

The Chinquapin School: A Model For Success

Brad Lamonte

LEE COLLEGE

*I love this school.
I hope it goes on forever.*
-Journal entry of former
Chinquapin senior

On Wallisville Road in the small town of Highlands, Texas, lies an innovative school that is the only one of its type in America—the Chinquapin School. Highlands is about twenty-five miles east of downtown Houston, and for twenty-five years has been the setting of The Chinquapin School, an experiment in college-preparatory education. What started out as little more than a bundle of unselfish hopes has fully flowered into a

dream-come-true for hundreds of underprivileged but bright and motivated students. In the twenty-five years since retired English teacher Robert Moore and his wife, Maxine, created Chinquapin, the Chinquapin School has sent dozens of Houston teenagers written-off as “hopeless” to a number of America’s best universities, including Stanford, Rice, Duke, Notre Dame and many more.¹ Many educators “think giving young teenagers a structured haven in which to live and attend school will boost achievement dramatically.”² Ninety-five percent of Chinquapin’s last four graduating classes are attending a

college or university.³ The fantastic success of the history of the Chinquapin School shows that it is an ideal model for other such projects across Harris County and Texas.

The Chinquapin School is a private, non-profit, accredited college-preparatory school for inner-city Houston youths from the 7th to the 12th grades. Almost all of the students are recommended by Houston Independent School District counselors and principals, though most students learn about the school through word of mouth. Currently at the Chinquapin School, there are nine full-time teachers and 96 students "largely drawn from ghetto and barrio areas of Houston."⁴ The student body is split almost evenly between the genders. Many of the students have parents whose education extends only to the junior high level and who earn an average of \$16,600 a year.⁵ Some kids come to the school knowing only rudimentary English, but all of them have what founder Robert Moore always looked for when recruiting for new students: the "three d's"—desire, drive, and determination. All students accepted by Chinquapin "must show either the ability or potential for academic standing and the willingness to work hard to achieve their goals."⁶ They come to Chinquapin from the worst parts of Houston and leave a few whirlwind years later to the best universities all over America. "These are kids who came from schools where they never knew if their lunch money would be stolen or if they would have drugs

offered to them in the restroom," said development director Ann Smith, "but there's none of that here."⁷ But through all the daily writing and re-writing and sweat, the teachers at Chinquapin always focus their energies on the individual and his or her potential for academic achievement and, most importantly, the only two requirements for graduation: college preparation and acceptance.

Except from September of 1973 to March of 1974 (when the sewer line down Wallisville Road was connected), Chinquapin has always been a boarding school for boys.⁸ Moore said that the importance of boarding the boys was to give them "an environment free from the devious attractions of the neighborhood pushers, hustlers, pimps, and petty thieves."⁹ Being a boarding school, the teachers and students were basically forced to become well-acquainted with each other; Chinquapin teachers and students usually develop close bonds while the boys finish school, bonds that long outlive graduation or distance. "That is one of the advantages for students," said Chinquapin Director William Heinzerling. "If the students run into trouble with their homework, they can talk to the teacher even as late as 10 p.m." The toughest part of the day at Chinquapin is *after* the classes are over. During her years at the school, Maxine Moore was considered a "mother away from home" by all the students, a role now taken up by Kathy Heinzerling. "You can't help it," said Mrs. Moore,

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"After all, you live with them 24 hours a day." There were no girls at the school until 1978, when the first girl enrolled at Chinquapin. The school started busing them *en masse* to the campus every day in 1985. Chinquapin experimented with boarding the girls also, but "it took too much effort to keep them away from the boys" and "brought up a whole new set of concerns," said Kathy Heinzerling. "Girls are more self-disciplined and form better study habits more easily." Presently, twenty-three of the twenty-five top Chinquapin students are girls, which shows that busing them in daily is no hindrance to their academic achievement.

The school is built on the simple Latin motto *Quid Pro Quo*—something for something. The students pay a token fee of five to twenty dollars a week, but more importantly, Chinquapin students do all the necessary chores around the campus. The Spring 1993 Director's Report stated that "the student body is divided into crews which are responsible for the daily maintenance of the buildings and grounds. Crew members also work in the kitchen on a rotating basis." The school has had as many "janitors" as

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students and teachers. "I probably cleaned more toilets and septic tanks and swept more floors than any so-called educator in history," said Mr. Moore. Chinquapin students are taught responsibility through learning to juggle their free time and chores, and all are required to participate in local volunteer projects. About all the free time the kids have is spent either studying or practicing or logging extra work hours at Chinquapin "to give something back." The Chinquapin Interact Club has worked in conjunction with the Highlands Rotary Club and the Bar Area Rehabilitation Center in many activities. Recently, Chinquapin students have "cleaned a beach in Galveston, helped maintain the Lone Star Trail in East Texas, worked on a house with Habitat for Humanity, and cleaned Washington Cemetery, [which was] a

Robert Moore, founder of the Chinquapin School. The school logo features the school's motto, Quid Pro Quo.

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joint project with students from St. John's School." Even with the strong work ethic at the school, visitors are always struck by the sense of "buoyancy, friendliness, and hospitality of the youngsters."

The school day begins for the boys at 6:30 a.m., when they run two quick laps around the soccer field in the back part of the Herzstein Gym. They shower and then eat together in the cafeteria. Chinquapin classes start at 8:00 a.m. and the school-day ends formally at 2:20 p.m. The girls do not arrive on campus from Houston until 8:00 a.m., and they go straight to their first period class. There are four classes, then lunch, then two more. All classes are fifty minutes long. When the school-day ends, the students go immediately to study hall. Study hall lasts until 3:15 p.m., and for the next hour the students do all the chores around the campus and clean up around the buildings. Afterwards, there are sports and everyone is required to participate. On Mondays and Thursdays, the girls practice softball, tennis, or volleyball and leave Chinquapin at 5:15 p.m. They leave the campus on Tuesdays and Thursdays after study hall at 4:30 p.m., and all the students leave on Fridays at 1:30 p.m. Weeknights, seventh- and eighth-grade boys must go to bed at 10:30 p.m., which is lights out in all the dorms. Older boys can study in the library, and often do, and they usually go to sleep after 11:00 p.m.

Class and study hall attendance is compulsory, a far cry from the laxness at the now-defunct "free schools." Chinquapin's success is partly due to the rigid Sam Rayburn-like discipline Moore always gently imposed on his students. His three cardinal rules are: no drinking, no smoking, no drugs. Violation of any of these three rules results in immediate

expulsion—no questions asked. Moore's approach to education was to always be straightforward and respectful to students and "to keep the students active." Moore said, "A kid just wants to be listened to; he does not want any advice." Moore never laid a hand on his students and treated them with the utmost respect. "Out of love," said Moore, "comes self-respect." Most of the smaller rule violations are handled by the Student Committee, which is composed solely of students, not the staff. The usual "sentences" are restrictions from some recreational activities.

Heinzerling said, "I feel that our curriculum here is as good as anything you can find in the best public schools," and many educators believe that the curriculum is also as good or better than that of most private schools, including River Oaks' private St. John's School. As much as possible is covered, from Spanish to calculus to vocabulary. Vocabulary is especially stressed because of Mr. Moore's firm belief that an immaculate vocabulary is vital to any form of social or financial success. All Chinquapin students are required to take a language arts vocabulary course along with the regular English classes. Some of the kinds of sentences the Moores encountered during the early years ranged from "me and him seen it" to "it don't make me no difference" to "Mr. Moe, you done tole us that awready." Day after day, the Chinquapin teachers had no choice but to work frantically just so the students could catch up with their counterparts' reading levels. Students provide their own pens, pencils, and paper. As a part of the emphasis Chinquapin puts on vocabulary and reading, the students publish a newspaper every day, *The Chinquapin Burr*. *The Chinquapin Burr* is

completely written by the students and full of everything from poetry and jokes to yesterday's softball scores and the usual high school gossip.

Chinquapin founder Robert Moore taught at the private St. John's School in River Oaks for eighteen years. (Among his pupils was the witty Texas columnist Molly Ivins.) In 1968, Moore resigned as Chairman of the English Department to start work on his plays for Chinquapin. River Oaks is the wealthiest neighborhood in Houston, and the opulent St. John's School is basically River Oaks' private junior high and high school. The Moores started Chinquapin for two major reasons. One is the gross inequity in education, which had angered them for

on standardized tests because they were naturally "inferior" to white children and that huge classes and virtually no access to any decent facilities were just excuses. But with the fine facilities and excellent teachers at Chinquapin, Chinquapin's top students have achieved astounding SAT scores and can easily compete with St. John's best students, two facts which forever put such theories into grave doubt. "The Moores wanted to give kids that didn't have the same economic background a chance to take college preparatory courses," said Heinzerling, "What it comes down to is, we are a private college-preparatory school for economically deprived kids."

Chinquapin is the name of a tree

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years. Children in the poverty-pocked areas of Houston received an education that was underfinanced and inadequate compared to their richer counterparts in River Oaks. Moore said, "I had begun to realize—it took me awhile—that kids on the east side of Houston do not get college preparation." The second and more important reason was the Moores' desire to prove wrong the theorists that preached white superiority solely because of test scores. Such theorists claimed (and some theorists still do—witness the "new" book *The Bell Curve*, being hailed by conservatives and reactionaries as giving definitive "proof" of such theories) that minorities scored low

common in East Texas and is Algonquin Indian for "large." In East Texas, a "branch of the Chinquapin Creek runs through the Moore's property near Palestine where the school was to be located originally. They wanted Chinquapin to "produce educated citizens and leaders and break the ghetto mold and welfare cycle." The idea was that Chinquapin would be a huge influence on its students, and the children the Moores reached would reach others and create a "ripple effect" that would eventually benefit the communities where the students came from. "The Chinquapin tree," Moore said, "has a prickly purr that covers an edible seed. I decided on that for



Sports are an integral part of the Chinquapin program.

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our mascot early in the game, and when some new teacher reported to me that the [students] wanted to be known as the lions or falcons or whatever, I simply put it on the table as non-negotiable."

The Chinquapin School was started officially on September 1, 1969 ("we had been pushing the starter button for many months before that"), but the basic idea for the school had been with the Moores for years. They "reached a point where there had to be a Chinquapin School—there had to be a place where poor kids . . . could get the kind of education that would give them the option to go on to college if they wanted to." The Moores originally wanted to start "The Chinquapin Branch Ranch School" on their eighty-acres of property in Palestine, Texas (a three hour drive from Houston), but "education authorities, psychologists included, persuaded them that city-bred children could be served better if they were not taken too far from their origins." The Moores also realized that they could not get the funding needed to build and sustain the school so far away from

Houston.

After the decision was made to establish Chinquapin School in Houston rather than Palestine, Mr. Moore went immediately to work and wrote several hundred of his former students for the necessary financial help vital to its success. Luckily, they responded more generously than the Moores had imagined. Since then, about half of the school's donations have come from people who were taught by Moore know of him personally. With the money they received and with a \$250,000 Brown Foundation grant, Moore started the Chinquapin School on four-and-a-half leased acres off Tri-City Beach Road in "an abandoned fishing camp on the north shore of Trinity Bay new Baytown." The entire student body consisted of sixteen boys and the faculty of six Houstonians, "four young bachelors plus Maxine and me." A 12-room, 3-1/2 bath main building and two small cottages made up the entire Chinquapin campus. In those first few weeks, "our *Quid Pro Quo* motto was given birth: Maxine cooked breakfast

for the twenty-some of us, I supervised the toilet flushing detail, Bill Heinzerling headed up the broken -window-glass-and-disabled-lawn-mower task force; in short, it was our school to make or break, and so all of us had to be involved in all of it." In their first year, the Moores took in an additional \$33,000 in contributions, all of which was spent on one-time start-up costs. "We sat under not one but two swords of Damocles," said Mr. Moore, "One was money, the other accreditation. Our long-term survival depended upon our having both." Chinquapin was

eighteen-acre former egg farm on Wallisville Road in Highlands. The high interest rates in 1980 gave the school's leaders a little scare, but they safely weathered it. Most of the money needed to run Chinquapin day-to-day is now donated by churches and civic groups.

Fourteen years after building and leading Chinquapin School, the Moores retired in May, 1983 and William (Bill) Heinzerling, a veteran Chinquapin teacher and one of Mr. Moore's former students at St. John's, became the new director. Heinzerling attended Stanford



Construction of new facilities is on-going at Chinquapin.

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accredited in 1973. Accreditation by the Texas Education Agency "saved us from the jaws of death [and] gave us a cachet of respectability."

Chinquapin faced a financial crisis in 1972. Moore had only \$2,000 in funds and the school's current bills added up to much more. Moore scheduled several committee and board meetings and decided to appeal for financial help. "The response was incredible," Moore said. Within three months, Moore had managed to pay the bills, put a surplus safely away in the bank, and buy the land that Chinquapin School is presently on—an

and Harvard, has a master's degree in English, and spent a year of graduate study in Austria. His wife, Kathy, has a master's degree in biology and teaches at the school. Bill is not only the Chinquapin Director, he also teaches four classes, is the athletic director, chore-team leader, and disciplinarian. Mr. Moore said that Heinzerling "is a truly dedicated and talented man; I would have stayed on forever if Bill hadn't agreed to take it over." Robert and Maxine are now enjoying their retirement in Palestine, Texas, on their beautiful country property. The Moores spend their time reading,

writing, and relaxing after decades of non-stop activity. They occasionally return to Chinquapin to teach a couple of classes, talk with the kids, or, on very special occasions, give the commencement address.

The campus is dotted with buildings that have been moved, built or refurbished on the property. The library, cafeteria, and faculty duplex were all built with money from the Houston Golf Association, which started donating money to Chinquapin in 1979 from its many charity tournaments, and has since been a generous sponsor. "The Houston Golf Association has been a tremendous help to Chinquapin," Heinzerling said. "Without them, the school would probably not be such a success as it is today." HGA funds also built the library and administration building in 1989. The two cinderblock dorms on campus were built with funds from the HGA and The Moody Foundation. Philanthropists Al and Ethel Herzstein have been a great help to the school through their support and financial backing. The Student Center (completed in December, 1977) is a gym with an office and three classrooms on the second floor and was built by a generous grant from the Herzsteins at an approximate cost of \$200,000. In 1970, five buildings were moved from Camp Allen, an Episcopal retreat on Tri-City Beach Road, to the former Chinquapin campus, and in the summer of 1973, when Chinquapin moved to Wallisville Road, all five were moved again to the campus. Also that summer, a large building from St. Jude's Catholic Church, which was at one time a roller rink, was carefully halved and wheeled onto the Wallisville campus. One half of the building was made into a kitchen, and the other half was made into the old library. The sci-

ence building was finished in 1976, with the help of a Brown Foundation gift, "and houses efficiently-designed and well-equipped biology and chemistry labs, as well as a typing room and a mini-classroom where algebra, vocabulary, and piano are taught." With proceeds donated by the HGA and a grant from the Houston Endowment, Inc., two new buildings were added to the campus this year: a girls study room/locker room facility and a faculty duplex. Chinquapin was selected as the PGA Tour's national 1993 Charity of the Year.

The school spends approximately \$6,600 per student, which is comparable to the amount many local private schools spend per student. The only government assistance is a hot lunch program that amounts to about \$19,000 a year. Texas foundation grants make up the largest type of donations for Chinquapin. Exxon has a productive relationship with the school, through its financial donations, donations of chemistry equipment, and tours of its facilities and research laboratories. San Jacinto Hospital

Current Chinquapin director, Bill Heinzerling in his office at the school.

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in Baytown once donated seventy-two roll-up beds for the boys dormitories. Lee College "has been absolutely wonderful to [Chinquapin]." Lee College, a community college in Baytown, has donated science equipment and also provided the high school mathematics/physics teacher for the last fifteen years, both of which are very generous contributions.

From the beginning, Mr. Moore recognized that the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is basically the most important part of college acceptance. "Through it all—," said Moore, "the grammar, the vocabulary, the reading, the composition—I always had one thing in mind: the Scholastic Aptitude Tests that they would be taking not too many years hence, for if that was the *bete noire*, we were going to meet it head on." The high quality education at Chinquapin is simply and easily reflected by the students' fantastic SAT scores. The SAT scores of Chinquapin seniors for 1994 were on average "136 points higher than the national average for college-bound seniors and 208 points higher than the average for HISD seniors." The SAT superstar is undoubtedly Chinquapin alumnus David Gonzalez, who had SAT scores in the 1400 range in the mid-1980s. Such high scores are crucial to the college acceptance that Chinquapin continually stresses.

Sports are an important part of Chinquapin. The school has a history of excellence in sports, especially soccer and basketball. The requirement that all Chinquapin students participate in some sport helps build a sense of teamwork and also stresses the importance of staying fit. Teachers double-up as coaches after the school-day is over. The Chinquapin Burrs basketball team won the Texas

Association of Private Schools State Championship (TAPS) in 1982, under Bill Heinzerling's coaching. Last season, the Burrs went to the TAPS regional finals and lost the nerve-wracking championship game only in the last few seconds. In the 1980s, the soccer team had several undefeated seasons under coach Pat Lohan, a Spanish teacher at Chinquapin. This is the first year that the girls have a district schedule in volleyball. "We don't recruit kids for their athletic ability," said Heinzerling, but former teacher Joe Iulano added, "... we hope they're good in athletics." The leadership and teamwork sports indirectly provides is priceless. "I can give the boys a different type of guidance on the basketball court," said Craig Wade, a history teacher and basketball coach, "a type that's different from the leadership I provide in the classroom, but just as vital."

Field trips to local interesting and historical spots are an essential part of the Chinquapin curriculum. The Spring 1994 Director's Report stated it succinctly: "We believe that it is important to introduce our students to as many areas of life in Houston as we can." Through such trips and extracurricular activities, Chinquapin students have many of the same privileges of their River Oaks counterparts. In the early 1970s, former Texas State Representative Joe Allen made 25 ninth- and tenth-grade students "honorary pages" which allowed them onto the House floor while it was in full session. In 1977, Mr. Moore and fifteen senior boys spent an hour with Former President Gerald Ford and chatted about everything "ranging from his football days and golf score to Watergate and the energy crisis." More recently, Chinquapin students have

toured the University of Houston Molecular Biology lab, visited San Jacinto Monument, the Menil Collection at Texas and Rice University, toured NASA and the Houston Ship Channel, gone bird-watching in the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, and gone to the Houston Zoo. Last summer, two seniors spent four weeks in Greece and five weeks in Italy on World Learning Inc. scholarships, and every year Chinquapin seniors fly to Washington, D.C. as part of the Close Up program. Last year they witnessed a Senate debate on President Clinton's budget and met U.S. District 25 Representative Mike Andrews. Guest speakers are also an important part of the Chinquapin curriculum. Local community and business leaders routinely address Chinquapin students on a wide variety of topics. Chinquapin students are learning more than just computer science, vocabulary, and chemistry; they are also working to be responsible and mature citizens.

Last year, about 240 students applied to Chinquapin. Each applicant is interviewed by two teachers and takes a short math and reading test. From the 240, about 120 were weeded out as either unqualified or "troubled." "People sometimes have the misconception that this is a school for problem students," Bill Heinzerling said. "That is just not the case." Two one-week trial sessions for potential students are conducted at the school every June, during which the staff and current students serve as counselors. The trial sessions are modeled after the regular Chinquapin school day. There, the staff and students discover potential problems in some of the nominees before they arise. All students "must show either the ability or potential to work hard to achieve their goals," Moore

said. "Despite our expectations and assurances of other educators and social workers, we [are] never able to let up on our recruiting efforts. Visits to schools, meetings at neighborhood centers and churches, public service announcements, and occasional feature articles in the two Houston [news]papers are still as essential as they were in the beginning." Even though Chinquapin can accept only a small number of new students each year, Heinzerling said that he has never had to turn a qualified student away because a class was full.

The annual Chinquapin graduation ceremony is a wonderful mix of an old Southern revival and a now-extinct Populist political rally; a throng of people are all over the campus smiling, eating, upbeat, and full of a contagious optimism. After all they have been through together, the teachers and students at Chinquapin have a special camaraderie that forever eludes public and private school campuses. There were eleven seniors graduating last May, and Mr. Moore gave the commencement address to a warm crowd of "over 400 people, including 30 Chinquapin alumni." This year marked the 25th anniversary of the school and the 20th graduating class. The speech was electrifying; Mr. Moore spoke of the rough early Chinquapin days, years before every senior graduating was even born. Graduation night is very special to everyone involved in Chinquapin. Seniors often feel senses of dread and sadness along with the usual elation, for soon they would be on their own. All of the students receiving their diplomas that night were accepted at a college or major university. The valedictorian would soon be leaving to California for four years—at Stanford University. Valedictorian Clinton Starghill was the fourth

Chinquapin student to be accepted by Stanford University. The other graduates were attending the University of Texas, Smith College, the University of Houston (Honors College), and the University of Michigan, among others. "The kids who graduate from Chinquapin all have truly superior educations," Molly Ivins said. "They not only read and write at the college level, they know how to think."

The Moores always told their students that they "are staring ten yards behind everyone else," and that they all must work twice as hard as the next person solely because of their lack of education and social skills. But catch up they can, and usually do—the stories of success are plentiful.

Craig Wade now teaches history and coaches the Chinquapin Burrs basketball team. Craig first came to Chinquapin in 1976 and graduated in 1983. Craig's two brothers used him as a "lookout" as a child, and they both spent time in prison. After Craig graduated from Chinquapin, he attended Colorado College and received a B.A. degree in Political Science. "Craig epitomizes everything positive about Chinquapin," said Moore. "If the school ever proved its existence, it is in the person of this fine young man, husband, father, teacher, and much more."

Neither of Frank Aguilar's parents finished elementary school. Frank graduated from Chinquapin in 1976 and eventually went on to the University of Texas Law School. He is a former Harris County assistant district attorney and is now in private practice. "Without the Chinquapin School," Frank said, "I wouldn't be a lawyer today."

And David Gonzalez knew little English when his family came to America

from Mexico when he was fourteen. David was accepted at Harvard and the University of Michigan, but Stanford offered him a full scholarship. He has since graduated from Stanford with a B.A. degree in Electrical Engineering. These are just three of the hundreds, if not thousands, of inner-city students the Moores and Chinquapin have directly and indirectly given hope to and changed for the better, all of whom are trying to alleviate some of the defects in our local communities a little at a time. That is what makes Chinquapin so special and unique: the teachers change their students' lives forever by etching the love of learning into them—students that might have never had the chance to develop their talents and pursue their dreams to the highest degree.

A recent Houston *Post* article stated that "Houston Independent School District is quietly exploring the option of a public boarding school: a campus that wouldn't send kids home every day to empty houses and volatile neighborhoods." Doubtlessly, officials in HISD are looking to Chinquapin for a successful outline. Unlike all the other "free" schools that were built with the usual sound and fury and soon thereafter quietly closed down, Chinquapin has survived the ultimate tests of time and credibility. The Chinquapin concept can easily serve as a model for other projects around Houston and across Texas. The school empowers determined Houston youths by giving them the means to carve out their own fortunes and happiness in life.

Imagine Texas with several such schools that would eventually rehabilitate our rotting ghettos and at the same time give to thousands their own stake in the American Dream. As Robert Moore

said: "I finally came to see that we were the most innovative school of them all."

Visitors to the Chinquapin School may make arrangements through Ms. Ann Smith at (713) 426-5467.

(for Annette Johnson)

ENDNOTES

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- ⁶⁴Director's Report, Summer 1994.
- ⁶⁵Butcher, "Chinquapin."
- ⁶⁶Ibid.
- ⁶⁷Moore, Unpublished manuscript.
- ⁶⁸Heinzerling, Interviews, Dec. 10, 1992; Apr. 17, 1993; Mar. 20, Oct. 16, 1994.
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- ⁷⁰Ivins, "Chinquapin School."
- ⁷¹Moore, Letter to the author, Apr. 30, 1993.
- ⁷²"Chinquapin Grad to Attend Stanford," *Baytown Sun*, May 19, 1990.
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