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# The Transnational Immigrant-Refugee Experience of Mexican Yaquis and Canadian Chippewa-Crees in Arizona and Montana

Brenden Rensink

HE historical geography of Euro-American expansion throughout the North American continent entailed a long succession of dynamic and constantly shifting borderlands. These were regions at the edges of their empires where competing spheres of influence overlapped on uncertain ground, disparate peoples met, contending and mixed. Often, no one single party held firm footing in these borderlands. Eventually, their flexible and transitory nature became more strictly defined and patrolled as the international borders of the United States, Canada, and Mexico solidified. For indigenous peoples of these regions, the geopolitical consequences of new Euro-American international borders — fixed, rigid, and policed — would exert new and unique forces on their own indigenous spheres of influence. Native views of geography and

territorial homelands were often incongruous with the new and discernable economic, military, political, social, and cultural divides created in this process, and they did not observe passively this new bisection of familiar landscapes.

Some indigenous groups would come to understand the near-sacred value that Euro-Americans placed on those proverbial lines in the sand. Divorced from what their own perspective of territorial boundaries entailed, some even leveraged the Euro-American model against their adversaries. Hence, North American borderlands history is full of indigenous groups co-opting the supposed impermeability of international borders to their own advantage by directly violating their sanctity and crossing them. Knowing that U.S., Canadian, or Mexican pursuers would be reticent to follow them across the



Crees performing a dance in Havre, Montana during the 1895 deportation to Canada. The view is looking east on 1st Street.

Photograph courtesy of Glenbow Archives NA-1270-2

line, many used it as means to escape various threats of pursuit, persecution, and prosecution. Far-off groups such as Delawares, Kickapoos, and Seminoles joined a flow of local southwestern Apaches, Kiowas, Comanches, Pimas, and others to cross south into Mexico and along the 49th parallel, Nez Perce, Sioux, Iroquois, and countless other crossed north into Canada in similar flight. These series of exoduses out of the United States compose a rich and complex narrative of North American indigenous border crossing.

There are two intriguing examples of indigenous peoples moving in the opposite direction and entering the United States. Running counter to the geographic flows of the exodus narratives, Yaquis from Mexico crossed into Arizona while Chippewas and Crees from Canada entered Montana. Both starting roughly in the 1880s, they sought permanent residence, reservation lands, and federal tribal recognition from the United States. At the end of long struggles for both, their narratives stand as two unique examples of "foreign" Indians granted tribal status and reservations in the United States. Such inbound Native border crossing, the reception or rejection by borderland locals in Arizona and Montana, and the struggle to gain permanent legal residence greatly complicates the broader history of indigenous experiences in the North American borderlands. Involving opposing borders, the historical context in which so-defined "foreign" Indian peoples gained permanent reservations in the United States provides considerable material for comparative analysis. The experiences of Arizona Yaquis and Montana Chippewa-Crees reveal many important truths. First, the United States' immigration and refugee policies for borderland Indians were inconsistent or nonexistent at best, errant and mercurial at worst. Second, it is clear that local borderlands economic, cultural, and political interests strongly swayed said capricious federal policy (or lack thereof). In both cases, the far-flung edges of the American empire, small settlements burgeoning urban centers on Montana's northern plains and Arizona's southern deserts informed the central formulation of federal policy on a national level.

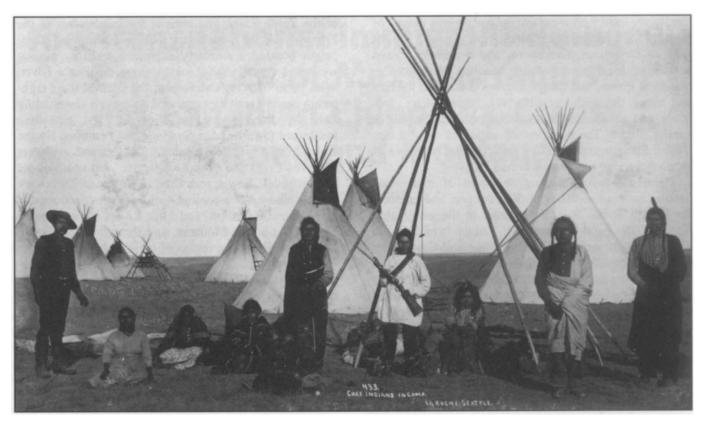
#### **Chippewa-Crees in Montana**

At the time of initial European contact, Crees and Chippewas both resided in eastern woodlands along the western shores of Hudson Bay. Their subsequent territories extended into immediate surrounding environs to the west and south between Hudson Bay, the Great Lakes, and Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba. As their involvement in the growing European fur-trade increased, both groups extended westward well into the Northern Great Plains and southward towards the 49th parallel. By the end of the eighteenth century, travelers such as David Thompson and Alexander Mackenzie placed Crees in the Eagle Hills north of the Saskatchewan, along the Great Slave Lake, at the headwaters

of the Peace River, and even at the headwaters of the Fraser River in modern-day British Columbia. Chippewas boasted a similarly expansive territory aiming westward towards the Rockies along the Peace River. With these outlying extensions, the core of their eighteenth century activities centered on regions surrounding Lake Manitoba and Lake Winnipeg, and extending southward towards Lake Superior and Pembina. By the early- to mid-nineteenth century, traders and explorers observed Crees and Chippewas active well south of the 49th parallel. Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery among others made comment of both groups along the Yellowstone, Missouri, and Milk Rivers in present-day North Dakota and Montana, and throughout the Sand, Leach, and Red Lake region of present-day Minnesota.

Developments in nineteenth century trade and settlement of the West led to further augmentations in territorial ranges. In gradual succession, the contracting fur trade, disappearing northern bison herds, and increasing white settlement along the northern prairies all contributed to migration and fragmentation of Cree and Chippewa bands. When, in the late 1870s and early 1880s, Crees began appearing in Montana on a more regular basis, Métis, Chippewas, Bloods, Piegans, and Blackfeets mirrored their southward migrations elsewhere along the 49th parallel. Unfortunately, for these "Canadian" Indians, their entrance into Montana coincided with a dramatic influx of white settlers, traders and ranchers into the same regions. Struggling to establish their own economic, social, and cultural foundations, Montanans found cross-border indigenous movements disconcerting. The continued regional presence of individuals such as Sitting Bull and Louis Riel, both suspected of fomenting discord "for the purpose of waging war upon the white settlers this side of the line" and "making the whites cry," compounded fears of cross-border raiding or attacks.1 Loathe to return to an era of daily "bloodshed and pillage by the Indians," and with reports of "wanton" killing of local livestock, local Montanans consistently drove federal policy toward the forced removal of "foreign" Indians throughout the following decade.2 Quickly, deportation became the preferred method of dealing with the now-termed illegal presence of Indians from north of the line.

The first of these major efforts, the 1881 Milk River campaign, simply aimed to put "foreign Indians" across the line.<sup>3</sup> For the following years various Indian bands were deported, but the focus of army efforts and that of local and national press quickly narrowed on the Cree. Cries of "marauding bands" on the warpath, demands that the government "rid Montana of the Cree Indians," and drive "the copper-colored marauders back to their Canadian hunting grounds," echoed through national and local papers.<sup>4</sup> When Big Bear's Crees participated in the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, the growing negative treatment and portrayal of the Crees in Montana, a group that had received considerable negative press in



Crees in camp, ca. 1893. Little Bear is pictured second from the right.

This comes from the Frank La Roche Photograph Collection, courtesy of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW21830z

Montana in the preceding years, significantly worsened. Subsequently, reports that his son Little Bear participated in the much-publicized Frog Lake Massacre assumed new importance when Little Bear appeared in Montana seeking sanctuary soon thereafter. Efforts previously aimed at deporting and denying entry to his father focused now on Little Bear and Crees associated with him. Two compounding media-driven assumptions, that all Crees in Montana were Canadian and that they all had participated in the Northwest Rebellion, galvanized American determination to expel them.

Despite the United States' best efforts to expel Cree immigrants, a persistent number either remained in or continuously returned to Montana. By the late 1880s, one of the last remnants of these borderland Indians was the small group of Crees under the leadership of Little Bear. For some years, various associated bands sought permission to settle on public lands or on an already existing reservation and declared their desire to gain U.S. citizenship. Writing to Montana State Governor J. E. Rickards, Little Bear explained:

Our object in coming to the United States, was to procure for ourselves homes and better treatment than that to which we had been subjected under Canadian laws and while the general impression is and we have been represented throughout the state of Montana by the press thereof as being fugitives from our former homes on account

of having participated in the "so-called" Riel Rebellion such is not the fact. We left our former homes (some of us prior and others, and by far the larger part of our tribe, subsequently to that Rebellion) for the reasons as above stated to procure homes in a land where we had been informed we could become Naturalized Citizens and gain acquire a certain amount of the unoccupied land therein for a homestead and we have during all the time we have been here tried to conduct ourselves so that we would be considered possessed of the necessary qualifications to become such citizens."

Detailing his band's plight, their struggle to "eke out an existence," and sincere desires for citizenship, Little Bear clearly understood that they faced considerable opposition from local community interests. In the years to follow, they struggled to survive off the land, earned wages through small labor projects for local ranchers, and wandered between the edges of Montana's growing urban centers and already existent Indian reservations. They found little respite among Montana's Native or white populations. Deploring in the most derogatory terms by local newspapers, the Canadian exiles also faced opposition from Montana's local Native populations. On continually precarious ground, Crees faced repeated deportation efforts throughout the 1890s. In the words of Governor Rickards, "The patience of [Montana's] people [had] been sorely tried."

In 1901, Little Bear met a small group of Chippewas that had been moving westward out of North Dakota. This group, under the leadership of Rocky Boy, or Stone Child, started negotiating with local industry leaders and military officials to pressure the United States government to grant them a parcel of land as their own reservation. Little Bear's Cree quickly joined in this request, as did smaller gatherings of Métis still present in Montana. Despite strong congressional efforts, resistance from local economic interests stressed the need simply to deport Rocky Boy's band, and various attempts to settle the destitute group failed. One concerned community expressed fears that a nearby Chippewa-Cree presence would retard white settlement and investment because locals "consider[ed] Indians detrimental to the country and bad neighbors ... bear[ing] the reputation of being improvident, lazy, thriftless, and diseased, and wholly unfit to mingle with white people."7 This typifies the unjustly negative prejudice laid against Chippewa-Crees. With considerable support from prominent Montanans such as Frank B. Linderman, Congress finally passed a bill in 1916 to create a reservation for "Rocky Boy's band." After forty years of trying to deport the foreign Indians, local Montanans accepted the fact that it would be simpler to grant Rocky Boy's band a parcel of land and end the constant worry of wandering bands of indigent homeless Indians. For Little Bear and Rocky Boy's combined Chippewa-Cree band, years of persistent struggle and patience finally led to a more stable future in Montana.

#### Yaquis in Arizona

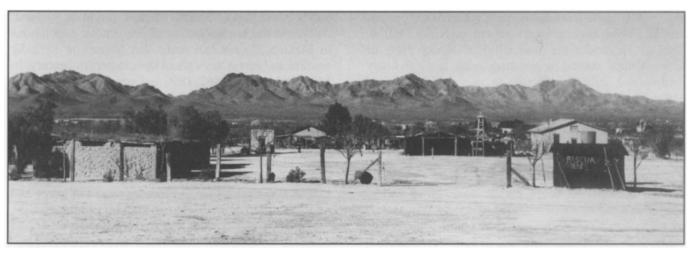
Some fifty years after Little Bear and Rocky Boy's combined 1916 Chippewa-Cree band secured a reservation in Montana from the Fort Assiniboine Military Reserve, "Mexican" Yaquis acquired land holdings outside of Tucson. The 1964 piece of legislation that conveyed land to the Pascua Yaqui Association directly cited Rocky Boy's band and the 1916 act as direct precedent. The Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs stated, "Congress has enacted special legislation in the past in a somewhat comparable situation of a group of Chippewa and Cree Indians living in the State of Montana who were known as Chief Rocky Boy's band ... thus there is precedent for the donation envisaged by H.R. 6233."8 The legislative paper trail suggests a meaningful linkage between these two insular events. On some basic levels, similarities between the stories of Canadian Chippewa-Crees in Montana and Mexican Yaquis in Arizona are apparent. Both groups were fleeing hostile treatment and seeking sanctuary in the United States. Furthermore, both would face a long and tortuous road toward final legalized reception across the line.

As in Montana, *local* borderlands interests significantly influenced the historical evolution and *federal* 

policy resolution of Yaqui refugees' plight in Arizona. As one of the last unconquered indigenous populations in Mexico, Yaquis had embroiled Sonora in periodic warfare and revolt throughout the nineteenth century. In 1825, 1834, 1857-1862, 1899 and again in the 1910s and 1920s, the Yaqui mounted considerable resistance to the various colonizing efforts of Mexico City. The latter of these wars had two important outcomes that weighed heavily in the story of the Yaqui in Arizona. First, traditional migratory routes between the Yaqui River Valley and what would become Arizona, and settlement patterns dating back as far as 1796, increased in usage and political significance. Mexican observers argued that the Yaqui constantly crossed into Arizona and New Mexico as a way to escape the continual warfare. Hence, Mexicans reinterpreted and Yaquis reused traditional migratory patterns as a means of escape. This became particularly important during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when the Porfirian government escalated the policy of forced Yaqui deportation to Yucatan where henequen and sisal plantations used them as slave labor. Starting as early as the 1880s, these forced deportations spurred a dramatic increase of Yaquis fleeing northward. These flights would extend well into the 1920s.

The second outcome of the Yaqui Wars that had direct impact on the story of Arizona Yaquis centers on the United States' popular, media-driven image of the Yaqui. Throughout the various outbreaks of war between federal Mexican troops and resistant Yaquis, American newspapers and periodicals painted the Yaqui in the most savage and deplorable terms. For decades, newspapers across the nation related imagery of how the barbaric Yaquis massacred Mexican troops, endangered American economic investment and settlers in the region, and exhibited only the basest levels of culture or civilization. Headlines darkened the Yaquis' public image with headlines such as "Sonora in Terror of Red Rovers," and "Scourge of the Yaquis." This narrative parallels the negative press that Crees had faced following the 1885 Northwest or Riel Rebellion. Fate, however, would lead Arizona's Yaquis down a different path.

Similar negative press had combined with negative local perceptions to bar federal cooperation with Montana's Canadian Indians. Initially *positive local reception* in Arizona trumped the negative national press in forming federal policy towards border-crossing Yaquis. Much to the chagrin of Mexican officials, industries across Arizona welcomed Yaqui. One observer wrote, "The majority entered as contract railroad laborers drifting here to work in the mines or work as laborers on the ditches and irrigation projects or worked as farm hands." Anthropologist Edward Spicer noted in his diary from Pascua that various Yaquis worked cleaning irrigation ditches, as ranch-hands, and picking cotton during these early years. As local Arizonans



A view of the ceremonial plaza of Old Pascua village, ca. 1937.

Photograph courtesy of the Arizona State Museum

convinced the federal government to accept Yaquis as political refugees, many entered and established a considerable presence in the state. If events had followed along this trajectory, the growing and welcomed Yaqui presence in Arizona may have led to rapid federal recognition of tribal status and granting of reservation lands.

An economic recession, however, would change the course of Yaqui history. A national investment and banking crisis in 1907 came to affect adversely the same local industries that were employing Yaqui refugees. The economic slowdown quickly reduced Arizonan demand for Yaqui labor, and the Department of Commerce and Labor consented to longstanding Mexican demands to heighten border security against Yaqui refugees. Previous Arizonan acceptance of Yaquis gradually came to mirror the Sonoran desires to expel Yaquis from their territory. The constant threat of capture and deportation by U.S. officials thus complicated the northward migration of Yaqui refugees in the decades to follow. As their history returned to mirror more closely the plight of Montana's Chippewa-Crees, Yaquis employed a tactic unavailable to their northern counterparts. Fearing deportation, many Yaquis sought to conceal their identity and attempted to blend in with the broader Mexican immigrant groups and settlements. "There is a definite disinclination on the part of Yaquis everywhere in Arizona to give facts about themselves," noted Edward Spicer, "Yaqui secretiveness here is a result of an ever-present fear of being deported to Mexico."11 Chippewa-Crees could not pass as Anglo Canadian immigrants and found no sanctuary among the closely monitored Native populations on Montana reservations whose resources were sorely lacking already. Due to U.S. racial perceptions that more closely aligned indigenous ethnicity with Mexican ethnicity, Yaquis were able to blend in more successfully.

Their ability to remain below the radar of deportation efforts allowed Arizona Yaquis to form more permanent

settlements in Arizona than Chippewa-Crees could in Montana. Eventually, as the 1910s and 1920s uproar over Yaqui revolts in Mexico calmed, deportation threats against those in Arizona lessened. This set of events, however, postponed their future reception of reservation lands and tribal recognition. Whereas Chippewa-Crees' wandering in Montana eventually drove local efforts to settle them on a reservation, local Arizonans felt no need to push through legislation to federally recognize as an Indian nation the already "settled" Yaquis. With tragic irony, Yaquis' success in settling permanent communities allowed Arizonans to ignore their presence more easily. This is not to suggest Arizonans ignored the Yaqui presence outright. In the late 1900s, a host of exposé publications unveiled the tragic story of Yaqui deportation to the Yucatan and flight to Arizona. However, as Yaqui groups around Tucson made numerous public overtures requesting U.S. citizenship during the 1920s, the national media only covered their story sporadically. Their presence in the state persisted nonetheless, and by the 1930s Yaquis had established four major settlements outside of Tucson, Tempe, Scottsdale, and Yuma — each with a population of at least 500 each. By the 1960s, there were 6 wellestablished settlements with at least 14 other transitory communities with a total population of some 6,000.

In 1964 a private organization named the Pascua Yaqui Association formed to represent and address the poverty-stricken Yaqui community in Tucson. With the support of Congressman Morris K. Udall and devoted persistence of University of Arizona anthropologist Edward Spicer, among others, the Pascua Yaqui Association secured some 200 acres of land in 1964 to settle legally the community of 450 Yaqui that had been illegally squatting on land outside Tucson since 1919. This was not the first conveyance of land to Yaquis on record. In a statement concerning the proposed 1964 bill, Arizona Senator Carl Hayden detailed the precedent of a 1905 group of Yaqui political refugees acquiring

acreage in what would become the permanent Yaqui town site of Guadalupe. In response to his support for the bill, Hayden would receive a tirade of irate correspondence from Arizona residents who opposed the land transfer. The verbiage of the 1964 legislation, however, focused on the two intriguing lines of reasoning: the lack of mineral wealth on the lands in question and the Yaqui's positive contribution to the Tucson economy through their public cultural celebrations. In 1962, Edward Spicer coordinated a petition effort that garnered the support of local business owners, newspaper editors, the Pima County City-County Planning Department, the Tucson Festival Society, tourism bureaus, the Tucson Chamber of Commerce, Tucson Public Schools, the Bank of Tucson, the Arizona Department of Public Affairs, and local attorneys. In other proposals coordinated between Spicer and Yaqui leaders, St. Mark's Presbyterian Church, the Diocese of Tucson, the Tucson Community Council, U.S. Senator Paul J. Fannin, and Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall all included their testimonies of the cultural value the Yaquis represented for Tucson. Again, positive local support was the lynchpin for positive resolution of the refugee/ immigrant plight. Amid the awareness raised by the American Indian Movement and other events in Indian

country during the late 1960s, the plight of the still federally unrecognized Yaqui Indians in Arizona garnered national attention in 1970s by a series of newspaper articles. Finally, in 1978, the United States federal government officially recognized the Pascua Yaqui Tribe.

#### Conclusions

There are important differences between these two cases that deserve mention. First is the complicating factor of ethnicity tied to the incoming refugee-immigrants. Whereas the Chippewas and Crees from Canada were clearly "Indians," not to be confused with "regular" Canadian immigrants, Yaquis were not always differentiated from their "regular" Mexican counterparts. On occasion, this allowed Yaquis to blend into the broader Mexican immigration whereas Chippewa-Crees could not do likewise among Canadian immigrants. Second, the way in which the United States initially defined these groups differed and led to different outcomes. In an ironic twist of fate, the Yaquis, initially given official refugee status, faced a much longer struggle for legal federal recognition, and the Chippewa-Crees, initially defined as illegal immigrants, faced a shorter struggle. The established legality of the Yaqui presence, and the



Yaqui men with Edward (Ned) and Rosamond Spicer, ca. 1937-38. This is thought to have been taken after a weekly mass on Sunday, along the south wall of the church in Old Pascua. Back row, left to right: "Bufalo"; unknown; unknown; Tomas Alvarez, a matachin kovanao (leader of the matachin society of ceremonial dancers); Juan Acuña, a matachini; and Pedro Garcia, a matachini. Front row, left to right: Ned Spicer, Rosamond Spicer; unknown; unknown. For more information see http://parentseyes.arizona.edu/pascuayaquiaz/.

Photograph courtesy of the Arizona State Museum

regularity with which they were lumped together with Mexicans by many Americans, allowed Yaquis to build more permanent settlements in the United States. Although the Cree refugees of 1885 gained legal entry and protection at first, locals quickly challenged their right to stay, preventing secure community building and forcing them to wander about Montana for decades. In the end, annoyance of "wandering" illegal Indians drove previously noncompliant Montanans to push for their reservation settlement and federal tribal recognition. The paradox is that Yaqui's legal settlement allowed local Arizonans to ignore their presence longer than Montanans could with their roving Chippewa-Crees.

In these two unique examples of "foreign" Indians securing tribal status and reservation lands by the United States, there was an apparent lack of overarching federal policy. Federal Indian policy, in its many forms and reinterpretations was entirely limited to what the United States considered "American" Indians. As "domestic dependent nations," so termed by Chief Justice John Marshall in 1831, the United States had defined, though not always respected, relations with the sovereign Indian nations within its borders. Hence, no apparatus or policy was needed to deal with "foreign" Indians. Simply put, the rest of the North America's indigenous population was out of sight, out of mind. Chippewa-Crees from Canada and Yaquis from Mexico shattered the logic of U.S. Indian policy. There was no mechanism with which to deal with them. How then did the federal government come to deal with these immigrant or refugee populations? As apparent in both cases, press coverage along with local social, economic and cultural interests in Montana and Arizona were what ultimately formed federal policy.

The United States' relationship with "American" Indians had rigid geographical bounds and carved up underlying historical Native geographies. Had local and federal conceptions been more continental in scope, perhaps allowing more philosophical flexibility in partitioning the continent's Natives into categories of "foreign" and "domestic," the outcome may well have been different for both groups. However, the sacrosanct nature assigned to international boundaries superseded the reality of broader, legally undefined, indigenous spheres of influence and operation. By indiscriminately and arbitrarily bisecting Native lands and labeling groups as either domestic (for which they held responsibility) or foreign (for which they held no responsibility), the United States *created* a problem they had no mechanism to solve. Indigenous North American spheres of influence had never been static, and would continue to move, evolve, and adapt. Hence, the United States' assumption that it could impose geopolitical concepts of regulated borders over the dynamic and fluid networks of Native interactions and empires and have the continent's indigenous populations respect those boundaries, new national identities and federal

oversight was naïve. One has to assume that they understood borders would be violated, but why then, did they not establish a more concrete and well-defined policy to deal with such border crossing? This paradox trapped Chippewa-Crees and Yaquis. A system had been imposed on them that traditional modes of migration and geopolitical negotiations dictated they would violate; the bisecting border created illegals out of Natives.

For Crees who wandered homeless and destitute for forty years in Montana, and Yaquis that lived semilegally in oft poverty-stricken conditions for over eighty years in Arizona, that system had not conceived of an equitable or consistent way to deal with their presence. Throughout this process, neither group was without their own agencies and initiatives to drive their futures. Though a long and grueling history, it is indeed one of great perseverance and fortitude. Facing considerable obstacles, Chippewa-Crees and Yaquis not only succeeded in securing legal settlement, tribal recognition, and reservation lands, but they did so while preserving a vibrant sense of indigenous identity, culture, and religion. However, their reception in the United States by local borderlanders and the federal government often seemed detached from their realm of control. Left to the caprice of local interests, the uncertainty of local economies, and the ever-shifting winds of the press, this made for an uncertain present and future. Thankfully, positive support from various interested parties eventually met Chippewa-Cree and Yaqui diligence, sweeping away some of that uncertainty by acts of Congress. They were Crees, Chippewas, and Yaquis first. Regardless of how Anglo borderlanders classified them throughout their progress towards legal settlement in the United States (foreign, domestic, refugees or illegal immigrants), these unique identities endure today.

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