



FISHING

in the Land of 10,000 Lakes

JUNE DRENNING HOLMQUIST

MINNESOTA'S ten thousand lakes and abundant streams have long made the state a favorite with Izaak Walton's disciples. Although early Minnesotans fished for food rather than for sport, the state soon became known as a vacation spot for fishermen. As early as 1844 the well-known geologist Joseph Le Conte and his cousin John made a trip to Minnesota's wilds to explore and to fish.¹ Forty years later anglers were singing the state's praises in the columns of leading sporting magazines, crowing without restraint over their tremendous catches.

Today fishing has become the basis of a

large and important Minnesota vacation industry. Fifty years ago only about a hundred thousand anglers fished the lakes of Minnesota annually. Now that number has increased to more than a million. Three out of four tourists and approximately forty-three per cent of the state's residents purchase fishing licenses, indicating that angling is the most popular of all Minnesota sports. Fishing has become a source of tremendous revenue to the state, pouring more than two million dollars into its treasury from the sale of fishing licenses alone during the fiscal year 1951-52.²

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¹For an account of Le Conte's visit see June D. Holmquist, ed., "Frontier Vacation," in *Minnesota History*, 32:81-99 (June, 1951).

This, however, is a comparatively recent development, for not until 1927 did Minnesota require its residents to buy a license in order to angle. A state board of fish commissioners, however, had been set up by the legislature in 1874. Given an appropriation of five hundred dollars, the board was directed to concern itself with artificial propagation and stocking. For more than twenty years fish commissioners tried valiantly to introduce California mountain trout, shad, and salmon into Minnesota

waters. The salmon, the board hoped, would go to the Gulf of Mexico or to Hudson Bay and then return to Minnesota's lakes and streams to spawn. State hatcheries also raised and distributed thousands of trout, walleyed pike, whitefish, bass, and carp.³

In 1891 the state's fish commissioners were authorized to appoint game wardens to enforce fishing laws, but not until 1893 did those laws place any limit on the number of fish an angler might catch. Laws prohibiting the netting of trout, however, were passed by the first state legislature in 1858.⁴ Minnesota "fishing cranks," as ardent fishermen were called in the 1880s, were allowed to pursue the sport with very few restrictions.

As might be expected, enormous catches were recorded in the days of unlimited

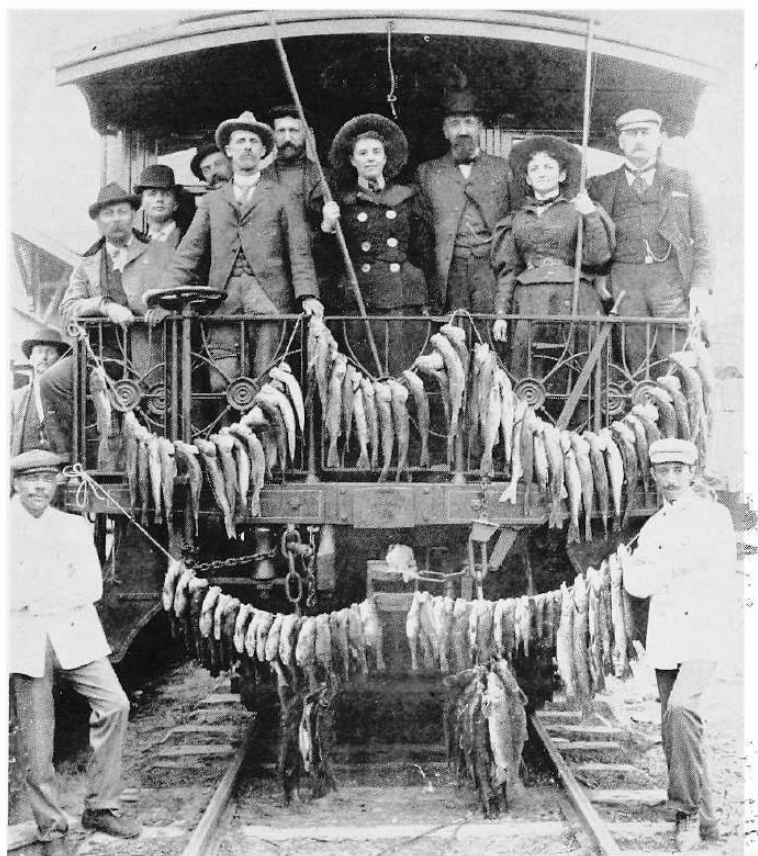
² Department of Conservation, Division of Game and Fish, *Biennial Reports*, 1947-48, p. 7; 1951-52, p. 91; Department of Business Research and Development, *Steps to Better Vacations in Minnesota*, 6 (St. Paul, [1949?]).

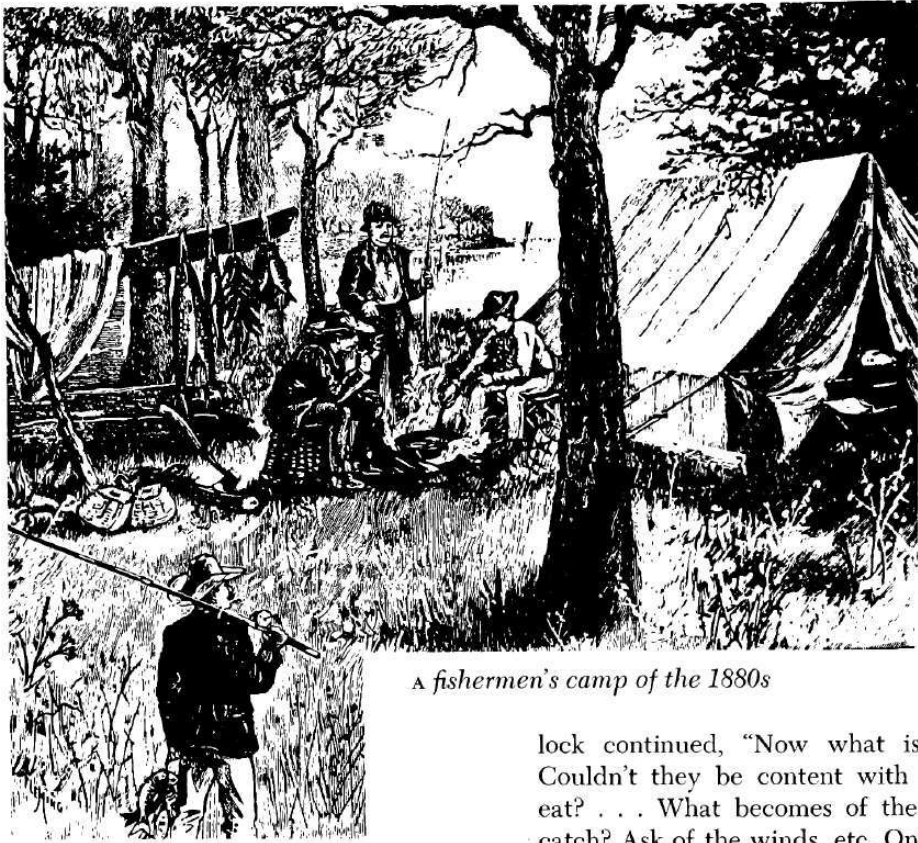
³ Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1874, p. 140-144; 1927, p. 637.

⁴ *General Laws*, 1858, p. 105; 1891, p. 73; 1893, p. 236; *Special Laws*, 1858, p. 152.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EDWARD A. BROMLEY

*THIS fishing party
went to Leech Lake
by rail in 1896*





A fishermen's camp of the 1880s

angling. On September 24, 1851, the *St. Paul Weekly Minnesotian* reported: "We have two expert amateur fishermen in St. Paul, who have, within the last six weeks, taken over two thousand lbs. of bass, pike, and pickerel with hook and line." Sporting magazines of the 1880s carried long columns reporting stupendous catches sometimes totaling thousands of fish. The *American Angler* for June 21, 1882, heralded a catch of "exactly five hundred fish in four hours," and on August 18, 1883, a correspondent reported that he had caught "close on to 240 pounds" of black bass in four hours of fishing.

Charles Hallock, the first editor of *Field and Stream*, writing of the famous Wisconsin trout stream, the Brule River, stated that "It is no uncommon thing for a couple of anglers to report one thousand trout as the result of three or four days' fishing!" Crying out against such senseless destruction, Hal-

lock continued, "Now what is the use? Couldn't they be content with enough to eat? . . . What becomes of the first day's catch? Ask of the winds, etc. Only the take of the last day will be fresh enough to fetch home."⁵

OF COURSE, not all anglers in Minnesota waters before the days of restrictive laws were "fish hogs," as Hallock termed them. One of the true sportsmen of the period was the Reverend Myron Cooley, who from 1889 until 1894 served as Baptist minister at Detroit Lakes in Becker County. With his favorite fishing partner, P. O. Stephens, one of the state's first game wardens, Cooley ranged northern Minnesota and Wisconsin seeking "finney denizens" of all types. The two men fished with eight-ounce split bamboo rods, light silk lines, and small hooks. Many of their experiences were recorded by Cooley between the covers of

⁵ Charles Hallock, *An Angler's Reminiscences*, 61 (Cincinnati, 1913). Although Hallock's book was not published until 1913, he wrote this portion of his reminiscences in 1885.

a small red book, a copy of which is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.⁶

By his own admission Cooley "caught every variety of fish . . . found in Northern Minnesota," but he was especially fond of fishing for bass. "I've never caught any great strings of fish running into the fifties and hundreds," Cooley wrote. "By the time I get fifteen or twenty good black bass landed I'm always ready to quit for that time. . . . I'd rather catch one small-mouthed bass than three large-mouthed ones, each of the same weight."

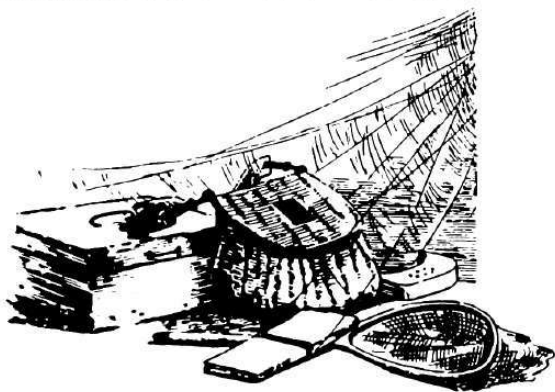
One of his favorite bass fishing spots was Franklin Lake in Otter Tail County. To it Cooley and Stephens returned again and again in search of bass, "the true game fish" of them all. Today's fishermen will raise an eyebrow when they learn that Cooley and Stephens customarily fished with three hooks to a line, but this was a common practice. Apparently, many fishermen not only used more than one hook to a line, but also made use of at least two or three lines. Of his first trip to Franklin Lake Cooley wrote:

"Monday morning saw us driving out of Detroit City, Minn., with our tent, fourteen foot [collapsible canvas] Acme boat, rods and provisions, snugly packed in the wagon. After leaving Detroit lake we went on ever farther and farther into the woods, great beautiful woods, in all the pomp and glory of full summer time. . . . At 3 o'clock we came out on the shore of Lake Franklin—a beautiful lake, wooded all around. . . . [Here] we decided to pitch our tent. Soon the white was gleaming amid the green, coffee made and lunch eaten, boat unrolled and set up, rods made ready, and about 5 o'clock off we shoved. . . . This afternoon we put three hooks on each line, and baited with frog minnow and fly.

"We moved slowly up the shore, and a

few rods from where we started something was seen in the water—was it a shadow moving between us and the shore? 'Tis a bass,' said Stephens. 'I'll try for him.' The cast was made, the bait falling near the suppositious bass. Whew! Zip, went the line, the rod bent, and in a few minutes a 3 lb. black bass lay in the boat—a good beginning in a strange lake." Out near the center of the lake the two men saw a "monster bass," but could not persuade it to bite. When they returned to camp that evening, they had a dozen bass, "none weighing less than 2½ pounds." At sunrise the next morning they were out on the lake again, and at this point Stephens made the catch of the trip.

"We were laying by the mass of rock out in the lake where I saw the 'big one' . . . when Stephens, who had just made a cast to the edge of the rocks, gave an exclamation and said, 'What have I got now? A whale?' Hither and thither surged the line, the split-bamboo playing grandly. No fish broke from the water. What could it be? What a tremendous pull! Stephens had a look on his face which plainly said 'I'll conquer or die.' Ah, see that great swirl? How the water boils. Nothing but a bass would cause that. Here they are now in sight. They? Yes, for there two were hooked and a third has just broken a snell [hook] and gone. . . . From the fly, a Gov. Alvord, we took a 5½ lb. fish and from the frog a 3½ lb. one, and the one that had broken away had taken the minnow. Neither of us had made a catch like that in our lives."



⁶ Minnesota Baptist State Convention, *Minutes*, 1889, p. 12; 1894, p. 61; Cooley, *Outings and Innings* (Detroit, Minnesota, 1894). A portion of Cooley's narrative also appears in *Field and Stream*, 2:126-128 (September, 1897).

IN COOLEY'S DAY pike were considered rough fish, and few fishermen worth their salt bothered with any member of this family except muskellunge. Cooley and his friend Stephens had a try at catching this much-talked of fish in the waters of Elbow Lake near Park Rapids. Neither had ever caught a muskie, but they vowed that when they did, they would do so on their usual light tackle. The only concession they made to this fighting fish was the addition of a piece of light copper wire at the end of their lines. To this they fastened a number 8 Skinner spoon.

On August 6, 1892, the two men took the newly completed Great Northern Railroad to Park Rapids.⁷ The line had been in operation only five days, and Cooley commented that it seemed "the essence of newness." At Park Rapids, where they found "a genuine boom" in full development, the men obtained a team of horses and drove through the pine woods to Elbow Lake, about five miles east of the town. Once there, they set out to catch what Cooley called "the gamy mascalonge."

"The lake is very appropriately named Elbow lake, as it closely resembles a bent arm. We turned the bend and went slowly along the west shore, keeping just out of the weeds.

"What was that which gave such a tug at the line and caused my rod to bend so? Had the spoon caught on a log? No, for there was a succession of fierce jerks that caused me to call out to Stephens, 'I've hooked one!' I had a very pleasant experience the next few minutes, which resulted in bringing to the side of the boat a fish that could do more rushing and plunging and splashing, when seemingly played out, than any fish I had had on a hook in some time. . . . I had no idea that mascalonge were such fine looking fellows.

"During the next hour we caught four more. . . . One of these fish went through a variety of gymnastic exercises, which were far and away ahead of anything in that line I ever saw any fish do. . . ."

The two men went home very well satisfied with their first try at muskies. They had "nine beauties, . . . no large fish as mascalonge run, but with our tackle it was rare sport."



SECOND ONLY to bass as game fish, in Cooley's estimation, were trout. Early one spring the two friends set out on a ten-day trip along the North Shore of Lake Superior, of whose trout streams they had heard many glowing reports. From Duluth they took the steamer "Dixon" up the shore, landing at Chicago Bay. There they set up their faithful canvas boat, and in this flimsy craft went rowing off up the lake, much to the astonishment of a fisherman living near by. They planned to fish for speckled trout in the mouths of the many swift-running streams which empty into Lake Superior between Chicago Bay and Grand Portage. According to Cooley:

"We had a most delightful row, the scenery having those marked and peculiar characteristics that make the north shore so grandly stern and savage. A little after noon we reached the stream [*Reservation River*] which we supposed was the one we wanted to find. As we passed the mouth, making for a bit of sand beach on which to land and get dinner, I had a strike but did not succeed in hooking the fish. I at once cast again, another fierce rush was made, and I hooked and brought in, after a fierce struggle, a grand speckled prize; a 3-pounder he proved to be. . . . We were so elated we could scarcely eat dinner, although we had some of the trout caught

⁷ Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, *Annual Reports*, 1892, p. 343.

in the morning nicely fried, and most delicious they were, too.

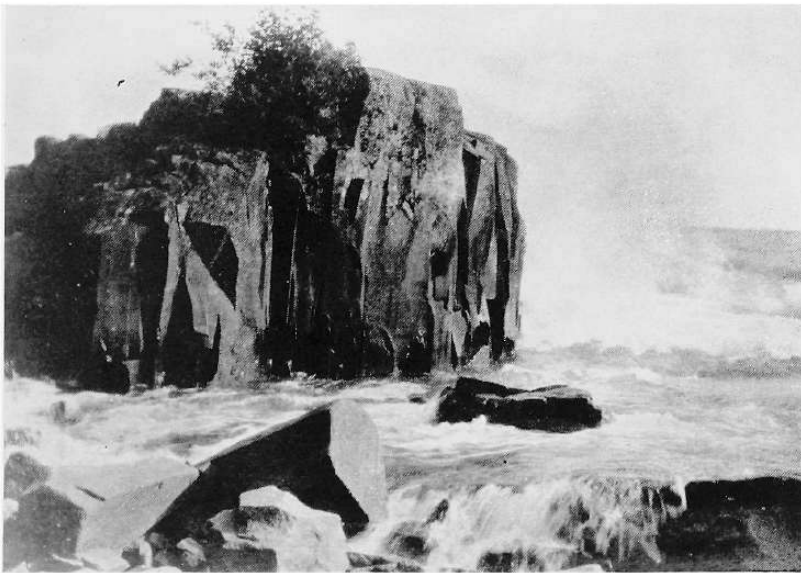
"As soon as we had eaten we hurried back to the mouth of the stream and at his first cast Stephens caught and finally landed another three-pounder. It was my turn to hurrah for him, but just at that moment my Montreal fly proved to be a fatal attraction to another of the gamy beauties and I soon had another 2½ lb. trout added to our trophies. Directly after, Stephens hooked a large one. . . . At length we started up the stream. We could have filled our boat here with trout eight, ten and twelve inches long, but we had no use for them, so we contented ourselves with making a cast here and there to see the quick dash for the hook, and in admiring the beauty of the stream. About 4 o'clock we started onward . . . looking for . . . our camping place for the night. . . .

"The shore was so rocky and forbidding that we did not like the idea of attempting to land after dark. At length, rounding a point, we saw a beautiful red gravel beach, and dividing the beach nearly in the center was a great mass of red rock that rose straight up from the water thirty or forty feet. A few feet above the beach was a park-like place, nearly level. . . .

"We learned afterward that it was Red Rock, a famous camping place for Indians and others. . . . In the morning a heavy sea was running. . . . After breakfast we attempted to get off, but the waves were running too hard, as we found when a big wave completely filled our boat with water. We hauled it up . . . and around to the sheltered side of Red Rock, where we loaded up and succeeded in getting out. As we rounded the point into the main lake we found a stiff breeze blowing and a very heavy sea running. The little Acme, loaded as it was, seemed a very frail thing to brave Superior in; but on we went . . . the storm getting worse, the seas heavier. . . . Rock and dashing waves everywhere.

"Ahead we saw a great rock jutting out from shore. We made for it, thinking we might land under the shelter of it. Just then an accident happened that, only for Stephens' presence of mind, might have proved serious enough. One of the oars snapped at the rowlock. Stephens, with rare presence of mind, caught the part of the oar with the blade on before it slipped away, put it in the rowlock and commenced a battle with wind and wave with an oar and a half. Not a muscle of Stephens' face changed,

COURTESY ST. PAUL DISPATCH



*A storm
on the North Shore
of Lake Superior*

although for a brief while it seemed as though we should be driven back on the savage Red Rock Point, over which the waves were dashing in great fury. . . .

"A landing was now a necessity, or probably a death in Lake Superior. We made directly for the big rock. As we approached our supposed refuge we were suprised to see foam-capped waves flying high on the side where there should have been comparatively calm water. We soon saw the reason. The rock was tunneled clear through in two places, and the waves were coming through with a boom and crash like a cannonade. But land we must, so, watching the waves, we went in on a big comber. I sprang for the shore as the wave broke and pulled the boat up as far as I could. Stephens sprang out and we were high and dry before the next wave came in."

As luck would have it, the two men had landed close to a stream, so they calmly resumed fishing and caught thirty-five trout before lunch. Next day the wind was still blowing, so the friends walked up the shore to Grand Portage. They spent the night with Peter Gagnon, a fisherman living on Grand Portage Island, and the following

day he took them to Isle Royale, where they continued to fish, without much success, in a snow storm.

ON A TRIP to Burntside Lake near the mining town of Ely to fish for landlocked salmon, Cooley and Stephens rode on the recently completed Duluth and Iron Range Railroad, noting the development of the newly discovered Mesabi Range. They passed through the now vanished town of Mesaba, which Cooley described as "a gathering of buildings, scattered in a most promiscuous and haphazard way among the rocks, bo[u]lders and stumps, board shanties, houses, stores, saloons and hotels, canvas sided and canvas covered houses . . . with some tents pure and simple."⁸ The writer came to the conclusion that "Mesaba is a fearfully and wonderfully constructed town." He added that "There was a regular mob at the station, representing all the nationalities found in the Northwest, from the Simon-pure American Indian to the

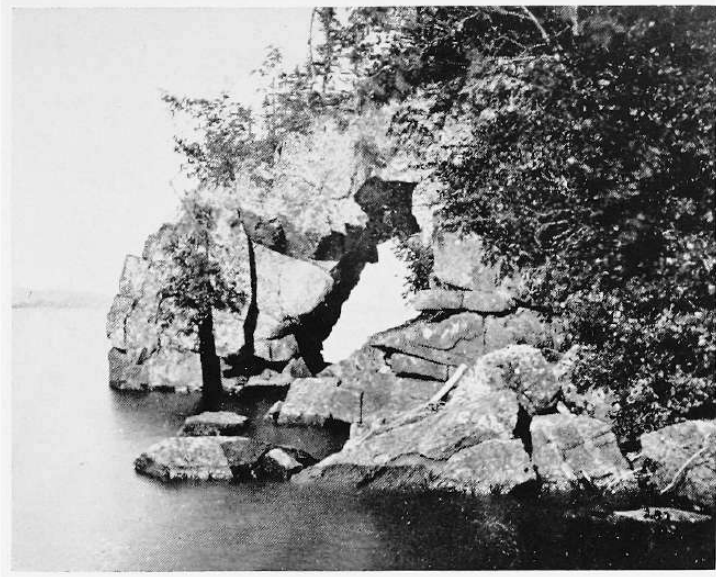
⁸ The railroad and the town of Mesaba are described in Grace Lee Nute, ed., *Mesabi Pioneer, Reminiscences of Edmund J. Longyear*, 7 (St. Paul, 1951).

FROM NUTE, MESABI PIONEER, P. 7



THE post office
at Mesaba
in 1890

AN arch of rock
formerly on
the North Shore
near Grand Portage



latest importation from the slum holes beyond the sea, with a thick sprinkling of bankers and iron magnates from East and West, North and South.”

Upon reaching Burntside Lake, the two fishermen were not impressed with the landlocked salmon as a “fierce fighter.” They were, however, struck by the beauty of the lake. Cooley wrote:

“Of all the lakes I have ever seen Burntside is the most beautiful. It cannot be described with ordinary pen. The rocky shores in many places resembling old Superior—pine crowned bluffs, numerous wooded islands, large and small, and of every variety of shape; narrow, deep inlets o’er which the giant pines cast their shadows, broad open expanse, reflecting every change of cloud and sky, all go to make a lake of surpassing beauty.

* An article on one of Cooley’s California fishing trips appears in *Field and Stream*, 3:46–48 (April, 1898).

THE SKETCHES on pages 252 and 255 are from *Field and Stream* for December, 1898, and July 1899; that on page 254 is from a *Reconnaissance of the Golden Northwest* published for the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway Company about 1883. The tackle on page 256 is illustrated in a catalogue issued by Strong, Hackett and Company of St. Paul in 1883.

“We put our boat into the water, rigged up our rods, and went to fishing. I opened the season on that lake by taking a trout, and Stephens soon after hooked and landed one, and here was our first great disappointment: We had been told they were hard fighters and ‘fierce fish.’ After Stephens had landed his I said:

“Well what do you think of them?”

“They are not a bit gamier than a pike-perch [*walleye*] of the same size,’ he replied and I agreed with him.

“They are a beautiful fish with a head, mouth and tail like a speckled trout, body marked and colored like a lake trout, and meat regular salmon color.”

The fishing expeditions of these two men carried them throughout northern Minnesota, to the Red River of the North, and to the streams of Wisconsin. In all these places, they seldom failed in their purpose. Throughout the small book in which Cooley records his journeys, his love of the out-of-doors is obvious and his joy in getting away for even a few hours of fishing is apparent. So it is not surprising that when he was transferred to California in 1894, he continued to fish there, but without the success that had characterized his Minnesota rambles.⁹



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