



# HISTORICAL NOTES

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## MILLIE RABAS, A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLTEACHER IN THE 1930s

by Jerry Abitz

What was life like in the 1930s? We can often generalize, but life was so different that it is hard to conceptualize what it was actually like. Recently I invited Millie Rabas for lunch to talk about those days as viewed from the perspective of a one-room schoolteacher.

Millie graduated from Algoma High School, and wanted to become a bookkeeper or accountant. Not many careers were open to women at that time except for secretarial work, teaching, or nursing, and the nearest place to get that training was a private business college in Green Bay. (In most towns, these schools typically occupied the second floor of a business on its main street.) However, it was expensive, and one would have to board out away from home. Millie's father vetoed the idea as being too expensive.

Instead, he suggested an institution closer to home — Door-Kewaunee Normal School ("Normal" referred to teacher training). Most counties had such a school to provide teachers for the one-room schools. Today, the only linkage that "DK," as it was popularly called, has to the present is that same building

now houses the Algoma Library, City Hall, and Police Department. Millie Kirchman (her maiden name) could live at home and, after one year of attendance, join the ranks of the employed, and earn a living. This she did.

If you wish to receive notification that the most recent issue of the KCHS newsletter is available online, send your request to [gabitz@centurytel.net](mailto:gabitz@centurytel.net) with your name and email address.



**Pleasant Hill School (1935)** — Mildred Rabas, teacher. **Top row (L to R)** - Robert Dier, unidentified boy, Mabel Schmidt, Eileen Dier, Marian Barrand, Harold Witcpalek, Clarence Krohn, Clarence Bathke. **Row 2** - William Dier, Donald Klatt, Evelyn Klatt, Mildred Rabas, teacher, unidentified girl, John Michaletz, Lillian Michaletz, Lorraine Michaletz. **Row 3** - Betty Duerst, Janet Herbst, June Herbst, Fern Witcpalek, Lila Sibilsky, Faith Wagner, Myrtle Duerst, Dorothy Krohn. **Front Row** - Norman Michaletz, Ralph Michaletz, Edward Duerst, Milton Duerst, Vernon Sibilsky. *Photo courtesy of Jim Rabas.*

**Editor's note** — Please contact us if you can identify either of the unknown children (Top row, second from left and/or Second row, just left of Millie Rabas).

Finishing in 1931, at the height of the Great Depression, jobs were hard to find. As the school year was about to start, the teacher previously hired to start at the Collegiate School resigned for a better position. Millie, along with a large number of other unemployed teachers, applied for that job. Competing with experienced teachers, as a novice trying to get her foot in the door, was a daunting task. Getting to the interview would be difficult, so the family decided that their hired man would drive her halfway across the county in his rickety car.

*Cont. on page 2*

## Millie Rabas *(cont. from page 1)*

Arriving at the school clerk's house, they found cars parked in the yard and along the road's edge. Millie began to panic and thought she wouldn't have a chance; however, the hired man encouraged her. Inside the living room, candidates were sitting around the periphery of the room. The school board asked a number of questions, and then each candidate received a private interview. When Millie's interview neared completion, she was asked what pay she anticipated. She knew there was a state minimum set for one-room teachers; it was \$75 a month, so that was her reply.

The interviewer's response was, "There are other candidates willing to work for less." (The school board paid them the \$75, but demanded a kickback on the salary.) But Millie stuck to her guns, telling them they would be breaking the law. Imagine her surprise at evening's end when she learned she was the only one hired!

School was about to start. Where could she board because she had no transportation of her own? The clerk, who lived across the road, offered to take her in. Neither this home nor the school had electricity because rural areas were very late in getting electricity; some areas were not connected to the grid until after WWII.

The school year began, and Millie was confronted with 30-some students in all eight grades. Sessions in each group were strictly limited in time, and one had to be a clock-watcher in order to stay on schedule. Reading, spelling, language, social studies, music, art, and physical activity for all grades had to be fit in, sometimes with a shoehorn. Students knew why they were there. They knew, too, with siblings also in their school, their transgressions would be reported at home by a brother or sister, resulting in an additional punishment by the parents. Parents were not shy to reinforce this.

Boys and girls had separate entrances to the classroom via their respective cloakrooms where outer garments, boots, and lunches were stored. Millie was lucky because the clerk would start the fire every morning. A stove in the back of the room provided heat with a long stovepipe transecting the entire room, radiating heat until it entered the chimney. Wood was carried in by the boys, and ashes removed. Students were encouraged to be helpful at all times with chores such as these as well as cleaning erasers and washing blackboards. Bathrooms were outdoors at the end of a path. Water came from a bucket kept in the rear of the room where everyone drank from a common dipper. As primitive as it was, most rural schools were in the same condition.



**Millie (Kirchman) Rabas**, 1913-2010. (L - 1930, R - Jan. 20, 2010). *Photos courtesy of Jim Rabas.*

Members of a rural school were like one big family. Younger children could respond (*and did!*) to questions intended for older students. The two main social events of the year were the annual Christmas program that required a lot of practice — and patience — on the part of the teacher working with hyperactive children; the entire neighborhood would turn out, and even Santa put in an appearance; the other big event was the end-of-the-year picnic.

Seatwork had to be prepared. There were no workbooks on which to fall back. Using hectograph stencils was messy, cumbersome, and time-consuming; the dye was hard to remove from anything it came in contact with. With the piles of papers every night that needed grading and recording and plans needing to be made out for the next day's classes, teaching left little time for leisure. Despite the lack of an active social life during her four years at Collegiate School, she met the man who would become her husband.

She transferred to Pleasant Hill School on Highway 54 just west of Algoma, much closer to home. There she taught for two more years until she and her boyfriend, Jim Rabas, decided to marry. That was the end of her teaching career. No school board would hire a married lady teacher during the Great Depression, the rationale being that, if a lady was married, she had a husband who could support her. Since jobs were scarce, the position could be best filled by someone else who was supporting a family.

For most of us, we can hardly imagine how primitive it was. For schools in those times, the only visual aids were chalkboards and textbooks, yet they graduated students who made a success of their lives. For many immigrant families, this is where they learned to speak English and truly became Americans. Raised in German-speaking homes, this certainly was true for each of my own parents.

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**See Editor's note on next page.**

*cont. on page 3*



## HARBOR HOUSE

by PattySue Powell

The house at 801 Lake Street has had a long line of interesting owners whose descendants will take family ownership into the fourth generation. While Leopold J. Raatz built the home in the summer of 1893, he and his wife only lived in it for five short years. William Vollmer (b.1858) purchased the property and home in 1898, and thus began the family romance with 801 Lake Street.

William Vollmer started working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1881, beginning as an ordinary deckhand, advancing to manning the crane and, eventually, becoming operator of the *U.S. Dredge*. He was promoted to Master in 1900, and is said to have been known for fifty years in “every port on the west shore of Lake Michigan.” He supervised the building of the *Dredge Kewaunee*, and was its captain until he retired from the service in 1923. He remained very active in the community, serving on both the Algoma City Council as well as the Algoma City Water and Light Commission. He was at such a meeting in 1929 the night he died. He had asked to be taken home, saying that he was feeling ill. The funeral services were held at his home, as was still customary in those days.

Captain Vollmer and his wife, Elvena (b.1863), had two daughters—Blanche (1889-1916), and Ruth Elida, born in 1891. Ruth was a member of the first class of teachers to leave the Door-Kewaunee Normal School in 1909, and graduated from Stout Institute, Menominee (now UW-Stout) in 1911. She returned to Algoma and helped establish the Home Economics Dept.

### Millie Rabas *(cont. from page 2)*

**Editor's note** — Since the time this article was written, Millie entered Bay Road Place, an assisted living facility in Algoma. She was 97-1/2 and, until the move there, lived alone, drove her own car, and walked without a cane or a walker. I visited her there and shared the photo her son, Jim, had sent me. Although on oxygen, she was lucid and her old self; she was one of the most cheerful and outgoing people I have ever met. She volunteered at the Jail Museum and, in the 1980s, was a KCHS board member for four years. She would come to our Annual Volunteer Dinner and entertain the crowd with her jokes, including some where I was the butt of the joke. She was a truly remarkable woman. She passed away on Saturday, Aug. 21.



**The Harbor House** (circa 1905) with Elvena Vollmer and daughters, Blanche and Ruth. Note the small side porch on the left of the house. If you look closely toward the back of the house on the left, you can see the cross from the Methodist Episcopal Church that once stood on Fourth Street. *Photo courtesy of the Runke family.*

at Algoma High School. In December of 1915, she married Rufus Runke in a small family ceremony at the Lake Street house.

Rufus was from a prominent family in Ahnapee. He attended the Kodan Grade School, Algoma High School, and was also a graduate of the University of Wisconsin. His career included work as a high school principal, positions with the Farmers Home Administration, and agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. (He was the *very first* agent for Fond du Lac County.) He and Ruth lived in Marathon County for ten years, and owned a very successful farm operation that used the most up-to-date technology of the day. They were instrumental in promoting programs for modernizing the farm and home; both worked with the Rural Electrification Division of the College of Agriculture. (*Having electric service was a pretty revolutionary idea back then!*) And all this, while raising four children: Gene Marie (1916-2008), Charlton, and twin girls—Blanche (1919-1949) and Ruth, who is the current owner of 801 Lake Street, and takes us back to the story of the house.

Actually, it was the house on *Third Street* until Rufus, during a short stint as mayor of Algoma, decided to change the name to Lake Street. And a very appropriate name it is as you can clearly see the light-house all the way from the back of the house. One of the neighbors who grew up on this street, Audrey Krautkramer, remembers coming to the house as a child. One of the things that stands out in her mind is

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## Harbor House *(cont. from page 3)*

that it had “a breakfast room;” she and her friends and siblings thought this very special. And, indeed, it is an unusual thing. It’s a bright, pleasant room with a perfect view of the St. Agnes Episcopal Church south side gardens, and, if you look straight through to the front of the house, you can see the Algoma Harbor. To catch a glimpse of the moon over the lake is something you can experience most clear nights from nearly anywhere in the house.

Ruth Elida Vollmer Runke became ill, passing away in 1932; her mother, Elvena M. Kolwei, died in 1934. The house was passed from Captain Vollmer to his wife; from there, it would have gone their daughter, Ruth, but went, instead, to her widower, Rufus Runke.

Rufus married Myrtle F. Hyde Perry in 1936, and they made their home in the Lake Street house with their children, one of whom was Rufus and Ruth Elida’s twin daughter, Ruth. Her sons, Rich and Gary Haucke, remember coming here every year to spend the summer as soon as school was out. (*I’m sure they have some tales to tell of their own!*)

There is conflicting information as to exactly when the house was remodeled. Originally, it had a parlor, formal dining room, breakfast room, kitchen, one bedroom downstairs and three (possibly four) bedrooms upstairs. The old pantry cupboards were removed and replaced with “modern” metal cabinets sometime after 1936; later on, the kitchen was moved into the former breakfast room, and that space became an extra bedroom. The woodwork in that one room (the new kitchen and, by then, bathroom) all matches, though it is completely different from the (mostly original) woodwork throughout the rest of the house.

An old photo of the house shows a small side porch with dining room entrance (common architecture at the time) which has been covered with a small extension to the living room and two additional windows. The entrance was moved to the front of the house which now brings you in through an enclosed, three-season porch overlooking Lake Michigan. The rest of the windows are original in all but the back portion of the house; some still have the original wavy glass. There are double-hung picture windows in the living room (parlor) and dining room, each with a stained glass sash at the top. Eventually, around 1950, the upstairs bedrooms were made into a small apartment. An outside entrance to the upstairs was added, and the original stairway is now a dining room closet.

The Runkes lived downstairs, and rented out the upstairs. Rufus died in 1969, while Myrtle remained in the house until the mid-1980s. For the last quarter century, both the upper and lower portions of the house



**Family picture** (circa 1898) — Captain William Vollmer and his wife, Elvena, with their daughters, Blanche and Ruth (1898). Photo courtesy of the Runke family.

have been rented out. Last year, the family claimed the upstairs to use for family visits to Algoma, although the downstairs is currently rented by a tenant who spends quite a bit of time daydreaming about what life was like in days gone by.

I’ve found some precious sights here. The downstairs bedroom has the most delightful floral wallpaper. Myrtle Runke chose the pattern and, even after all these years, it’s still very charming and tasteful. Relatives wanted to capture the memory of what it used to look like “at Grandma’s house” with large picture frames in the living room surrounding samples of two of the original wallpaper patterns. Myrtle was known for her wonderful baking and preserves. Down in the fruit cellar, there are shelves lined with jars of home-canned jams, cherries, pickles, etc. Tacked on the door is a handwritten list of each jar and when it was lovingly prepared; little hatch marks are crossed off to indicate when a jar had been taken and how many were left. Rufus Runke’s initials can be found in many places—on the garage door, in the cement, etc. The Mock Orange and Bridal Veil shrubs in the front yard have been there for more than fifty years and, after a good pruning, should bloom next spring.

As of this date, the property has been in the family for 112 years. Ownership went from Captain William Vollmer to his wife, Elvena, then to their daughter, Ruth Elida (Rufus Runke) and then to Rufus and Ruth Elida’s daughter, Ruth. Her children will become fourth-generation owners.

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**Editor’s note** — More information about local history, and the people who made it, can be found by visiting the Kewaunee County History Center at 219 Steele Street in Algoma on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday afternoons from 12:30-3:30pm.

## WALLOON LESSONS — PRESERVING MEMORIES

by Jerry Abitz

Some time ago, I attended a monthly class led by a mentor who is fluent in Walloon, the language spoken by the early Belgian settlers in the northwestern corner of Kewaunee County but extends into both Brown and Door Counties. As the older generations have passed away, fewer and fewer people are able to speak this variant dialect of French. Perhaps it is the other way around. Not being a linguist myself, although I have some knowledge of French, German, and Latin from my schooldays, I am not able to judge which language is older. They all originated with the language of their conquerors, the Romans.

According to Wikipedia, the language is closer to that spoken in the 13th century than is neighboring French. There are four dialects of this language, also influenced by its neighbors, Dutch and German; it is also a dialect spoken in the northern border regions of France. While it is a protected language to be preserved, most of the speakers are the elderly.

This group (there were 12 present) took it upon themselves to get together periodically to speak Walloon within the group. All of them are elderly and probably retired, but were in fear of losing the language of their grandparents at whose knees they learned the language. Hearing them speak and then falter, one realizes they were searching for the correct word, hoping that someone else within the group will spit it out so they can continue. Like riding a bicycle, one never loses that skill, so it is with a language. But, if you don't use it, you do get rusty.

This group is not on a crusade to preserve the language although, if asked, they probably would think it would be great for someone to spearhead a preservation movement. They are out to enjoy the afternoon and do some socialization with their peers.

Some sounded more proficient than others. Performing in public can make one shy and reluctant to speak up. They shared stories and even humorous events. They were given a handout of several pages for names of animals. Listed was the Walloon word followed by the same word in French, and then the English meaning. It appeared to be a fairly good coordination between the Walloon and the French. The difference may be the pronunciation of the vowel or diphthong or even a consonant cluster. The mentor also read them a story or two in Walloon; from their

reaction, they understood what was read. Another handout dealt with points of grammar.

I was struck by their knowledge of the local lore. One must understand that, when one learns the language of their ancestors, a lot of historical knowledge is also passed down. Living in an area where reporters rarely, if ever, venture, much of this knowledge is never recorded. Just as culture is passed on to the next generation, a lot of local history is transmitted in the same manner.

I found the group to be fascinating and interesting, and gained an appreciation for such a group. Certainly socialization is an important element in the dynamics. I learned, too, that Walloon *is* a written language, contrary to what I was told. Having lived amid this ethnic group for 51 years, I was always told that Belgian is not a written language, but was informed that is not true. There are, however, regional dialects that made it impossible to write to each other; to do so, they had to resort to writing in French.

The mentor was Cletus Bellin, better known for his knowledge of music within the Belgian and Czech communities in our region. At a past annual KCHS Volunteer Dinner, he was the guest speaker on that subject. In February, he spoke about Walloon and the province of Wallonia in Belgium as part of the Local History lecture series at the KCHS History Center. He has been to Belgium a number of times, and speaks the language fluently.

(cont. on page 6)



**Walloon class** teacher-moderator, Cletus Bellin (inset and far right); other attendees include (L to R): Angela DeChamps, Edwin DeChamps, Hillarion DuBois, Joe Bertrand, Valerie Dubois, Sister Claudette Jeanquart, Father Samuel Jadin, Shirley Nooyen, Rose Seidl, Delores Davister, Isabel Walker, Adeline DeGrave. Photo by Jerry Abitz.



## NEWS FROM THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### *Report from the Trenches*

by Jerry Abitz

**KCHS HISTORY CENTER** — The manager for this operation is now Gloria Peterson. Gloria is the wife of Earl Peterson, and lives on Adams Street in Algoma; she also is a recent addition to the KCHS Board of Directors. You'll find out more about her in the next newsletter.

I was amazed that she knows where I live. Imagine my surprise when she told me her late uncles, Joe and Frank Servais, had had cottages two doors down the street from where I reside on the Bay of Green Bay in the Dyckesville area, a mixed area of year-round homes and cottages.

Since Virginia Johnson chose to leave, the Center has been managed by a team, comprised of Julie Bloor, Bevan Laird, Gloria Peterson, and Judy Srnka, keeping the place open and available for our members and visitors. Since then, Gloria has volunteered to head up the management so decisions more easily can be made and executed. At a recent meeting, the Wisconsin Historical Society recommended we contact an individual at the UW-Oshkosh Area Research Center to come and assess the operation to make recommendations regarding how to operate, what needs to be done, and to help give us a better sense of direction.

**The History Center is open Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, from 12:00 noon until 3:30 p.m., and other times by appointment.**

## Walloon Classes (cont. from page 5)

Bellin is a resident in the Rosiere area, living in the house where he grew up. He, too, appears to have his finger on the pulse of this ethnic community. He is an interesting person with an inquisitive mind, and I am happy to call him a friend. If you run into him, do commend him for his interest in keeping aspects of the Belgian community alive. At the present, he is spearheading a drive to mark with signage the 31 wayside chapels that are unique to the Belgian areas. He is about to dedicate one in his own backyard. I got a preview of it, and my jaw dropped with astonishment!

**WEBSITE UPDATE** — At this point, we have nothing new to report. After two meetings with the new website developer and furnishing him with photos and dialog boxes, he has not accomplished a great deal. He informed me when queried that, with summer vacations and being short-handed at work, he has had little time to develop anything.

**ANNUAL VOLUNTEER DINNER** — This year's annual dinner will be held on Saturday, Oct. 23, at 12:00 noon at the Hotel Stebbins in Algoma. This is a change from an evening dinner held in previous years. The menu will consist of beef tips and chicken served family-style. A program will follow.

With the end of another tourist season, we wish to honor those who gave us of their time to keep operations going. The KCHS has sponsored this dinner for approximately 20 years.

*We invite all those who have volunteered at either facility, written newsletter articles, and helped prepare the newsletter for mailing. Please bring a spouse or friend as your guest. Directors and their spouses are also invited to attend.*

Awards for *Special Merit* this year go out to the following individuals: Dona Fischer, Bevan Laird, Susan Slikkers, and Mark Teske. Their names will be engraved on our Wall of Fame located in the Jail Museum. In addition, they will receive a framed certificate, specifically designed by Susan Slikkers, who used our logo and a photo of the Jail Museum as a watermark. Volunteers will also receive a certificate in a presentation folder.

**Dona Fischer** has been a director for a number of years. She is being honored for her service to the KCHS. Her artistic talents were put to use in the design of a recent brochure we produced, *The Historic Markers of Kewaunee County*.

**Bevan Laird**, one of our newer directors, stepped forward to head a management team formed to keep the History Center open and operating. It was also her idea to rename the Center so its name is not so foreboding to the average person.

A chance conversation with my neighbor, **Susan Slikkers**, several years ago about putting a newsletter together and the consternation it can cause led her to tell me that she edits and manages production for a number of other groups' publications. It can be a frustrating job and one that requires a great deal of computer knowledge. Editing skills are a must. Probably being a slave driver also helps! At least, it helps me, a procrastinator, to meet deadlines. Currently she also has designed those certificates we will be awarding.

Whenever we need someone to do some videotaping, **Mark Teske** is there to do the job. He has done a number of cemetery walks for us as well as some of last winter's guest speakers at the Center. It is a pleasure to have him come to our aid.

**KCHS DIRECTORS** — There have been some changes on the KCHS Directors Board. You will find out more about them in a future newsletter. As already mentioned, Algoma's **Gloria Peterson** is a recent addition. Two former members have returned as well. **Jim Steffel** of the Pilsen area is back; he lives on a farm that he placed on the National Register. In the 1990s, he was the chair of the committee designing and installing our heritage signs. He resigned because of pressures at work. Tammy Etienne is back after her recent marriage and her husband's stint in the Army. Now known as **Tammy Zekany** and living in Luxemburg Village, she's also a former elementary student of mine from my teaching days at Wequiock School. Her specialty is Belgian research. Lastly, we wish **Dona Fischer** success in all her future endeavors as she retires. Her artistic talents will be missed.

**JAIL MUSEUM 40<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY PARTY** — Recently I received letters from Duane Ebert who has connections to the Oconto County Historical Society. They were written in 1969 by Olga Sanderson and sent to Jimmy Hall at the Oconto County Historical Society, outlining the difficulties faced by the KCHS as it tried to convince a reluctant County Board and its skeptical chairman about their ability to open and operate a museum in the abandoned jail and sheriff's quarters. They persisted, and forced a county referendum that told the County Board to reconsider their decision to raze this historic 1876 building. In 1970, 40 years ago, they opened the doors of this museum.

To honor the occasion, we printed 5,000 copies of the July newsletter with an invitation, and had them inserted into the *Kewaunee County News* to publicize who we are and announce the celebration.

The event was held on Saturday, Sept. 4; it included a free ice cream and cake social, popcorn and lemonade, and free admission to the Museum. Live music was provided by a small band, and there were antique autos on display on Dodge Street, east of the Museum. Opening ceremonies included an appearance by the Mayor of the City of Kewaunee, John Blaha. Representatives from the County's American Legion Posts were present as a color guard. Retired minister and director, Al Briggs, led us in prayer.

A steady stream of visitors toured the Museum and pretty much cleaned up the cake, ice cream, and popcorn. Although 160 individuals registered,



**Visitors inside the Museum at the 40th anniversary celebration** — (L to R) Darlene Muellner, KCHS Museum curator, Ellie Cannon, and Mia Cannon. Photo by Jerry Abitz.

according to Virginia Kostka, our volunteer coordinator who manned the registration desk and gave an introduction to the Museum, a fair number of individuals did not register; some came for the refreshments but did not tour the facility. Her estimation was an attendance figure in the 250 range.

A pleasant surprise for me was the attendance of my deceased cousin's daughter whom I had never met. She lives only a few blocks from the museum. I happened to observe her as she wrote her name, and I could not believe what I read!

GO GREEN!! HELP KCHS SAVE \$\$\$!! GO GREEN!!

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We want to continue to use all of our resources wisely, including the dollars you give so generously. Each one can help reduce costs to produce the newsletters — paper, printing, and postage — by opting to receive the KCHS *Historical Notes* in your Inbox.



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GO GREEN!! HELP KCHS SAVE \$\$\$!! GO GREEN!!

## Friends of the Kewaunee County Historical Society

### ~~ 2010 Fund Drive ~~

The KCHS is very grateful for these donations that help fund what we do. None of us are paid nor do we expect any compensation for what is, essentially, a labor of love. Knowing that we are appreciated is our reward. Some of you have expressed your gratitude by your contributions and notes of appreciation. As you are preparing for your year-end donations, please continue to keep KCHS in mind. *Thank you.*

*Note:* The listing below is based upon donations received June 2 through September 6. If yours has not been listed and was received at a later date, it will be acknowledged in the next issue. If your name is not listed and you gave, please contact the editor ([gabitz@centurytel.net](mailto:gabitz@centurytel.net)).

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