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CITIZEN HOBO

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Tramps, of course, wrestled with their own insecurities, though middle-class descriptions of tramp life hardly mentioned them. Tramping was an expression of the new social and economic relationships coming to dominate American life in the Gilded Age. Increasingly dependent upon wages and decreasingly secure in their jobs, working people the nation over faced the threat of poverty, dislocation, and the shattering of their customary patterns of life. In the face of these changes, some workers took to the road and, in so doing, collectively gave rise to a new modern problem of homelessness that would command the attention of private and public officials for generations to come.

Because the alarm raised by the tramp crisis of the 1870s reverberated halfway into the twentieth century, charting the emergence of this first tramp army is crucial to understanding the subsequent history of American homelessness. What exactly was new about the great army of tramps? How did Gilded Age tramps differ from previous generations of homeless vagrants? Where and how did they travel? Why did some poor Americans hit the road while others staved out? And how did tramps get by once they found themselves, as . . . looking for a job?"⁸

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THE MAKING OF AMERICA'S TRAMP ARMY

In what one commentator called "a happy innovation of language," Americans in 1873 coined the word "tramp" to describe the legion of men traveling the nation "with no visible means of support."⁹ Previously, the noun had denoted "an invigorating walking expedition" or, during the Civil War, "a long, tiring, or toilsome walk or march."¹⁰ Stressing mobility, the new usage also signified a sense of novelty, as if older terms such as "vagrant" or "vagabond" were somehow inappropriate to the moment.

But despite the innovation of language, neither homeless migration nor the fearful responses to it were new to American life in the Gilded Age. Long before the tramp crisis of the 1870s, poor men and women traveled in search of work and relief, often encountering fear and hostility instead. Indeed, court records from the earliest English settlements in America abound with references to the "strolling" or "wandering" poor. Seventeenth-century English colonists had left a country that itself was awash with

"vagabonds" and "masterless men": displaced laborers drifting in and out of urban centers. A flourishing literature of "roguery" that purported to catalog the various deceits and depredations of these wayfarers kept the sense of crisis alive, while new draconian penalties for vagabondage—whipping, branding, and hanging among them—set the standard for cruelty. The problem was so urgent that propagandists for colonization such as Richard Hakluyt even urged the establishment of English settlements in America in order to relieve the mother country of its vagrant and "surplus" population. British America, in a sense, was founded as a refuge from, and solution to, the homelessness crisis of Tudor and Stuart England.¹¹

A highly mobile people themselves, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans harbored the Old World's suspicions of wandering strangers and took vigorous measures to suppress the transient poor. "Masterlessness" remained a major problem in the New World as the vagabond population swelled with escaped slaves, runaway servants and apprentices, and a host of others recently released from bondage. Those with skills or money usually gained residency or "settlement" when they moved to a new town, while indigent migrants were often "warned out" and physically removed beyond town limits. Settlement laws, which remained in effect until well into the twentieth century, protected towns not only from the responsibilities of poor relief, but also from the exotic and unwanted cultural influences that often accompanied wandering strangers. The tightly regulated towns of colonial New England, for example, frequently banned newcomers who carried religious convictions, political ideas, or moral standards that departed from community norms. Transients judged to be particularly dangerous, in either the criminal or cultural senses, could be deemed "vagabonds" and subjected to the grisly punishments customary in England. Pillorying, branding, flogging, or ear cropping often awaited those migrants who could not give "a good and satisfactory account of their wandering up and down."¹² Like the laws of settlement, vagrancy statutes legitimized and facilitated the mobility of better-off transients while discouraging and criminalizing the movement of the poor.

These laws, strict as they were, proved ineffective in the face of the market and transportation revolutions of the 1820s and 1830s, which unleashed new streams of poor migrants throughout the country. Some of these migrants sought the new employment opportunities afforded by the Jacksonian economy. Young single men poured into and out of such inland boomtowns as Rochester, New York, for example, finding seasonal work along the Erie Canal. These unattached and highly mobile workers

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made up 71 percent of Rochester's adult male workforce, filling the city's burgeoning workshops, boardinghouses, barrooms, and streets. The rowdy subculture they created alarmed Rochester's more stable middle-class residents. Caught up in the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening, reform-minded citizens launched temperance crusades and other organizations to impose moral order on this floating army of workers.¹³

While the commercial revolution set new groups of migrants in pursuit of opportunity, it also dislocated those farmers and artisans bankrupted by the new wildly competitive economy. Rural families scrambling for cash to pay rents, debts, or taxes swarmed into urban centers such as Philadelphia and New York on the promise of wage labor. Testifying to the frequent failure of these cities to make good on that promise was a newly refurbished urban institution: the almshouse. No longer able merely to "pass on" or "warn out" shelterless paupers, antebellum civic leaders sought to control and rehabilitate the vagrant poor in regimented caretaking institutions.¹⁴

The vast majority of those we might now call homeless, however, managed to avoid whatever care the almshouse afforded by earning their subsistence in the economy of the streets. Indeed, when antebellum commentators talked of the "vagrant mode of life," they denoted not homelessness per se, but the casual labor that poor city dwellers increasingly pursued. Peddling, scavenging, begging, prostitution, petty thievery, gambling, and any other "disorderly" public activity that threatened or "injured" the moneymaking potential of urban real estate all fell under the legal purview of vagrancy. By 1860 entire neighborhoods of the propertyless poor, like New York City's notorious Five Points in lower Manhattan, became known as "vagrant" districts not only because of their degraded housing conditions, but also because of their illegal street economies. That relatively settled neighborhood residents could be deemed vagrants attests to the enduring and multifaceted nature of vagrancy in nineteenth-century America.¹⁵

As these historical precedents suggest, the tramp crisis of 1873–78, while eclipsing everything that had come before in its breadth and intensity, was not entirely, as one journalist claimed in 1877, like "a thunderburst from a clear sky."¹⁶ Indeed, the great army of tramps was in many ways merely another variation on the old, if ever-changing, theme of American homelessness stretching back to the days of colonization. Gilded Age tramps, like their homeless predecessors, took to the road because of dislocation and unemployment or because of new opportunities resulting from economic expansion. Just as propertyless migrants in the

early nineteenth century encountered an array of law enforcement and charity officials bent on punishing, incarcerating, or rehabilitating them, so, too, did late-nineteenth-century tramps. Indeed, tramps of the 1870s inspired a whole new generation of vagrancy laws and workhouse disciplines. But, also like earlier vagrants, most tramps found temporary refuges of their own in working-class neighborhoods and the casual labor economy.

Middle-class perceptions of crisis in the Gilded Age also mirrored earlier panics over vagrancy. The factors generating concern about the "vagrant mode of life" in the antebellum period also fueled the tramp scare of the 1870s: the struggles between the propertied and unpropertied over the uses of public space, fears about the growth of a propertyless proletariat, and anxieties about the loss of traditional social controls in American cities. Viewed from one perspective, the rise of America's great tramp army in the 1870s proves nothing more than the biblical adage "the poor you have with you always."

But, to borrow again from Scripture, American homelessness was a house of many mansions, and the great army of tramps possessed numerous features distinguishing it from previous groups of the migrant poor. As the term "tramp" suggests, what struck Gilded Age Americans most about the new homeless army was its stunning mobility. Jacob Riis's constant shifting back and forth between and within metropolitan regions was not unusual. Unemployed men of the 1870s routinely traveled hundreds of miles at a stretch. Even in a nation where over half the population changed residences every ten years, such extreme mobility caused alarm.

The primary reason for this new mobility was the vast expansion of the nation's railroad network in the years following the Civil War. A loose collection of tracks in the antebellum period, railroad lines expanded into a tightly connected web by the 1870s, adding as much as 7,379 miles in a single year and attaining a total mileage of 93,000 by 1880.¹⁷ With a continental network of transportation and communication in place, the consequences of industrial life—beneficial and unsavory alike—penetrated every corner of the land. Created to deliver commodities to a great national market, railroads now also transported, often without remuneration, an increasingly footloose working class that circulated throughout industrial America after the Civil War. No longer were the problems of vagrancy and floating workers contained within metropolitan regions. Almshouses that had previously served local paupers now swelled with nonlocal tramps who could not claim residency anywhere.¹⁸ America, it seemed to many, was overrun with wandering strangers. To make matters worse, those who wandered most tended also to be the poorest.

What was it about the nation? Elite observers often spoke of a "roving disposition" among the unemployed as the predominant cause while in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the city of New York.

It was now late in the fall of 1877, and the streets were full of idle men. My last night in the city, I saw a factory, failed, and, hon- estly, I was not surprised to see tramps, wandering about the streets, somehow stilling the hum of the city with vagrant curs or out- raged men, some sheltering ash-bin c-

Jacob Riis's dependence on the state for shifts in the demand for labor was a key factor in the struggle for the food and shelter of the poor. In other words, Jacob Riis, like many others, had firsthand the problem of the unemployed.

Although the problem of unemployment is actually a fairly recent phenomenon, it did not even appear in print until the late 1800s. Joblessness, of course, predated the Industrial Revolution, standing outside the shut doors of the unemployed. But unemployment as a social problem was first attested. But unemployment was not a new phenomenon. Roughly the eve of the Civil War, the unemployed Americans in the industrial revolution were employed, either as farmers or as factory workers. They used to make a living, but they were idle, self-employed, and they were against unemployment. They were not employed. Farmers and shop owners were prepared for intervals of inactivity. Farming families also marketed their goods as clothing, soap, and candles. Finally, for the first time, the customary intimacy of the family was broken. The social bonds between employees and employers were broken from being laid off during the economic depression.

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What was it about the post-Civil War years that put the poor in motion? Elite observers often attributed Gilded Age migrations to a certain "roving disposition" among the poor.¹⁹ Jacob Riis, however, revealed the predominant cause while describing his arrival in New York City from New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he had previously worked in a brickyard:

It was now late in the fall. The brick-making season was over. The city was full of idle men. My last hope, a promise of employment in a human hair factory, failed, and, homeless and penniless, I joined the great army of tramps, wandering about the streets in the daytime with the one aim of somehow stilling the hunger that gnawed at my vitals, and fighting at night with vagrant curs or outcasts as miserable as myself for the protection of some sheltering ash-bin or doorway.²⁰

Jacob Riis's dependence on wages had made him vulnerable to seasonal shifts in the demand for labor, a vulnerability that compelled him to scavenge for the food and shelter he could not purchase on the market. In other words, Jacob Riis, like millions of other Americans, had discovered firsthand the problem of unemployment.

Although the problem of unemployment might seem as old as time, it is actually a fairly recent phenomenon. In fact, the word "unemployment" did not even appear in print in America until 1887.²¹ The experience of joblessness, of course, predated the term, as any Jacksonian-era laborer standing outside the shuttered doors of his former workshop could have attested. But unemployment did not become a widespread problem until roughly the eve of the Civil War, when, for the first time, a solid majority of Americans in the industrializing North worked for others. In the first half of the nineteenth century, most northern heads of households were self-employed, either as farmers, artisans, or tradesmen who owned the property they used to make a living. Although they all faced periods of "forced idleness," self-employed property owners possessed precious "shelters against unemployment" that allowed them to subsist during slack periods. Farmers and shop owners controlled the pace of their labors and prepared for intervals of inactivity. In addition to growing their own food, farming families also manufactured at home important necessities—such as clothing, soap, and candles—that wage-earning people had to buy on the market. Finally, for those Americans who did work for others, the customary intimacy of the small farm and workshop often generated personal bonds between employers and their workers that protected employees from being laid off during economic downturns.²²

Through the course of the nineteenth century, the ever-encroaching

tide of commercial exchange steadily eroded these protections. By the 1870s they had diminished to the vanishing point. Most northerners were now wage earners who did not own productive property and who encountered their employers in relations of the market rather than paternalist authority. In such cases, the seasonal inactivity such as Jacob Riis experienced precipitated not a routine shifting of productive activity, but rather a desperate search for the cash income one needed to survive.

Seasonal inactivity marked virtually every field of occupation, from agriculture to industry. Outdoor labor—harvesting, dock work, canal digging, and building of all sorts, for example—had to be done in temperate months, leaving many unemployed during the winter, a season when poorhouse populations swelled.²³ Indoor labor in factories and workshops also had their idle periods, usually corresponding to the cycles of consumer demand. These slack periods—coupled with local, regional, and national business cycles—made for highly volatile employment patterns. One scholar estimates that between 20 and 25 percent of all northern wage earners spent at least three months jobless during the average year in the late nineteenth century, with both figures rising sharply during depressions.²⁴

Once jobless, many wage earners had little choice but to move. Housing, which earlier in the century had provided a resource for subsisting through idle periods, was now a cash drain that required the constant transfer of wages into rent.²⁵ "I'll give you one instance out of a hundred how workingmen manage to live in these hard times," explained one worker in the 1870s. "A man moved eighteen times in two years without paying his rent."²⁶ The lack of cheap public transportation meant that most workers had to live within walking distance of their workplaces. Since each neighborhood supported only a limited amount of wage labor, losing one's job quite often required changing one's residence. Under these circumstances shelter was anything but permanent, and being caught, like Riis, without lodging or the means to pay for it became a routine hazard of working-class life.

Just how far and in what direction jobless migrants traveled once on the road depended largely upon their point of origin and the skill level they expected from their jobs. Most migration involved cities, either as departure points or destinations. Cities with diverse employment opportunities sustained comparatively higher and more stable employment rates than smaller communities dominated by fewer industries and trades.²⁷ Rather than pursue random itineraries, then, jobless migrants everywhere traveled predictable routes to urban centers, expecting with reason that cities would offer good chances for employment. As Riis found in New York

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City, however, moving to a metropolis was not a guarantee of finding work. Whether or not an urban job search succeeded, migration to a city exposed the tramping worker to a greater variety of subsequent migration options. The larger transportation networks available to urban migrants—such as carriage roads, water routes, and especially railroads—broadened the choice of travel methods and destinations, as Riis demonstrated when he tramped, ferried, and hitched freight trains to Philadelphia after his traumatic experiences on the streets of New York.²⁸ Cities also served as information centers on labor market conditions elsewhere, enabling migrants to determine with greater precision what travel routes would likely lead them to jobs. Twenty years before urban lodging-house districts provided institutional frameworks for disseminating such information, Jacob Riis and other transient men of the 1870s gathered reports from the job front in the streets, parks, and saloons surrounding cheap boarding-houses.

Whether into or out of metropolises, short migrations, such as Riis's trip from New Brunswick to New York City, were more common than longer ones, especially among “casual” workers who circulated around fixed and familiar territories. Most tramping workers, especially unskilled day laborers, headed for the closest cities and towns where they thought they might find work. Skilled workers tended to tramp farther than their less skilled cohorts, taking advantage of the Gilded Age's rapidly expanding railroad networks to plot more elaborate travel routes.²⁹ Jacob Riis's longer migrations, such as his direct trips back and forth between Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and New York City, generally corresponded with stints as a carpenter, furniture maker, and journalist. Once these highly skilled jobs ended, Riis often then traveled shorter distances to surrounding towns or villages, picking up whatever work he could, usually casual labor in a factory, lumber camp, or on a farm. Skilled workers were also more likely to pursue wage opportunities in rapidly growing communities of the Midwest and West. These places especially attracted large numbers of workers in building trades who followed construction booms only to depart when demand inevitably slackened. Jacob Riis's very first migration in the United States was to build housing for coal miners in what soon became the industrial town of East Brady, Pennsylvania. After “some temporary slackness in the building trade,” Riis then tried mining (“one day was enough for me”) and various kinds of casual labor before pawning his clothes for a trip back to New York.³⁰

Unlike previous generations of jobless migrants, the tramp army of the 1870s contained large numbers of skilled workers like Riis.³¹ Some of these workers benefited from formal “tramping systems” sponsored by

unions of printers, carpenters, cigar makers, iron molders, and miners to control and accommodate the mobility of their notoriously footloose members.³² The vast majority of "tramping artisans," however, migrated without the aid of union-sponsored traveling cards, relief funds, and lodgings. Especially during depressions, most skilled workers stole freight train rides, begged meals, competed for common labor, and faced vagrancy arrest right alongside their less skilled compatriots. By the time Jacob Riis found himself among the great army of tramps, occupational skill provided precious little buffer against the hazards of seasonal unemployment.

In addition to finding work, another ongoing task a jobless migrant faced when in a new district was securing shelter. By the turn of the century, virtually every American city contained lodging house neighborhoods that offered transient workers a wide array of cheap lodging options, from full private rooms in furnished hotels to dry spaces on saloon floors. In the 1870s, however, the temporary lodging market was still in its infancy, and most tramping workers roomed in private homes or in small boardinghouses. The most affordable boarding arrangements in the 1870s were in tenements, which were already overcrowded and offered few amenities that could not be scavenged elsewhere. Finding himself "crowded out of the tenements of the Bend by their utter nastiness," the destitute Jacob Riis turned to the doorways of Chatham Square, which, in dry weather, provided a cheaper (and perhaps better) opportunity for sleeping, despite periodic roustings by police officers.³³ Outside of larger cities, cheap boarding options were scarce, leaving transients like Riis to inhabit barns, wagons, and sheds, often even when employed.

Another shelter alternative for migrants both in small towns and large cities was the public lodging provided by poorhouses and police stations. Even if, as Jacob Riis testified, public lodging was a last resort for "honest" homeless men, it was nonetheless an increasingly common recourse for the migratory poor during the 1870s. Overnight lodging was one of the first functions performed by the newly organized urban police departments of the 1850s. Nineteenth-century police departments often fed and lodged more persons than they arrested, although during seasons of slack labor demand, an otherwise homeless "lodger" could be locked up as a criminal vagrant. By the 1870s police stations had replaced poorhouses as the primary public lodging for indigent working-age males. Conditions of police station lodging varied, but most provided only temporary shelter on bare floors for a few days or hours, leaving lodgers to shift for themselves once released. By the end of the century, a growing chorus of social reformers led by Jacob Riis would condemn the short-term, unsupervised

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relief offered by police stations as the poor made their way to the city. In Philadelphia, for example, between 1870 and 1875, an average of 10 and 20 persons per night had lodged in the city's police stations. In the late 1870s, the police stations had become a familiar and even routine

The rise of police station lodging changed the composition of the migrant population. Those who gained admission to police station lodgings were a more homogenous group than those who sought admission elsewhere. The presence of police stations made it more difficult for a transient to find a job, and admission to a police station could effectively end a transient's job search at all. As a result, the population of police station lodgings could respond more deliberately to transiency of

Poor women, for example, often found themselves in police station lodgings for one reason they were unable to find work. Homeless women have often been cited as their presence so disruptive to the city that they were quickly rendered to police station custody or by being sent to the almshouse. In Philadelphia, prostitutes, that occupying a large portion of the population, were one of the few options available to women. In the nineteenth century, women who lost their jobs or opportunities in manufacturing or service work, or who were on the road, women faced a difficult choice. From such public service, women were often kept away from hitting the streets. The police stations provided a place where women that housed and fed them could even begin their job search. In Philadelphia, in 1874 and 1875 were few women in the city's House of Commons. In the bellum period and the

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relief offered by police stations as an encouragement to tramping. By that time, however, cheap private lodging houses had begun to replace police stations as the poor man's last resort. Before then, approximately one adult male in twenty-three slept in a police station at some point in his life, and between 10 and 20 percent of American families contained a member who had lodged. In the late nineteenth century, police station lodging was a familiar and even routine experience for many poor Americans.³⁴

The rise of police station lodging signaled major changes in the social composition of the migratory homeless. Whereas previous populations of vagrants exhibited considerable ethnic, gender, and even racial diversity, those who gained admission to police stations in the 1870s were a remarkably homogenous group. Bordering as it was on incarceration, admission to police station lodging hardly seems a privilege. But given the importance of police stations in underwriting the mobility of tramps, denial of admission could effectively bar a poor person from conducting a migratory job search at all. As a result, only a narrow segment of the laboring population could respond to their job insecurity through the extreme and deliberate transiency of a Jacob Riis.

Poor women, for example, were excluded from police station lodging, one reason they were not counted among the great army of tramps. Homeless women have always existed, but in the late nineteenth century their presence so disrupted settled notions of dependent womanhood that they were quickly rendered "invisible," either by being placed in protective custody or by being recruited into the army of female "tramps," that is, prostitutes, that occupied nineteenth-century urban centers.³⁵ Subsisting through an economy of sex, rather than itinerant labor, was indeed one of the few options available to indigent women. While female wage opportunities in manufacturing and domestic services improved during the nineteenth century, the kind of extensive migrations often required to maintain employment were exceedingly difficult for female workers. On the road, women faced frequent harassment, violence, as well as exclusion from such public services as police station lodging. In order to prevent women from hitting the road in the first place, charitable organizations founded unprecedented numbers of caretaking institutions for poor women that housed and often put the indigent to work before they could even begin their job searches. Thus, only a little over 6 percent of all jobless migrants who applied for public aid in New York State in the winter of 1874 and 1875 were female; of these, over half were accompanied by husbands.³⁶ In Philadelphia the proportion of women vagrants incarcerated in the city's House of Correction dropped dramatically between the antebellum period and the 1870s, from about half to a quarter or fewer. Ac-

counting for this decline was the extreme underrepresentation of women among the increasing numbers of transient poor. The rise of "mothers' pensions" and other protectionist measures in the early twentieth century ensured that tramping, as it emerged in the 1870s, remained an experience defined almost exclusively by men.³⁷

In addition to sex, race also played a large role in determining the social composition of America's tramp army in the 1870s. African Americans had long idealized geographic mobility as a crucial component of freedom, both before and after the end of slavery. For slaves, self-emancipation often involved long, arduous journeys, whether escaping individually or in mass during the Civil War. After the war black migration continued as former slaves took to the road for diverse reasons: to search for family members, to establish independent livelihoods, and, as Peter Kolchin so aptly puts it, simply "to affirm their freedom."³⁸

Infusing this ideal of free movement with even greater urgency was the coordinated campaign on the part of white planters and their political allies in the South to coerce black workers to stay put. Southern power brokers after the Civil War sought to secure their rural labor force by restricting mobility through debt peonage, draconian vagrancy ordinances, and a uniform structure of low wages. Without the right to move on their own terms, African Americans were effectively barred from the privileges of tramping. Southern homelessness, therefore, tended to be a white, urban, and relatively infrequent experience, a product of the same patterns of wage employment that created larger-scale homelessness in the North.³⁹

Homelessness among African Americans in the North was even rarer proportionately than in the South. Late-nineteenth-century surveys of public lodgers report consistently low rates of black admission; only 2.3 percent of New York State's homeless aid recipients during 1874 and 1875, for example, were African American.⁴⁰ Nonlocal black paupers became especially rare, for few poor African Americans dared to step foot on the road. The black aversion to tramping is attributable not only to outright racial discrimination in public assistance, but also to the hostility and violence that blacks could expect to encounter on the road itself. Simply put, black migrants could not count on the already haphazard kindness of strangers—not to mention railroads, missions, and municipal authorities—upon which the transient homeless so often depended.

Tramps often threw up barriers of their own to black migration. The large number of Irish immigrants in America's tramp army suggests that the road itself may have served as a critical racial proving ground for poor white men. Notorious for their particularly virulent brand of white su-

premacry, Irish immigrant lodgers and vagrants.⁴¹ J in part from his dislike of the road. While German places in the great army Gilded Age stereotype, c turn of the century. Ind and eastern Europe po and tramping became ev take their places in the t grants and native-born while the new immigrar migration.

Regardless of nativity loose forebearers, were man's pursuit, a virtual culled from police and re the mid- to late twenties married.⁴² Old age, of c courage many of the eld often seized by the youn period increasingly took eight-year-old tramping he had "tramped and re age" and had experie sible for a human to sta tramped when jobless in being single contributed important attributes of mitted him to pursue th stitutionalization.

In contrast to this per vagrants did not make months or years on enc sented a brief stage of p manent condition. Alm public aid in New York S one month. Fewer than 1891-92 had been tra records from the period of incarcerated vagrants

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