seeing some wonderful films at the **Ward**. Well, they were wonderful at least to me as a child and later as an adolescent. Like many of my friends at the time, I loved science fiction movies. Some of my favorites included *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954).

Perhaps the most memorable movie I saw at the **Ward** was *Bwana Devil*, which debuted in 1952. That was the first feature-length 3D movie. The spears being thrown at wild lions felt as if they were aimed at me. In return, we would throw Necco candy discs at the screen. Those flimsy cardboard 3D glasses somehow made Robert Stack and Barbara Britton look as if they were alive.

The **Ward Theater** survived through some difficult years, including, of course, the Great Depression. Creative marketing approaches were instituted, such as coloring contests for children (at age ten, I won a toy), free Sundays (before noon), giveaways of dishware and other inexpensive products, and beauty contests

for teenage girls. Rochelle Hornsby (nee Winnick), a **Manor Avenue** neighbor, won one of those beauty contests. Her photograph was displayed in the theater's lobby for weeks. From time to time, there were also guest appearances. We were especially excited when one of the Bowery Boys (AKA the East Side Kids) made an appearance. I can't remember if it was Huntz Hall or Leo Gorcey.

What happened to the **Ward Theater**? I left The Bronx in 1964. Therefore, I have to rely on third-party internet notations. It appears that the **Ward** closed in the late 1970s. By that time, the seats were threadbare, armrests were missing, and the floor was sticky from decades of fallen chewing gum, candy, and soda. I have heard that, before it closed, the theater may have experienced some violent episodes, and that it had a reputation as being a dangerous place. That, along with labor costs and television, may have contributed to its demise.

After the theater closed, there is some evidence that it may have been transformed into a roller-skating rink. Afterwards, it became a discount store. At one point in the building's history, the auditorium was used for church services. The space continues today, after opening in 2015, as an affordable women's clothing store, part of a chain known as the "Rainbow Shops".

Just as a rainbow is full of luminescent colors, so are my fond memories of Saturdays at the **Ward Theater**.

A Young Boy in The Bronx

By Charles Emanuel, charlesmnl@yahoo.com

I lived in The Bronx from the age of one, at **East 180th Street** between **Vyse Avenue** and **Bryant Avenue**. My building had 16 apartments in it. We lived on the fourth floor and eventually moved to the third floor.

I remember, as a young boy, sitting by the front window looking down onto **East 180th** and watching the trolleys go by. The trolleys had open windows and could be driven from the front of the car or from the back. They rode on railroad tracks that were in cobblestone streets. The top of the car had a pole that went up to an electric wire. Every once in a while, the wire would shoot out some sparks. Eventually, buses replaced the trolleys, and the streets soon were paved over the cobblestones.

P.S. 6 was my school from kindergarten to the 8th grade. From the beginning, I would walk the three blocks to school, regardless of the weather. Because there were so many kids my age in the neighborhood, I always had someone to walk with. In those days, no one would get driven anywhere; if you had to go, you walked.

P.S. 6 was a great school where I made many memories. The desks had inkwells built in, which needed to be refilled every now and then. Ballpoint pens were not invented yet, and each kid had a pen with a point on the end that needed to be dipped in the ink. If you were good, you would be selected to go to the utility room and get the ink to fill everyone's inkwell. Another important job was taking the erasers out back and slapping them on the building to clean the chalk off of them.

Air raids were common during World War II. When the air raid siren blew, all the kids would have to go under their desks. When the all-clear siren blew, we would continue with our schoolwork. At home, all

the windows had black shades, so at night when the air raid siren blew the shades were pulled down and no light would be seen from outside. The air raid warden would be in the courtyard and yell at anyone who had a light showing. In the evening, if you looked up to the night sky, you would see large spotlights fanning the sky, looking for planes.

At three o'clock, we would leave school and rush home to change our clothes. In school, the boys had to wear white shirts and ties. We could not wait to change to dungarees (jeans) and sneakers and go to **Vyse Avenue** to play.

There were around eleven guys in the neighborhood that hung around **Vyse Avenue**: Hugo, Steve, Billy, Morty, George, Sonny, Harry, Leib, Mousy, Walter, and Tommy. We would meet and decide what games to play. If someone had some chalk, we would draw a Sculley chart in the street. The chart had a large square with smaller boxes around the inside of the square, and one square in the center. Each square had a number, which you had to follow. The object was to get to the center square. Each person had a bottle cap filled with tar or

whatever you found to make it heavy. The caps were put on the ground, and one by one, we flipped the cap with a finger to make it go through the small squares. If someone shot their cap and knocked you out of a square, you had to start from the beginning again.

Another game was stickball. We used a mop or broom handle for the bat. The ball used was a Spalden. The game was played in the street with a car fender as first base, the sewer cover as second base, another car fender as third base, and another sewer cover as home. This was the game we played the most. Other games included Johnny on the Pony, marbles, ring-a-levio, stoop ball, and so many more.



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We would spend time in **Sonny Cohen's Candy Store** and order things like malteds and egg creams with a long pretzel. There was a red cooler box filled with water and ice, and sitting in there were all the bottled sodas. When you wanted a Coke, you would open the lid and reach in the water for a frosty one. We were able to buy one cigarette at a time. The cost was two cents.

Not far from the candy store was **George the Butcher**. I worked one summer for him, cleaning the butcher block and sweeping the sawdust. Across the street was the bakery; they made the best jelly doughnuts and corellas. Next-door to them was **Witkin's Deli**, who made the most delicious hot dogs and pastrami.

The laundry was located on my side of the street. It consisted of 10 or 12 washing machines and dryers. People would drop off their clothes, and we would deliver them for usually 25-cent tips.

East 180th Street was about two blocks from **The Bronx Zoo**. In the summer, because there was no air conditioning, our windows would be wide open. Some evenings we could hear the lions roar.

It seemed like, in those days during the winter, there was always snow on the ground. When it snowed, everything seemed to stop. The snowfall was usually very heavy and accumulated very fast. Cars were covered quickly, and sometimes because the snow was so deep it was hard to find your car. As kids, we used to dig cars out and make a dollar.

We loved the snow. There was an empty lot next

to the church with a long hill that we would go to and sleigh ride. Some used sleds and some used garbage can covers. All in all, everyone had fun.

The movie house that we went to was called the **Ritz**. It was located on **East 180th** between **Bryant Avenue** and **Boston Road**. The admission price was 15 cents. They would show two major shows, two cartoons, and the path news, and have a drawing for a boxed game. If your ticket stub number was called, you won. Every Saturday when you bought a ticket, you would receive a dinner plate. Many housewives would go every Saturday to try and complete a set.

The church on **East 180th Street** had a backyard that we often played on. We would play football and pitcher-batter, just to name a few. In the evening, we would go there and make a fire pit. We would take a potato, put it on a stick, and hold it over the fire to cook it. Sometimes, we would put the potato right into the fire. After taking the potato out, we would peel the skin off and eat it. It was some of the best times.

As we got older and reached our teens, we tried to find work to make some money. Any job was okay. Some guys got jobs in the movie theaters as ushers, while other guys found part-time work in stores. I got a job working in a bowling alley setting pins. Most of my money was from tips. At the end of a game, the bowlers would send down a quarter.

Eventually, I got my driver's license and bought my first car. It was a beautiful '49 Buick, for which I paid \$50. I have had many cars since then, but I'll always remember that one.

Bob Abrams

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campus was called NYU.

So, why was the book titled The Luckiest Guy in the World? Maybe it was because, early on at the age of 31 while as an assemblyman, Bob ran for borough president and had to travel on many occasions from The Bronx to Albany and back in a single day. One time on his way back to The Bronx, he fell asleep at the wheel, lost control of his car, and veered onto the northbound lane and down an embankment. Luckily, there were no other cars coming northbound, and his car spun around and hit a tree. Amazingly, Bob walked away without a scratch: no blood, no broken bones, just totally shaken up. He proclaimed, "I must be the luckiest guy on Earth to still be alive."



Ben & Dotty's Luncheonette

Four decades later in 2009, a CAT scan revealed a malignant cancerous tumor which measured thirty centimeters and weighed twenty-five pounds. The prognosis of success for this type of operation was only around 20%. After the operation and carefully monitoring with follow-up CAT scans, doctors determined that there was no additional growth or return of the tumor; another reason Bob again felt that he is "the luckiest guy in the world".

However, Bob's book title may just be a metaphor for the way he has navigated through the uncertainties of life. Think of the changes that he made using his political acumen, like fighting and



Howie "Deuce" Cohen (co-editor of *Pelham Parkway Times*) and Robert Abrams at Pelham Parkway Reunion celebration circa 1996

prevailing for ordinary people battling unequal odds against corporate greed; or launching the Love Canal case and other key environmental issues; or his path-breaking support of the LGBTQ rights which ultimately led to marriage equality. Many people have been impacted by his "luck", and for this, we should be thankful. The book is a good read, so I recommend you pick it up for yourself or give it to an old Bronx friend as a gift.



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