

Oral History Interview
with
PHILLIP W. VOLTZ

Appraiser for the Farm Credit Administration, 1933-34; in the Field Service of the Central Bank for Cooperatives, Department of Agriculture, 1935-38; employee of the Tennessee Valley Authority, 1938-49; employee of the Rural Electrification Administration, Department of Agriculture, 1949-52; and Chief, Farmers' Service Division, Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction, Technical Cooperation Administration, Department of State, 1952-56.

Glen Echo, Maryland
November 14, 1969

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
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HESS: Mr. Voltz, for the record, would you tell me a little about your background, where were you born, where were you educated and a little bit about your early life and some of the positions that you've held?

VOLTZ: Mr. Hess, I was born on a farm in southern Wisconsin. The closest trading town in Wisconsin was Salem, just a few miles from the Illinois line, and the metropolis of that day in my early history, early life, was the little town of Antioch, at that time probably a population of

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about a thousand. But I was born on a farm and stayed on the farm until I was about fourteen or fifteen. As Clarence Darrow said, "I stayed on the farm until I was old enough to work and, according to my wife, I haven't worked much since." But, from about 1912 or 13, in the year 1912 or 13, my father and my mother and myself, moved into Kenosha and I was a graduate of the Kenosha High School in 1915. After 1915 my first job was with American Brass Company at Kenosha and I worked there for about a year and saved a little money. And in the fall of 1916 I went to Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. World War I broke out, I think, April 7th, 1917, and I quit school and enlisted in World War I about ten days after war was declared. The thing that caused me to leave college and enlist in the Navy was Woodrow Wilson's great speech, "Let's make the world

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safe for Democracy," and I took the words to heart and enlisted in the United States Navy. All during my naval career I was assigned to posts within the United States, spending a lot of time at the Naval Air Station at Rockaway Beach. At that station, the planes that were the first planes to fly the Atlantic started from there; but I wasn't there at the time.

I got a discharge to return to school. I think my discharge was dated January 10th, 1919 and the following fall I went to the University of Wisconsin where I studied agriculture with a major in agricultural economics and cooperative marketing and I've spent, practically, the balance of my life, or the major part of my life, working with cooperatives and other non-profit organizations. This work, fortunately, or unfortunately, has taken me to most of the densely populated countries

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of the world with the exception of the Iron Curtain countries. I've never been behind the Iron Curtain but I've been, in my travels and in my work, in most of the states in the Union and in most of the major countries. My wife and I were fortunate enough to go around the world in 1954, just incidentally at Government expense, and in 1956 while I was stationed in Taipei, Taiwan, I resigned, or was rified, and decided to quit Government service, and I returned to the States and have been in a state of retirement since that time. That's probably too much in detail, but that's my background.

HESS: When did you begin your Government service?

VOLTZ: I think it was about 1933 or 34, shortly after Roosevelt was elected, shortly after Roosevelt took office. When was that, '34?

HESS: '33.

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VOLTZ: Yes, 1933. No it wasn't....

HESS: March the 4th, 1933.

VOLTZ: It was shortly, let's see, yes, it was either in 1933 or 1934. My first job was a Land Bank appraiser with the Farm Credit Administration out of St. Paul. I appraised farms for Federal Land Bank loans, and as a rule we could only work during the summer months. In the winter months I either was on leave or was called into the Land Bank in St. Paul and served on the loan committee. After about a year or two of work with the Farm Credit Administration I was called into Washington into the Cooperative Branch of the Division of Cooperatives, USDA and assisted in working on USDA Bulletin 57 which was an inventory of the Farmer Cooperatives in the United States. About 1938 I accepted a position

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with the Tennessee Valley Authority, also, again, in the Cooperative Division and I stayed with TVA for eleven years. I left TVA about 1949 and went back to Washington with the Rural Electrification Administration. After about four years in Washington, I transferred to the, what was generally called, the point IV program, at that time under the State Department. I was assigned to Free China and I was chief of the farmers' organization division under an organization more generally known, at least to the Chinese, called JCRR, the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction. I stayed in Taiwan for about four years until I retired in 1956.

HESS: During the Truman administration while you were with the Government, did you ever have occasion to meet Mr. Truman?

VOLTZ: Yes. I had the opportunity, a very pleasant

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opportunity, of shaking hands with him one time in the Raleigh Hotel. He had been asked to meet with and to make a speech to a small group of leaders of the Rural Electrification program, but things in his office were so, I won't say hectic, but probably unsettled, that he originally turned this group down. But at the last minute, however, he accepted the invitation and dashed over and made a very brief, but very pointed, speech to this particular group. After his preliminary remarks, he said, "As I was going out of the door somebody handed me this speech that I should read, but I don't like to read speeches," he said, "I want today to talk off-the-cuff." And he did. I suppose some place, someone has got a pretty good record of that speech. I remember some things that he said. He said he had torn out a sheet of paper, an ad of the privately-owned and tax-

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paying private utilities, and he held that advertisement up and he said, "When I get an Attorney General, I've had a little difficulty in getting and keeping Attorney Generals lately, I'm going to have my Attorney General do something about this." And for the first time I heard the President use words which probably wouldn't be permitted on TV or even on tape today. But shortly after that meeting, a few of us had the opportunity to shake hands with the President and I enjoyed meeting him very much and always was a great admirer of his frankness, his honesty, and his enthusiasm.

HESS: Do you recall any other incidents pertaining to Mr. Truman?

VOLTZ: Well, under the Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary [Charles] Brannan, they had a little

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difficulty in getting the type of person that they wanted as Assistant Secretary of Agriculture. They finally settled on a very dear friend of mine, now dead, Knox T. Hutchinson, and Mr. Hutchinson and I would often drive out to Beltsville, or some other place together and quite often we would start talking shop and things that we were both mutually interested in. One day I remember Mr. Hutchinson telling me about the time the President officially gave him his appointment and the story is, Mr. Hutchinson tells me, was about like this: He was called to Washington and a time was set up for him to meet the President prior to his appointment. And he said, "The President sat behind a rather big desk in a big room and as soon as my time for meeting the President came, and I entered the room, the President didn't wait for me to get to his desk. He got up from behind his desk

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and walked a half or three quarters of the way to meet me, and I remember his first words was, 'Mr. Hutchinson, I'm so pleased to meet you.' He said, 'Secretary Brannan has told me that you're something that we've been looking for for a long time. You're a farmer that has experience with cotton, corn and with livestock. You're from Tennessee, which is one of the finest agricultural states in the nation, and that you're one of the best farmers in the state, coming from that same territory where Andrew Jackson selected his farm. Mr. Hutchinson, please sit down. I'm so glad that I have this opportunity to meet you.'" And with a flourish, the President signed Mr. Hutchinson's appointment. And after a few minutes of, should I say, chit chat, why Mr. Hutchinson got up to go. The President said, "Mr. Hutchinson, do you raise any sheep?"

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And Mr. Hutchinson said, "No, Mr. President, I never raised any sheep. I have some dairy cows and beef cattle and I have twenty or thirty acres of fruit, but we don't raise sheep."

"Well," he says, "don't tell anyone this, but I'm kind of glad you don't raise sheep. I never liked sheep and I want to tell you why. When I was a boy on a farm in Missouri, our family kept about forty or fifty sheep and every once in a while one of these old ewes would die and it was my job as a boy to take that old stinky sheep out in the field and dig a hole and bury her. You know, to this day I have never liked sheep."

Now, that's the story as Mr. Hutchinson told me. Of course, I've run across some other things but not directly related to the President.

HESS: Do you recall what Mr. Truman's attitude on

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cooperatives was during his administration?

VOLTZ: He was one of our most staunchest supporters. And he was very friendly with the coop leaders, and whenever he had the opportunity he would try to do something for the coop leadership, or strengthen the cooperative movement in any way that he could.

HESS: Do you recall any incident that would help to illustrate that point?

VOLTZ: Well, I think that during the President's administration, he strengthened the cooperative section within the Department of Agriculture by giving that particular group that made surveys and research studies on cooperatives more money, and some place, and I can't place it exactly where, he put a, well you might say a declaration of principle, or a statement,

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regarding ways and means in which both the farmer cooperatives, and it seems to me, the consumer cooperatives could be strengthened. Again, quite often, through his office, the appropriations to support the Rural Electrification Administration would be increased. Of course, during that time, it was one of the peak periods of not only the development of the REAs, as we call them, but the strengthening of the REA program throughout America. Personally, I think President Truman was one of the best friends the American farmer has ever had in the Presidency.

HESS: Why would you say that?

VOLTZ: Well, first of all I think his selection of Brannan as the Secretary of Agriculture was a very good selection. I think the selection and

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the continuance of office of [Claude R.] Wickard as head of the REA administration was a good move. I always judge a President not so much by what he says in public speeches, but what he does and the persons that he appoints to carry out his policies and I think President Truman's appointments, especially as applied to the Agricultural Department, were especially strong.

HESS: Did you have occasion to work with, or meet the Secretaries of Agriculture under Mr. Truman: Clinton Anderson and Charles Brannan?

VOLTZ: Mr. Anderson I have known better as a Senator but I didn't know Anderson when he was Secretary of Agriculture. As I understand it, Clinton Anderson as Secretary of Agriculture under Truman, was a compromise. Behind the scene, as I get the story, and of course this is

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hearsay, there was a terrible struggle between the American Farm Bureau Federation and other farm groups and Clinton Anderson was a compromise. On the other hand, Brannan was an out and out appointee being supported by the more liberal agricultural groups and during Brannan's administration, whenever the changes in the agricultural program were brought up, or even discussed, Brannan was sure to be faced with the American Farm Bureau opposition on one hand, and the Farmer Union, and in some cases, the Grange support on the other. Take for instance this policy of limiting agricultural payments, subsidies, uninformed people call them, paid to farmers when they comply with the farm program in limiting the total payments. I think it was first brought up in Secretary Brannan's administration to put a twenty-five or fifty thousand dollar limitation on payments to any

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one farm owner. Of course, the Farmer's Union, as a group, supported that policy but the American Farm Bureau, as I understand it, opposed that policy. Now I think that's coming up now. That's been a moot question ever since the fifties, ever since it was first proposed, fifties or even forties. The policy over the years has been to support the family-sized farm. On the other hand, it seems to me that the policy of the American Farm Bureau is to support the large farmer, or even the corporation farms, and I think that if Brannan would have raised the limit from twenty-five thousand or fifty thousand, whatever it was at one time, as the amount that one particular farmer and/or his wife could receive, in the form of payments from the Department of Agriculture, to possibly a hundred thousand dollars, that the Farm Bureau would have gone along; but I don't consider a

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farmer drawing a hundred thousand dollars as a family size farmer. I consider him a corporation farmer, and I think that that's what the controversy was all about. And now I'm speaking of Brannan's position rather than the President's, exactly the President's, but I do think that, knowing what I do know, the little that I do know, of President Truman's background, I'm sure that the President, too, would support the family-size farm rather than the corporation farm. That's a very serious thing in this country today.

HESS: During the time that you were with REA, did you ever have occasion to work with any of the members of the White House staff, Charles Murphy, Clark Clifford, Matthew Connelly, to name a few?

VOLTZ: No. I've never met those people in the field.

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There were some occasions, previously, where I ran across some people from the Washington staff, but not during President Truman's administration.

HESS: And when we were talking earlier, you told me an interesting story concerning the Truman and General MacArthur controversy. Would you relate that again, sir?

VOLTZ: Well, I've probably gotten into more arguments, and arguments is what it really amounts to, regarding the Truman-MacArthur controversy than any other phase of that administration, and I always, if they'll give me the time, I always like to tell this story as to what happened to me several years ago when I was sitting around a dinner table in, I think it was Taipei. About five of us were discussing world affairs. You know how men, after they have had a good dinner

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and maybe a drink or two, will talk and try to solve in their own way, certain world problems that may or may not be recently in the paper. But at this meeting, at this dinner, there was a German officer present, I don't know if he had the rank of General or not, but he was a very high ranking officer because he had been employed, or assigned, to go to old China many years before

and help train the army of the "salt administration." This is the background of that: The old Chinese government had a very weak central government, and they had no way of raising funds to support the government except by a tax on salt, and the real rulers of pre-Communist China were the warlords, about equal to the governors or the dictators of some of our states. Well, the warlords would collect the salt tax but they were very slow and very tardy in sending the salt tax into the central government. So the central government

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decided "Let's have a small, but efficient army of forty or fifty or sixty thousand rather mobile troops and any warlord that doesn't send in his salt tax after due time, let's go after it with these mobile troops." So, they sent to Germany and asked that a few of these top officers come over and train, equip and outfit this small group of troops who would collect the salt tax. General Von Stein was one of the German officers that was assigned to this task and he did his job and, I think, did it well, and every once in a while when the central government would need these crack soldiers for their army, why, they'd grab these trained troops from the salt administration and these German officers would have to start retraining a new bunch of recruits. That's the story as told to me, and over a period of time probably they

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had trained four or five hundred thousand troops and many officers.

Our conversation that particular afternoon went to the Truman-MacArthur fight, struggle, and rather innocently I asked this German officer, I said, "Who was right, Truman or MacArthur?" Probably I asked him rather abruptly and to the point, and I remember that gentleman looking at me as if I were a school boy. I think the thoughts were, that were running through his mind, was "How can a person be so dumb as not to know who was right between Truman and MacArthur on this particular controversy."

I asked a direct question, the officer gave me a direct, terse reply, "Truman, of course. If MacArthur's troops had been allowed to go north and to cross the Yalu River, those troops would have been completely annihilated."

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And then rather arrogantly he said, "My staff and I had trained them that way." So, I asked him to go on, give me more details and he said, "Well, these troops were troops that had been trained by my staff for the salt administration and they had been transferred, from time to time, to the regular Chinese army, and of course, had been taken over by the present Chinese Government, especially many of the officers. They had been trained to retreat, and to retreat, and to retreat, and to draw the enemy away from their base of supplies and after the enemy was a long way away from their base of supplies, then small battalions or small groups would go around, cut back, and completely cut off their supplies. And then, of course, the main army would sit and wait and probably, just from time to time, annoy the troops, the enemy troops, until the

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enemy troops no longer had the capability or even the desire and the wherewith to continue the fight." And then he added again rather tersely, "I just can't see how so many people, often

intelligent people, tend to support MacArthur's position." Well, even there Truman didn't make the decision, the decision what to do so far as going north and getting away away from their base of supplies was made by the Chiefs of Staff, experienced and qualified American officers, who were right and who, of course, knew what they were doing. "Now, maybe you won't like what I'm saying, but I would say that if MacArthur had been a German officer, he would have been charged with, probably, disloyalty, disobedience of orders, and finally court-martialed. But you Americans don't handle your military men that way, you're soft on your incompetent military officers who

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have disregarded orders. And that was about the end of the conversation and I felt myself completely squelched even for asking the question.

HESS: He thought your question was slightly naive.

VOLTZ: Yes, he thought so, and really that General was really one of the most interesting persons that I've ever met any place. He reminds me of the old type Prussian officer. His hands were -- first of all he was about six feet two or three in height and just as straight as an arrow, and he spoke very good German, of course, very good English and he also spoke very good Chinese, of course, that was Mandarin Chinese and I suppose, all told, he had been in China for twenty to thirty years and he was still -- well, as I said before, he was straight as a die, his hands were about

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twice as large as mine. And let's see there was another thing that -- oh, when he would come into a room to be introduced, suppose he would come in late, he'd come in with all the dignity of a military officer, but I never saw him in uniform, and he'd stop very abruptly and he'd click his heels together and you could hear them click all over the room and he'd smile and bow gracefully and shake hands. Another thing that this German officer and myself had in common, he was a cigar smoker -- liked a good cigar. He often would give me some of these cigars that he had imported from Germany and he also liked some of our good American cigars.

HESS: One question on the election of 1948. How important, in your estimation, was the farm vote in Mr. Truman's successful election of 1948?

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VOLTZ: Well, my own feeling is that Truman won that election almost single-handedly -- almost single-handedly -- and one of the things that stands out in my mind, and I remember it just as if I had been there to hear it, he said something about the 80th Congress was a no-good Congress and when he made that speech in Des Moines, Iowa, I think he said something that all during the last four years this Republican Congress has been sticking pitchforks in the back of the American farmer, and I think that speech was the start of the turning point.

HESS: That was the National Plowing Match in Dexter, Iowa, September the 18th.

VOLTZ: I thought it was at Des Moines, Iowa, but anyway...

HESS: The National Plowing Match.

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VOLTZ: Anyway that speech in my mind was the one speech that started to wake up the American farmer. There was another thing that you could notice in the shift of sentiments as one would drift about the country, that Truman's short, snappy, frank, often good natured, and give-them-hell speeches on the back of the trains throughout the country, was another thing that changed people's minds and changed them, I would say, rather fast.

HESS: Were you out to Dexter for the National Plowing Match?

VOLTZ: No, no, no, I'm like Will Rogers, like Will said, "All I know is what I read in the papers."

HESS: Well, what do you recall reading in the papers in 1948? Weren't most of the newsmen slanting the election towards Dewey and saying....

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VOLTZ: Oh yes. It was slanted towards Dewey, but as you got out in the rural areas, and if the Truman train had gone through that area, the local papers and the weekly papers was quoting what Truman had said at this town or that town and usually his remarks were so pointed, and to the point, that farmer after farmer was quoting them to his neighbor, and I think his campaign is, I like to call it almost a single-handed campaign, was a master stroke of showmanship.

HESS: Do you recall anything revolving around the incident when the 80th Congress refused to place in the charter of the Commodity Credit Corporation, the provision for grain storage bins?

VOLTZ: No, I can't remember much about that. I think during that time, because they didn't have grain storage bins, that they used some of

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our surplus ships someplace. I don't even know where the ships were, but I think Brannan was compelled to store grains in some of the ships, what do you call them, the....

HESS: Liberty ships?

VOLTZ: The Liberty ships, yes.

HESS: Were you surprised that Mr. Truman won that election in 1948?

VOLTZ: If I had gambled on the election, five or ten days before the election, I would have bet on Dewey but I met -- I was meeting a lot of people who had been Dewey people that had shifted during the last few days and I remember getting my hair cut in the barbershop in the Hotel Raleigh down on Pennsylvania Avenue, the old Raleigh Hotel. There was a barber there that said, as we were talking

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about the election, he said, "Well," he says, "most people don't believe it," but he says, "this man Truman is going to be in, he's going to win."

And I said, "Really?"

"Yes, sir," he said, "even the gamblers are starting to change their odds a little." And he said, "When he first started out on this campaign he didn't have much of a chance, but he does today. And don't be surprised," that's just about the way the barber put it, "don't be surprised if Truman would be re-elected." And let's see, there was another person, I happened to ride on a train, I think going from Washington to Knoxville, and there was a man in the Pullman who had been drinking a little too much and he said, "Well, Truman's in." I thought, well, he's just an over-enthusiastic Democrat and he's been drinking

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too much, and he was so sure that Truman was going to be elected that he was willing to bet me ten dollars or twenty dollars even money. Well, I never wanted to take advantage of a man under the influence of alcohol, but I was almost tempted to do so, you know, that even at that minute because -- but I did know that the election was going to be much closer than most people had anticipated.

HESS: What would you see as the most important success of the Truman administration and perhaps the most glaring failure? What was the high point and the low point of Mr. Truman's administration in your opinion?

VOLTZ: Well, of course, I don't think that there's any question about it, and maybe this one thing can answer both questions. Wasn't the atomic bomb dropped during Truman's administration?

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HESS: Yes, sir.

VOLTZ: Now, under the circumstances, there was no alternative except to do exactly as the President did. Now, I'm sure that the President did a lot of soul-searching before he ordered the Air Force to drop that bomb and I think that the thing that caused him to give the order to drop the bomb was that by dropping the bomb when it was dropped, and where it was dropped, that it would bring an early end to the war and it would probably save a hundred thousand or two hundred thousand American lives in mop-up operations. Now, as we look back, and surely that was the great thing in Truman's administration, and after that, when we look back and see what the atomic bomb can do and may do if a group of angry men decide to "press the button," it might mean the end of what you and I call

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American or Western Civilization. So, may I answer your question in this one way. The great thing in the Truman administration was his decision to drop, and to bring into warfare, bring into

military, as a military power, the atomic bomb. Under the circumstances and the use to which it was put was the great thing.

Now, the peaceful uses of atomic energy and we just barely scratched the surface on that. In my own opinion, in my own field, if we can eliminate war and apply atomic energy to the peaceful uses for our civilization, I see uranium being used in major industrial complexes, especially along the oceans which are also close to dry areas of land, and I can see these big industrial complexes where they'll generate electrical power, de-salt ocean water, run industry, furnish cheap energy for industry and for people. Maybe eight or ten

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of those huge complexes could change the face, and the nature, of every arid area in the world. You could bring back to the desert a new Garden of Eden by taking the salt out of ocean water and use the water for irrigation. And there need not be, if we eliminated the amount of, well, 80 percent of our budget, or 70 percent of our budget which goes for past, present and future wars, take that out and utilize atomic energy for the development of these huge industrial complexes. Now, maybe that's a good thought to end on. I agree as many people agree, that Truman will go down in history as one of the great Presidents of all generations because of the great decisions he was faced with, and that he had to meet, and he met them and I don't know of a mistake that he made.

That's it, let's end on that.

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HESS: Very good, thank you very much, sir.

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