
God Called a Woman

by Josephine Benton

Many women have served the Seventh-day Adventist denomination as evangelists and pastors during the past century. Most held a ministerial license.

A spot check of only the yearbooks for the year 1904 and then every fifth year from 1920 to 1975, reveals nearly 30 women in North America who were licensed ministers. An additional 21 or more were licensed between 1878 and 1900.

During the 20th century, the largest number of licensed women ministers in North America for any one year was nine during the year 1960. Minnie Sype held a license the longest, working as a licensed minister most of the years from 1904 until 1955.

Not all the women who have served the denomination in ministry have been licensed. Many have held other credentials, and some were lay persons, without any license. But as the following biographies indicate, they performed as ministers.

Lulu Russell Wightman

\$100 REWARD

Will be paid at the Gospel Meeting in the Town Hall, Thursday evening, January 3, 1901, to any person or persons, presenting one or more texts of Scripture that read or prove that the First Day

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of the week or Sunday, is the Sabbath, or that Christ or the Apostles ever observed it as such
LULU WIGHTMAN,
Bible Evangelist¹

Lulu Wightman and her husband, John, raised the money for her first meetings.

Although they later became a ministerial team, it was Lulu Wightman who first entered the ministry. Her husband accompanied and assisted her, getting articles into the local newspapers concerning her meetings and Adventist teachings she would be presenting. Lulu Wightman later entered the paid ministry, but not without opposition. About the time of her transition from self-supporting work to conference work, J.W. Raymond, a minister and a member of the conference committee, wrote to a conference officer concerning Lulu Wightman, "So it would seem that she has gone into ministerial work. But somehow I feel a proclivity of averseness to such procedure."² However, more than once it was Raymond who was called in to baptize Lulu Wightman's candidates or to organize a church that she has raised up.

In 1904, soon after he was licensed as a minister, John Wightman wrote to the New York Conference president urging that his wife be ordained to the gospel ministry. That year was a good one for the Wightmans in ministry. A New York Conference report for the year shows the Wightmans leading the conference in the number of members added to churches, with a total of 27. It is interesting that this number is placed on the

line by the name of Lulu Wightman, rather than by the name of her husband. The next highest number of added members reported is 12, credited to Mrs. D.C. Smith, a Bible worker.

Concerning the Wightmans' work, S.H. Lane, the conference president, wrote to "My dear Brother Raymond" in June 1904: "They had 100 out last Sunday night. They are at a place called Lakeville a few miles from Avon. Nine are keeping the Sabbath at Avon."³ A few weeks later this note appeared in the New York Conference paper:

LAKEVILLE

August 21 the church of Avon was organized with a membership of fourteen. Particulars will be forwarded a week later. Hastily we write.

John S. Wightman
Lulu Wightman⁴

The Wightmans asked for God's blessing in their work and then did diligently what they could to cooperate. During the year 1904 Lulu Wightman preached 147 sermons and John Wightman, 140. They each reported visiting more than 800 families.

In December John Wightman received a letter with a negative response about ordination for his wife. Subsequently John was ordained, though Lulu remained a licensed minister.⁵

Jessie Weiss Curtis

Miss Jessie M. Weiss, of Kingston, daughter of a well-known merchant of Wilkes-Barre, is stirring the countryside in the vicinity of Drums of Luzerne County with an evangelistic campaign in which she is doing most of the preaching.

Stirred with the desire to give the gospel to the people, Miss Weiss secured a tent, and with the aid of two men pitched it on the C.A. Straw farm, and people are flocking by the hundreds to hear her. Coming from a radius of twenty miles, there have been as many as 110 automobile loads at a single service.

It is the first evangelistic campaign that Miss Weiss has ever conducted, and her success is very apparent from the way in which the crowds come night after night, arriving in time to join in the old-time congregational song-service, and remaining until the preaching service is concluded.

With the skill of a clergyman of long years experience, Miss Weiss declares that she will teach no

doctrine but what she can substantiate from the Word of God. Her repertoire of subjects reaches out over a wide range.

Methodists, Baptists and Lutherans, who have churches in the community are regular attendants.⁶

As this story indicates, a Seventh-day Adventist woman named Jessie Weiss held her first series of evangelistic meetings during the year 1927 in the vicinity of Drums, Pennsylvania. She started holding evangelistic meetings because, as the article from a newspaper in a neighboring town noted, she was "stirred with the desire to give the gospel to the people."

Jessie Weiss had been educated at Battle Creek College. According to one of her still-living nephews, Jack Davis, Miss Weiss was admitted at the age of 14—the youngest student that had been so accepted—to study nursing. Later she changed her curriculum to study for the ministry and Bible work.

Jessie Weiss married a Seventh-day Adventist widower who was a contractor. As Jessie Weiss Curtis she spent many years in evangelistic and pastoral work in the Pennsylvania Conference. According to Jack Davis, many interns began their ministry under Jessie Curtis. By the time the conference president entrusted Curtis with the responsibility of training new ministers, she had become an experienced and well-equipped evangelist. Some of her equipment included visual aids made of bed sheets that had been painted by an artist—42 charts in all, including the beast of Daniel 7 and the image of Daniel 2. Jack Davis recalled that he had hung these charts many times at his aunt's meetings and also had run the stereopticon to show slides. "I thought her work was as normal as anything," says Davis. "After all, the Lord chose a woman as His prophet for the last days. The Lord doesn't care who does the preaching, as long as the person's heart is filled with the Holy Spirit."

There were 80 converts from meetings at Drums. The farmer who lent the land for the

tent to be pitched, later “donated the property, and they build the Drums, Pennsylvania, church on the same place where they had the tent meetings,” according to Davis.

Sarah Kaplan

When Sarah Celeste Kaplan accepted Christ, she began searching for ways to share the news of salvation that had brought her from Judaism to Christianity. At the back of her flower shop was a balcony she redecorated with plans of turning it into a tearoom. But after her conversion Kaplan scrapped the plan for what might have been a lucrative addition to her floral business, and instead christened the balcony “The Celeste Chapel.”

A friend gave her a pulpit. Kaplan did not own a Bible, but about the time she started holding services, she received one from a Christian woman who worked for the Jewish people of Philadelphia.

At this point, Kaplan did not know much about Scripture. She would share, however,

One of Kaplan’s relatives, considering her acceptance of Christianity as evidence that she was losing her mind, had her kidnapped and placed in a mental institution, from which she was soon released.

what she had just learned and then hurry back to Atlantic City—where she had been converted through the ministry of the Salvation Army—to learn more.

One of her relatives, considering her acceptance of Christianity as evidence that she was losing her mind, had her kidnapped and placed in a mental institution. However, she was soon released.

Although she now understood what the cost could be for sharing her faith, Sarah

Kaplan continued her chapel services, talking to people and distributing literature in her flower shop. Later she conducted a radio program called the “Celeste Chapel Service.” “I felt that I had a message to the world. I could not keep it to myself for it overwhelmed me. I had found the Pearl of Great Price and I desired to share it with everyone. . . .” she wrote later.⁷

In her radio mail Kaplan received a letter from a Christian woman who called her attention to the seventh-day Sabbath. Until that time she had never heard of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Kaplan read the letters and other literature carefully. Then she passed the information on through her chapel services and radio broadcast. “I was really proclaiming the third angel’s message,” she later said. Soon she decided that she was breaking God’s law. No one, she recalls, “either Jew or Gentile, had ever spoken to me about keeping the true Sabbath before.”

I had been taught as a child to “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” I knew it was written in the Scriptures. Also, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou serve and obey.” I also knew that God required obedience more than sacrifice and, therefore, in order to be true to God, my decision to obey the true Sabbath was quickly made. (Exodus 20:8.) Then I closed my store on Friday night, on the eve of Sabbath. On Saturday I let my help stay off and closed up my store and this proved to be a mighty witness for truth to both Jew and Gentile in that busy thoroughfare where my flower shop was located.⁸

After becoming a Seventh-day Adventist, Sarah Kaplan continued her ministries in Philadelphia for a time. Although she was not a conference minister, she was a very active lay pastor. She collected tens of thousands of dollars for Ingathering in order to bring funds into the Jewish work.

In time Kaplan felt called to work more specifically for Jewish people. She sold her flower shop and moved to Miami Beach. Perhaps partly because she had been converted in a beach town, she went right onto the beaches to reach people for Christ. Now 92 years old, Sarah Kaplan lives in an Adventist retirement home in New York.

She still ministers through her speaking and singing, through contributions and distributing Christian literature.

Anna Knight

Anna Knight was born to a recently freed slave mother in Mississippi during the year 1874. Her family lived as poor sharecroppers in Jasper County until her mother managed to buy 80 acres and homestead another 80 adjoining acres. With a horse, cow and yoke of oxen the family grew all their food along with cotton as a cash crop.

As a child Knight made a blackboard by nailing boards together and blackening them with wet soot; she found natural chalk in the mud bank. What she learned, she endeavored to teach her siblings, nieces and nephews. To practice writing what she had put on the blackboard, they all went out to trace letters or numbers in the sand.

Knight picked cotton to get the 25 cents necessary to subscribe to a paper called "Comfort." In one issue of the paper she saw a notice that precisely fit her own needs, she thought; therefore she copied it verbatim, except for the insertion of her own name. By this time she had learned to write well enough to pen her own letter; it read: "Will some of the cousins please send me some nice reading matter? I would like to correspond with those of my own age."

Knight received 40 responses. One was from Edith Embree, a Seventh-day Adventist working at the *Signs of the Times* office and a member of the young people's literature correspondence band. Over a period of months she sent copies of the *Signs*, tracts and books; she wrote letters, and asked Anna Knight to respond to certain articles.

In her autobiography Anna Knight wrote:

After about six months of this systematic correspondence with Miss Embree, who was sending me literature, I fully accepted the third angel's message. I did not know what I had accepted or what denomination published the papers and tracts which I had been reading. However, I knew it was all in the Bible and believed it.⁹

Despite opposition on the part of her family (they thought she had lost her mind by too much reading), Anna Knight started keeping the Sabbath. She traveled to Tennessee for further instruction and baptism because in the 1890s the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in the South consisted of only a few churches and companies, some widely scattered members, and no conferences—the entire area was designated as a "mission field."

Friends in Chattanooga made it possible for Knight to attend Mount Vernon Academy for a year. After that she attended the new industrial school in Battle Creek to study nursing.

When John Harvey Kellogg encouraged Anna's class to volunteer for self-supporting missionary work, she decided to return to her home in Mississippi to open a school. She found that the opposition to her new faith had died out; her people received her gladly and were willing to cooperate to begin a new school. When the dilapidated log cabin in which the school was housed burned down, Knight organized construc-

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tion of a new building for the second year. Knight had 24 pupils in eight grades, yet she did not limit her work to instructing them. She organized two Sunday schools, one at the school, the other six miles away. After Sunday school she ran adult education programs for people interested in learning to read, write and figure, to cook or can food in improved ways or live according to principles of health and temperance.

At the age of 27, Anna Knight was nominated by Kellogg as a delegate to the 1901 General Conference session. While there, she overheard some nurses talking about the need for missionaries in India. Some good friends agreed to take care of the work that she had been conducting in Mississippi, and in a short time Knight was one of a group of seven on its way to India, the first black woman missionary to go to India from America.

For seven years Anna Knight served as a missionary. Filling the various roles of teacher, nurse, colporteur and Bible worker, she traveled throughout much of India. When she returned home, it was to reactivate the school program she had started in Mississippi.

Later she was given union conference level responsibility as secretary (director) for the home missionary department of the Southeastern Union Conference.¹⁰ After six years she became home missionary secretary of the Southern Union; later she returned to the same post in the Southeastern Union Conference.¹¹

When the Southeastern and Southern unions were combined in 1932 to become the present Southern Union, "Miss Anna Knight was elected as the associate secretary for the home missionary [evangelism], missionary volunteer [youth] and educational departments for this entire territory."¹² She had special responsibility for looking after the work among the black people.

Like any other departmental secretary, Anna Knight taught, organized, administered and preached. Of her work she wrote:

Since 1911 I have kept an itemized record of the work that I have done. I had to make monthly reports to the conference: therefore, I formed the habit of keeping a daily record. Thinking it might add interest in reporting, I am giving a summary of four items herewith: I have held 9,388 meetings and have made 11,744 missionary visits. My work required the writing of 48,918 letters, and in getting to my appointments I have traveled 554,439 miles. This report does not include mileage to or from my mission field, India, nor does it include any miles covered in my travels there.¹³

In her 90s she was still involved in the work of the church. In 1971 at the age of 98, Anna Knight was presented the General Conference Department of Education Medallion of Merit Award.

Marinda Day Sype

Born Marinda Day on April 18, 1869, she was known throughout her life as "Minnie." She was the first born of 10 children on an Iowa farm. Although the eldest children were all girls, they had to help their father with the outdoor work. In her autobiography she wrote:

I well remember the wheat-sowing time, when I had to drive the team and harrow the ground. I also helped to plant the corn, sitting on the planter and trying to hit a mark so as to have straight rows. . . In the fall we had to gather corn. It was not always pleasant to pick on frosty mornings, but as it had to be in the crib before snow, all went out to work.⁷

Although it was necessary to work hard—Minnie Day worked away from home off-and-on from the age of 13—the children found a great deal of love in their home. Sometimes their mother read the Bible to her children. As a child Day felt a great longing to know more about God, and cried because she considered herself "wicked." Around the age of 12 she gave her heart to God during an alter call. "That step proved to be a greater blessing to me than any previous experience," she wrote, "but I was not yet satisfied. I wanted to know more. I did not know how to believe."¹⁵

Minnie Day took normal training and became a teacher. "While teaching school in Sand Creek township, Union County, Iowa," she wrote in her autobiography, "I first met Mr. L.P. Sype." Concerning him she wrote:

I had often heard him spoken of as an exemplary young man, and when I met him I was attracted by his temperate habits, as it was very uncommon to find a young man who did not use tobacco. I had vowed that never should a young man puff tobacco smoke in my face. I hated tobacco. I had never associated much with people who used

liquor or tobacco, and even when viewed from a distance, the use of such things seemed very disgusting.

When Mr. Sype asked me to accompany him to a lecture, held at Afton, Iowa, I did so. I found he was of a religious turn of mind, and that he and his parents were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This I thought rather queer, but admired his good Christian principles. From time to time he asked me to accompany him to different places, and as he was often called upon to lead in singing I went with him to protracted meetings. When he asked me to become his wife, I accepted his proposal of marriage, and we were married on March 6, 1889.¹⁶

The newlyweds agreed to disagree in matters of religion, she being a member of the Christian Church and he a Seventh-day Adventist. They respected each other's religion and attended each other's churches.

While attending church with her husband, Sype observed that Adventists studied the Bible diligently; she was impressed with their ability to find texts in the Bible. She began to wonder why she and her husband were keeping different days as the Sabbath, and wondered whether either position could

I loved them all very dearly. They were kind, good old friends, and I had enjoyed many good times with them. As I saw them going one spiritual direction while I was going another, I cried: "Oh, my God! Do you ask this of me?"

be supported from the Bible. She started to look into the matter. This is her record of the experience.

I found the Seventh-day Adventists more than willing to give text after text as proof for seventh-day observance. I visited my own minister and asked for reasons for the observance of the first day of the week. To my surprise I got no satisfactory answer. This was indeed a disappointment, as I had secretly hoped to win my husband to my way of thinking on the Sabbath question.¹⁷

After several months of study, Minnie Sype was convinced that she must keep the seventh day as the Sabbath. It was not an easy choice. After she had attended a seventh-day service attended by only a few people, on Sunday morning she stood in her doorway and watched her neighbors—her friends—going to church.

I loved them all very dearly. They were kind, good old friends, and I had enjoyed many good times with them. As I saw them going one way, while I was going another, I cried: "Oh, my God! Do you ask this of me?" I turned and walked to the sitting-room. I knelt down, took my Bible, and in an earnest prayer said: "Lord, this question of the Sabbath must be settled forever. You know I do not want to be separated from my friends, but I do realize that they can never save me. I must take your word as my guide."¹⁸

Minnie Sype knelt, opened her Bible to the Ten Commandments, and studied them over carefully. "I can never become a Christian and knowingly break one of these commandments," she said to herself, "and the fourth commandment says: 'The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God.'" Sype determined that she would keep the Sabbath.

When she joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church, she felt a new concern for other people:

As the truths of the Bible began to unfold in such a wonderful way, a burden for souls rested upon me. I loved the farm, I loved my home and children, but I must also work for my fellow-men. It seemed to me I could not see people careless and unconcerned about their soul's salvation without making an effort to help them.¹⁹

Through her prayers, distribution of literature and teaching of Bible truths, Sype had the joy of seeing several members of her family and several others join her in her faith.

When the Sypes moved to Oklahoma to homestead, they decided to raise up a Seventh-day Adventist church in their area since there was none. Although she had never preached before, Minnie Sype—studying more diligently than ever—held evangelistic meetings in the neighborhood. Her husband led the song service, assisted in various ways and did the housework.

When the Oklahoma Conference sent a small stipend to the Sypes in appreciation for what they had done, they were surprised but very grateful, as the homestead provided only a meager living.

Then came an invitation from the conference for Minnie Sype to join its working force as an evangelist. The family prayed and considered carefully this unexpected call. Nevertheless, it seemed that God was leading in events that had occurred. The Sypes agreed that Minnie should accept the call.

Several new churches formed in the Oklahoma Conference as a result of the Sypes' efforts. Mr. Sype remained on the farm for a while, but the property was sold so he could give himself more fully to evangelism. He was most helpful, from pitching the tent to leading the singing, from caring for the children to keeping house. In 1906 the family returned to Iowa. In that state, also, several churches were begun by Minnie Sype.

From 1904, Minnie Sype served as a licensed minister for more than 50 years. Scores were won to Christ through her tent

meetings and personal work. These converts were baptized by the ordained men of the conferences in which she worked.²⁰

Licensing of Adventist women ministers is not a new concept. At least 50 women have served as licensed ministers in the

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Seventh-day Adventist Church during the past 100 years. They have worked as pastors and evangelists with great success as the preceding vignettes demonstrate. The church today would benefit by licensing the women God calls to the ministry.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. From a handbill printed by the Ontario Repository-Messenger Print, 407 Main Street, Canandaigua, N.Y.

2. Letter from J.W. Raymond, Cuba, Allegheny Co., N.Y., to Elder P.J. Henne [manuscript poorly legible], Rome, N.Y., June 1896.

3. Letter from S.H. Lane to J.W. Raymond, June 29, 1904.

4. *The New York Indicator*, August 24, 1904.

5. Lulu Wightman is listed among the ordained ministers in the 1908 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. Probably this is an accident, though someone may have believed that she was an ordained minister that year.

6. Quoted from a Hazelton, Pennsylvania, newspaper clipping taken from the scrapbook of Jack and Joan Davis, 1927.

7. Sarah Kaplan, *The Remarkable Conversion of a Jewess; The Personal Experience of Sarah Celeste Kaplan* (privately published), p. 12.

8. Sarah Kaplan, *How I Became a Seventh-day Adventist* (privately published), p. 2.

9. Anna Knight, *Mississippi Girl: An Autobiography* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association 1952), p. 27.

10. General Conference Committee Minutes 11-2, p. 496.

11. Harold D. Singleton, "Vanguard of Torchbearers," *The North American Informant*, XXII (March-April 1968), p. 1.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Minnie Sype, *Life Sketches and Experiences in Missionary Work* (Hutchinson, Minnesota: Seminary Press, 1916), p. 16.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

20. Two individuals state that on separate occasions one of their parents was baptized by Sype; however, a daughter of Minnie Sype denies she ever baptized (personal communications).

Breaking Up Is Never Easy

Merikay McLeod. *Betrayal*. (P.O. Box 362, Loma Linda, CA: Mars Hill Publications, Inc., 1985), 356 pp., index. \$11.50 (paper).

Reviewed by Winona Howe

The poster said that Merikay would be at the bookstore between 2:00 and 4:00 in the afternoon, autographing copies of her book. I went, because I was frankly curious about her. I wanted to meet the woman who had written *Betrayal*, although I wasn't sure that I wanted to read it. All my friends had already read the book; they assured me that once it was opened, it could not be put down. Apparently, everyone I knew had read it through in one sitting. But I was curious to meet the woman who had aroused the ire of Seventh-day Adventist administrators with her manifestly astonishing request back in the 1970s for equal pay for equal work. I could remember when I first started hearing dribblets of information about the case and thinking that in a certain sense the Adventist Church was undergoing a Watergate of its own.

Because of this curiosity, I went to the bookstore—partly to buy *Betrayal*, but mostly to meet Merikay. Surprisingly, I liked her immediately. I half-expected to find someone who deserved my respect, even my admiration, but also someone who would be overly intense, slightly fanatical. Instead, she was warm, friendly and direct.

"Today is the 10th anniversary," she remarked (as she wrote, "Winona, always be true to your best self.'). "Just 10 years ago today, I was fired from Pacific Press."

I didn't quite know whether to offer sym-

pathy for wrongs she had suffered or to congratulate her on the victory and freedom she had finally obtained.

"You're so calm about it," I finally blurted. "Why aren't you bitter?"

"Because it's been 10 years," she replied matter-of-factly as she reached for another book. "If you wanted to see bitter, you should have seen me then. The old truism really is true; time heals all wounds, I guess."

She continued talking, now about her present life, the projects she was working on, her goals for the future. She was alert, interesting and dynamic. Now I wanted to read her book. But, unlike my friends, I found myself unable to read straight through *Betrayal*. The reading was simply too painful.

Merikay's story, the story of *Silver v. Pacific Press Publishing Association*, is presented in diary form; it begins when Merikay, young and naive, bursting with enthusiasm, arrives at Pacific Press "determined to be the best book editor, the most spiritually discerning employee, Pacific Press had ever hired" (p. 5). She is happy in her new job and in her marriage. She loves the Seventh-day Adventist Church and feels nurtured in it as in a family; her faith is strong in God as well as in his designated representatives who head up the church. In these early days at the press, working for and with people she admires personally, spiritually and professionally, she is eager to meet what she sees as the challenges of her job: attracting good writers to the press, upgrading the quality of books published, presenting spiritual messages in attractive and creative forms. It is not long, however, before other challenges become more pressing. When Merikay's husband loses his job and returns to school, she innocently asks for "head-of-household"

pay (feeling that she is functioning in this capacity) and soon, in spite of her boss's testimony that she is "doing superb work in writing and editing for us" (p. 48), Merikay is struggling to survive financially, as well as emotionally and spiritually.

Betrayal is written with passion and honesty. And if, while reading it, I occasionally wished that I were hearing a more balanced presentation with both sides being granted equal time, as it were, I was also forced to admit that the story would then lose the very passion that kept me turning the pages, however reluctantly. For *Betrayal* is a very personal story of breaking up and the anguish that unavoidably accompanies such severings. Moving with Merikay as she gropes her way through a morass of misunderstanding and hostility, it details the breakups in her life as she separates, in turn, from her husband, her profession, and inevitably, from her church.

As Neil Sedaka once sang, "Breaking up is hard to do." The separations that occur in *Betrayal* hurt Merikay of course, but they also hurt those of us who feel strongly committed to the Adventist Church. The pain may come from a personal identification

with Merikay, but it may also come from a realization that even our leaders may have feet of clay. Unfortunately, the thought of our church leadership taking a morally indefensible stance in order to preserve its own authority over its members is not as alien today as it was 15 years ago. The *Silver* case was probably not the first in which a committed Adventist has run afoul of the system by trying to make that very system better; it certainly will not be the last. But it is a case that we should be familiar with; we should try to understand what occurred, for only by understanding will we realize what can happen when an individual takes on the system and what the possible gains and certain losses for both individual and system will be.

The last thing Merikay wrote in my book was a Bible text, Galatians 3:28: "There is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." This obviously wasn't the case in 1975; I hope it is closer to being true today.

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