# HOW FAR WE HAVE COME

Carl Ross

*IN OCTOBER, 1987, the research department of the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) initiated the 20th-century Minnesota radicalism project. The two-year project was designed to research and document the history of radical ideas and movements in the state up to 1960. The study will include all shadings of the spectrum of ideas, organizations, and individuals popularly identified with Minnesota's radical past—in short, an examination of cultural and political pluralism at work in American society. The editors hope that readers with pertinent information will get in touch with Carl Ross, project director, at the James J. Hill House, St. Paul.*

IT WOULD BE inconceivable to reach the end of this century without being able to document an aspect of history that has been a central fact of 20th-century life and a major preoccupation of our politics and culture during four decades of the Cold War. We should not leave it to the last decade. In fact, the discussion and debate about this recent past have already begun.[1]

The primary purpose of the 20th-century radicalism project is to strengthen MHS collections through oral history interviews, by acquiring new manuscript and printed materials, and by creating a bibliographical guide to existing sources. The project is also intended to stimulate research, discussion, and publication by scholars in various disciplines.

We began this project conscious of two requirements. First, we could not succeed without the cooperation of other institutions and individual scholars. We now have a substantial group of project associates, a number of whom are doing research on related subjects. Co-operation is being developed with the Iron Range Research Center, the Minnesota Jewish Historical Society, the Norwegian-American Historical Association, the archive of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, and with scholars at the University of Minnesota, Macalester College, Metropolitan State University, Moorhead State University, and others.

Second, we needed the trust and willingness to cooperate of individuals whose experience included Minnesota's radical past. Former radicals have responded enthusiastically with few reservations, partly because this project is sponsored by the Minnesota Historical Society but also because members of the "old left" are anxious to have their place in history acknowledged. Individuals among them have been asked to join our steering committee, to help with specific projects, to set up oral history interviews, and to locate relevant materials for possible acquisition. These people offer a unique perspective, the viewpoints of those who know our research subject from the inside.

The project has also been able to draw from an abundant literature on Minnesota's experience with Farmer-Labor politics and radicalism. This literature is especially strong on the history of factional battles and political maneuvers within the Farmer-Labor movement but weak on labor history, ethnic radicalism, Minnesota co-operatives, the Minnesota socialist and communist movements, and the impact of radicalism on the social, intellectual, and cultural development of Minnesota.[2]

[1] See, for example, a weekly 17-part series of articles by Eric Black re-examining the Cold War era in the *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis) from June 6 to Sept. 26, 1988, which will soon be available in book form.

This editorial is a revised version of a paper given at the Northern Great Plains History Conference held in Eveleth, Sept. 22 through Sept. 24, 1988.

[2] The most significant publications include George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (Reprint ed., St. Paul: MHS Press, 1987); Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (Reprint ed., St. Paul: MHS Press, 1985); Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979); John Earl Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's DFL Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Steven J. Keillor, *Hjalmar Petersen of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1987); Meridel Le Sueur, *Crusaders: The Radical Legacy of Marian and Arthur Le Sueur* (Reprint ed., St. Paul: MHS Press, 1984); and Lowell K. Dyson, *Red Harvest: The Communist Party*

# A Report on the 20th-Century Radicalism in Minnesota Project

Extensive primary sources on radicalism exist at the MHS as well as other libraries and archives. A survey of the society's library holdings, including some uncatalogued materials, is now complete with the help of project volunteers and MHS staff, but the major task of evaluating the MHS newspaper and manuscript collections still lies ahead. By the end of this project we expect to identify the most relevant materials and prepare an annotated bibliography. In the process we will learn more about where the weaknesses and gaps may lie. The acquisition of new sources for research is a main goal—not only to confirm what we have learned but also to extend research into new areas.

What we could not know before this project began was whether still-significant items and new information could be found. We had good reason to be skeptical of how much survived several decades of neglect and the wholesale destruction of papers during the McCarthy era by radicals themselves. We have had modest but significant success. For example, the Minneapolis Communist bookshop, in the process of housecleaning, would have thrown out old boxes containing papers of Sam K. Davis, Communist and labor editor, whose main collection of material had burned years ago in a garage fire. We got these papers because bookstore staff had been informed about our project. We located two generations of one family's papers dating from the founding of the Communist party in 1919 because we started oral history interviews. The papers of the Cloquet Co-operative Society's store, largest and longest lived of all the Finnish co-ops, were recovered because we asked the Carlton County Historical Society staff if they would make inquiries about the papers' existence two years after the store closed. Perhaps the nearest thing to a miracle happened when we began a search for copies of the *Two Harbors Socialist*, a search that led to the discovery of a number of bound volumes of this newspaper covering several years before 1919.

An aggressive acquisition policy will succeed when a lot of people outside of the academic world become convinced that radicalism is a legitimate and significant subject for historical preservation. The news release sent out by the MHS to announce the project, three radio interviews we were invited to do, and distribution of our project brochure have brought many responses that may lead to new acquisitions.

FOR A LOCAL STUDY of radicalism in an urban industrial community we chose the Duluth area. The results have been gratifying. Oral history interviews have been done with men and women activists in building the local CIO in the 1930s and 1940s. Research was initiated to document radical politics and labor struggles in Duluth and in nearby Two Harbors, which had a socialist city administration for nearly 15 years. The trail has led back to the World War I period, the impact of the Russian Revolution on the socialist movement, and the postwar Red Scare. It also led to information showing Duluth to be a more significant center of socialist influence than we had supposed.

We now have, for example, a profile of Jack Carney, Duluth's most distinguished and controversial radical during the World War I era. Virtually unknown to Minnesotans, Carney was a Cambridge-educated Irishman, colleague of James Larkin, friend of the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey. He led local socialists, largely Swedish workers, into the left wing of the Socialist party and then into the Communist Labor party of Minnesota which he founded in 1919. His colleague, Carl Haglund, who had migrated from Sweden just four years earlier, became Minnesota secretary of the Communist Labor party.[3]

*and American Farmers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). This list does not, of course, include dissertations, monographs, and articles by scholars and journalists too numerous to mention.

[3] For several years Carney, a flamboyant and charismatic figure, edited *Truth*, official organ of the Socialist party, published in Duluth from 1917 to 1922. Articles in *Truth*, the local Duluth press, court records, and other materials turned up by Virginia Hyvarinen for the project document a large slice of local radical history and of Carney's career. Carney was tried and convicted in Duluth on a charge of obstructing recruiting for the U.S. army in Siberia in 1920; the verdict was overturned by the appeals court.

With support from the St. Louis County Historical Society, the Northeast Minnesota Historical Center, and some members of the University of Minnesota-Duluth and the local labor movement, our work begun in Duluth may eventually result in a program to complete a history of the Duluth working people and labor movement. Until now most historical work in that city emphasized its East End, originally home of the industrial magnates who dominated the local steel industry as well as the Mesabi Range iron mines.

Oral history was our over-all priority during the project's first year. There was little room for flexibility in choosing interviewees since we had to record the oldest survivors first. To date we have transcribed 3,000 pages of taped interviews that dealt with a variety of subjects from the 1930s and 1940s: demonstrations of unemployed workers, farm protests and "penny sales," union organization including the truck drivers' strike of 1934 and the WPA workers' strike of 1939, the Minnesota Artists and the Minneapolis Theater unions, and experiences of Communists in the armed forces during World War II. The interviews reveal how radicalism energized movements of protest and labor organization; they also provide insights explaining the relative success and new prominence of the radicals in the labor and farm movements of that period. The interviews add to our knowledge of how radical culture and solidarity promoted cohesion within radical movements and their ability to attract a following.

There are a variety of questions that remain on the role of women, the ethnic aspect of radicalism, and the role of red-baiting and anti-Semitism in Minnesota politics. New priorities for the coming year are being set. We want to explore more thoroughly the impact of radicalism on the arts and literature in Minnesota, including the various New Deal era workers' education and arts programs.

THE PROJECT PLAN anticipated that the ethnic roots of Minnesota radicalism had to be better documented and understood. We decided to focus on the experiences of four groups—Minnesotans of Norwegian, Swedish, Jewish, and South Slav descent. Perhaps the central questions relate to Minnesota's largest ethnic group—the Scandinavians. While Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians had distinct historical differences, they also had considerable overlap in Minnesota's political history. What is the radical history of these groups? How much has it to do with the prominence of Social Democracy in Scandinavia?[4]

Historians refer in passing to the prominence of Scandinavians in Minnesota Farmer-Laborism but seldom document the significant role of ethnics in such movements. This is true even of the well-researched 1981 MHS study, *They Chose Minnesota.* Among other reasons this may reflect a serious lack of documentary sources for research.[5]

It is only on Minnesota Finnish Americans that extensive primary source materials dealing with radicalism have been identified and collected, mainly at the Immigration History Research Center of the University of Minnesota. The studies of radicalism among Finnish Americans show them active in the left wing in the northeast Minnesota labor movement, the co-operative movement, and the Socialist party, the IWW, and the Communist party. We propose to use the Finnish experience as a paradigm to raise questions that may provide insights into the history of those other groups.[6]

[4] In January, 1936, Marquis Childs published *Sweden—the Middle Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press), suggesting that Sweden's experience with co-operative enterprises and government policies we now identify as the "Welfare State" might prove a good guide to America in the midst of the economic and political crisis of the 1930s. The book was widely circulated and discussed. The Swedish blueprint for the co-operative commonwealth, endorsed in 1934 by the Farmer-Labor party platform and Governor Olson, certainly seemed like a palatable alternative to the Marxist concept that John Strachey, the British Marxist, had set out in his contemporaneous book *The Coming Struggle for Power* (New York: Covic, Fried, 1933). The comparison is not inappropriate since Strachey had arrived in Minneapolis early in 1935 to challenge Olson to a debate, which Olson quietly declined.

[5] Larry Remele makes this point about ethnic radicalism in his introduction to the reprint edition of *Political Prairie Fire.* A departure to some extent is Keillor's biography of Hjalmar Petersen, which deals at some length with Petersen's Danish origins. Typical of the general literature is Arthur Naftalin, "The Tradition of Protest and the Roots of the Farmer-Labor Party," *Minnesota History* 35 (June, 1956): 53–63, which says that "Since the 1890s . . . members of the Scandinavian nationalities have played a predominant role in Minnesota protest politics." Why this was the case is not considered or documented.

[6] These studies include several papers in *The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: A New Perspective* (Turku, Finland: Institute for Migration, 1975), ed. Michael G. Karni *et al.* : "The Finns in the copper and iron ore mines of the western Great Lakes region, 1864–1905," by Matti E. Kaups; "The development of Finnish consumers' cooperatives in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, 1864–1905," by Arnold Alanen; "From socialism to industrial unionism (IWW): Social factors in the emergence of left-labor radicalism among Finnish workers on the Mesabi, 1911–19," by Douglas Ollila, Jr.; and "Struggle on the coop-

*RADICAL LEADERS Vincent R. Dunne (left), veteran of the 1934 Minneapolis teamsters strike and leader of the Socialist Workers party, and Carl Ross, Communist party official, pictured at a 1957 meeting at the Twin City Labor Forum.*

Recently there has been a turn toward research in the urban history of Scandinavian Americans by scholars in Scandinavia and America working together. A book of essays and biographical studies about Swedish radicals in America is being translated into English; a study including Duluth is under way on the Scandinavian labor movement in America; and the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, at our suggestion, has published in its newsletter an appeal for donations of manuscript and print materials documenting Swedish-American labor and radical history.[7]

Last year the Norwegian-American Historical Association published *Marcus Thrane, Norwegian Radical in America*. The book opens a window on radical activity among 19th-century Norwegians, free thinkers, and various Scandinavian societies, including a section of the International Workingmen's Association. Thrane, Norway's first important socialist leader, emigrated to America in 1864. He wrote and published exclusively in the Norwegian language, so his work remained unknown to the outside community.[8] Although Thrane's paper, *Dagslyset*, was printed for a while in Becker, Minnesota, it is not clear what direct influence he may have had in the state. But several newspapers and periodicals sympathetic to the Knights of Labor, socialism, and labor organization were published in Minnesota by both Swedes and Norwegians in the 1880s and 1890s. We know that Minneapolis Local 7 of the AFL Carpenters Union, still existing today, was founded in 1892 by a group of Swedish socialists. Scandinavian workers' societies were established, and by the end of the century Scandinavian radicals appeared to be affiliating with the Socialist Labor party.[9]

We can take as a working hypothesis that two significant changes occurred in Minnesota Scandinavian working-class life around the turn of the century. The

erative front: The separation of Central Cooperative Wholesale from Communism," by Michael G. Karni. A major source on Finnish radicalism in Minnesota is Auvo Kostiainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism, 1917-1924* (Turku, Finland: Institute for Migration, 1978); Carl Ross, *The Finn Factor in American Labor, Culture and Society* (New York Mills: Parta Printers, 1977) provides a useful overview.

[7] The Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center in Rock Island, Ill., is doing a study with Uppsala University in Sweden on the interaction of Swedish Americans with other ethnic groups and of the Scandinavian labor movement in America that will include Duluth and several other American cities.

[8] See Terje I. Leiren, *Marcus Thrane, a Norwegian Radical in America* (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1987), 3–16, 28–33, 99, 107–111.

[9] Michael Brook, interviewed by Steven Benson of KUOM, University of Minnesota radio station, and transcribed by the project, discusses the SLP affiliation of Swedes.

first was a shift in employment: men went into new occupations that enlarged and strengthened their trade union base and influence in the growing labor political movement; women moved out of domestic service into factory employment and service industries.[10] The second development was the influx of immigrants already influenced by the rise of the labor and socialist movement in Sweden and Norway. The new immigration, with leadership already committed to socialism or syndicalism in the old country, benefited the Socialist party and the IWW.[11]

Descriptions of immigrant life in Minneapolis in the early years of the century record an atmosphere of free-wheeling debates and intellectual discussions among Scandinavian workers centered on public parks and radical halls. A Swedish federation of the Socialist party was established with strong branches in Minneapolis, Duluth, and St. Paul; a Norwegian- and Swedish-language radical press emerged. Among them was *Gaa Paa*, published in Minneapolis from 1904 to 1925 and described as "the reddest and most radical of the Norwegian papers."[12]

Documentation of this working-class radicalism is slim, resting mostly on general sources rather than on direct records of the movements or upon the Scandinavian-language press that ought to be singled out for attention by scholars who have the language qualifications and interest. It will take a good deal of co-operative effort to identify information in existing libraries and archives and to seek new materials.

New avenues for project research are opened up by historian Carl Chrislock's *Ethnicity Challenged*, which includes persuasive evidence that Norwegians were the backbone of the radical Nonpartisan League that laid the foundation of Minnesota's Farmer-Labor party. Chrislock cites a letter by Minnesota Senator Knute Nelson in 1920: "The truth is, there is no use disguising it, the Norwegians are at the bottom of our political troubles in the N. W. The Norwegians put the nonpartisan league into power in North Dakota & they are at the bottom of our troubles in Minnesota. . . . I see the same miserable spirit is prevailing there [in Norway] among the various labor organizations." In this Chrislock sees a possible combination of influences at work: economic concerns of "wheat-marketing and trade-union recognition," "the influence of Scandinavian communal political and cooperative tradition," as well as a reaction to the wartime loyalty crusade directed against ethnic groups including the Norwegians and Swedes in Minnesota.[13]

The year the NPL swept across the region like a political prairie fire, 1916, was also the year socialists in Minneapolis captured City Hall, an election in which *Gaa Paa* spoke for the Norwegian radicals in support of

[10] This hypothesis may facilitate further research into Scandinavian working-class history in Minnesota. It is substantiated by personal knowledge of Minneapolis labor history and conversations with Robert J. Kelly; by current research of Susanna Frenkel in Two Harbors; by a clipping file of articles on the Duluth Street Railway strike of 1912; and by some membership records of the Duluth Street Railway Local Union. The two largest industrial employers in south Minneapolis, with its concentration of Scandinavian working-class residents, were the manufacturing plant of Minneapolis Moline tractor and farm implement company and the Milwaukee Railroad shops and yards. Verification would depend on further research.

[11] Among the many immigrant Scandinavian radicals who played important parts in Minneapolis were: Carl Skoglund, who had joined the Social Democratic party in Sweden, was an active participant in the 1922 railway strike, state secretary of the Communist party in the mid-1920s, and subsequently a leader of the 1934 teamster strike and of the Socialist Workers party; Walfrid Engdahl, a founder of the syndicalist movement in Sweden, who was active in the IWW, edited the local IWW newspaper *Allarm* with Skoglund from 1916 to 1918, and remained an active member of Carpenters Local 7 until recent times; Walter Frank, an immigrant from Sweden, business agent for many years of the Minneapolis Lathers Union, and a militant left-wing leader of the Minneapolis Central Labor Union from the post-World War I period into the 1940s; Swan Assarson, an immigrant from Sweden, who moved to Minneapolis about 1934 from Chicago to organize a Scandinavian Workers Club and remained to organize the left-led Local 665 of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union and to participate in the leadership of the Communist party in the late 1930s and the 1940s. Information on Skoglund and Engdahl is from oral history interviews; transcriptions in project files. The author and Kelly are familiar with Frank's history in the labor movement; both knew Assarson well. Carl Haglund, secretary of the Communist Labor party and an immigrant from Sweden about 1916, is identified as such in the Duluth newspapers.

[12] Interviews with Skoglund by Tom O'Connell and Steve Trimble; interview with Engdahl by Steve Benson, KUOM; a letter to Sweden quoted by Benson—all in project files. It is likely that research in the collections of letters by Scandinavian immigrants to correspondents in the Old Country would reveal a great deal more about Scandinavian-American radical culture. For a listing of the labor/radical press in the Scandinavian languages published in Minnesota in the 19th century and early 20th century, see Dirk Hoerder and Christiane Harzig, eds., *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s-1970s*, Vol. I (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987).

[13] Carl H. Chrislock, *Ethnicity Challenged, The Upper Midwest Norwegian-American Experience in World War I*

the Socialist candidate Thomas Van Lear.[14] The two events symbolized a maturing farmer-labor unity in which Scandinavian radicals, both rural and urban, played a considerable role.

THE PROJECT thus far has less information on radicalism among Minnesota Jews and South Slavs. With the Jews this history is difficult to document because of the virtual disappearance of the working class that cherished a radical tradition, nourished by Yiddish culture. As late as 1947 almost 50 percent of Minneapolis Jews were employed in blue-collar occupations, but this figure dropped to less than 10 percent by 1971. After the second and third generations moved to respected professional and middle-class status in the community, only a few survivors represented the earlier years. The Minnesota Jewish Historical Society has only recently begun to document this past.

Jewish involvement in Minnesota labor and radical activity and culture in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth came naturally to many immigrants already familiar in Eastern Europe with the socialist Jewish Labor Alliance (Bund) and Yiddish culture. They built a "vibrant network of cultural, fraternal, and educational institutions and successfully attracted a number of second-generation followers." From 1915 through the 1940s the North Side Labor Lyceum was the center of their Minneapolis activities. They were active workers in electing Thomas Van Lear in 1916 and involved with the early Farmer-Labor movement. With the rest of the Jewish community and the progressive labor movement they challenged anti-Semitism and job discrimination and rallied to the struggle against Nazism in World War II. A focal point for rediscovering this history is to recognize that it is truly a very personal recent family history. It can also be found by reconstructing the past of institutions like the Labor Lyceum and Workmen's Circle and writing the biographies of significant men and women activists of the labor and radical movement who fought long and hard for the victories won on the hard road to the present era.[15]

The participation of Minnesota South Slavs in labor and radical movements remains largely unresearched and undocumented although Slovenes, Croatians, and Serbians have comprised a significant portion of the work force in the mining, steel, and meat-packing industries of northeastern Minnesota, South St. Paul, Austin, and Albert Lea. The key to unlocking this history may lie in exploring a seeming paradox. On the Minnesota iron ranges it was the Finns who led in the 1907 and 1916 mine strikes, and in these pioneer organizing efforts they took the brunt of defeats and blacklists. With the militants driven out of the mines onto farms in the surrounding countryside and the Finnish community seriously divided, the Finns were left behind in winning union and political leadership. In contrast, the South Slavs, some of them strikebreakers in the 1907 strike, became much involved in 1916 when a coalition of labor and middle-class supporters favored the strike. Relatively united around their fraternal and civic organizations (such as the mildly socialist Slovenian Fraternal Benefit Society and Croatian Fraternal Union), they began a steady rise to labor leadership and public office, devising successful political strategies to wrest control of local government, schools, and municipal life from the "Steel Trust." They maintained a cohesive and united ethnic community. We find new evidence of this in a study describing community life and culture among South Slavs in Chisholm and detailing the effective activity of the "Associated Units," a political secret society in Chisholm with 1,800 members of whom 1,000 were South Slavs. This suggests new directions for research and also an imperative need for more comparative work on ethnic experiences.[16]

TWENTIETH-CENTURY RADICALISM draws on the strong 19th-century legacy of socialist ideas and activity. With the evolution of Minnesota's diverse agricultural and industrial economy and its particular mix of incoming immigrants, the state's radicalism emerged as part of the groundswell of agrarian protest, militant

(Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1981); see p. 116 for the citation on Knute Nelson, p. 105 for citation on Scandinavian voting behavior in the 1918 campaign of Charles Lindbergh, Sr., for governor.

[14] See David Paul Nord, "Minneapolis and the Pragmatic Socialism of Thomas Van Lear," *Minnesota History* 45 (Spring, 1976): 2–10.

[15] References to the economic status of Minnesota Jews and to their labor and radical institutions are drawn largely from my personal recollections and from the chapter by Hyman Berman in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1981), 499, 500–503. The Jewish Labor Alliance of Russia, Poland, and Lithuania was founded in 1897 and was the first Marxist political group organized in the Russian empire. It spawned trade unions throughout the Pale, led strikes, and conducted clandestine political actions.

[16] Frank Blatnik, "Culture Conflict: A Study of the Slovenes in Chisholm, Minnesota" (Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1942), 142–151, 152–157, 158–180.

labor organizing, and populist politics that swept through the whole Midwest from the 1870s to the turn of the century. Studies of Minnesota politics trace the tradition of Farmer-Laborism back to this era, most particularly to the 1880s when the Farmers Alliance and the Knights of Labor challenged the status quo.[17]

The late 19th century was, after all, the period of the Haymarket episode and eight-hour strikes in Chicago of 1886. Edward Bellamy's popular utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, depicting a new socialist society, was published two years later and read by hundreds of thousands. As early as the 1870s co-operatives were forming and flourishing among dairy and grain farmers, taking root as well in some urban communities in the 1890s. The utopian socialist ideas of men like English industrialist Robert Owen and the German socialist theoretician Ferdinand LaSalle, on which the co-operative movement was based in both Europe and America, gained currency. The phrase "Co-operative Commonwealth," used by generations of Minnesota radicals to define their ultimate goal, had already entered the political vocabulary. It remained through the 1930s and 1940s a symbol of the impact that the radicals had on Minnesota's political culture.[18]

We have uncovered much in the first year of the Minnesota radicalism project. But the time is rapidly passing when oral history and other documentation of the American radical past can be acquired. In the ensuing year we hope to build on these beginnings in order to preserve and interpret the rich legacy of Minnesota's radical history.

[17] Naftalin, "Tradition of Protest," 53–63.

[18] Probably the most influential examination of the idea was written by Danish author Laurence Gronlund, *The Co-operative Commonwealth in its Outlines, An Exposition of Modern Socialism* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1884). In an 1890 reprint edition, Gronlund's new introduction claimed that Bellamy's work was inspired by it.

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