

LAWRENCE BURPEE

PATHFINDERS OF THE
GREAT PLAINS: A
CHRONICLE OF LA
VÉRENDRYE AND HIS
SONS

Lawrence Burpee

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CHAPTER I

EARLY SERVICE

Canada has had many brave sons, but none braver than Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye, who gave all that he had, including his life, for the glory and welfare of his country. La Vérendrye was born in the quaint little town of Three Rivers, on the St Lawrence, on November 17, 1685. His father was governor of the district of which Three Rivers was the capital; his mother was a daughter of Pierre Boucher, a former governor of the same district. In those days, when Canada was still a French colony, both Three Rivers and Montreal had their own governors, while the whole colony was under the authority of the governor-general, who lived at Quebec.

At that time Three Rivers was a more important place than it is to-day. Next to Quebec and Montreal, it was the largest town in Canada. If we could see it as it was in the days of La Vérendrye, we should find it very different from the towns we know. It was surrounded by a strong wall and protected with cannon. The town had always a garrison of regular soldiers, and this garrison was supported in times of necessity by every man and boy in Three Rivers. Those who lived in the neighbourhood were also liable to be called upon for the service of defence. In those days, when the dreaded Iroquois might at any moment swoop down upon the little settlement, every man kept his gun within reach, and every man knew how to use it. When the alarm was given, men, women, and children swarmed into Three Rivers, and the town became a secure fortress; for the Indians, ready enough to ambush small parties of white men in the forest or in the fields, rarely dared to attack walled towns.

In this little walled town Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye was born, and spent his boyhood. He was one of ten children, so that he must have had no lack of companions. We have no exact description of the home of the governor of Three Rivers, but it was probably much like that of other seigneurs or landed gentry of New France – a low, rambling, stone building, with walls solid enough to resist a siege, perhaps a wing or two, many gables, and a lofty roof. It would be flanked, too, with many outhouses. It must not be supposed, however, that the governor of Three Rivers and his family lived in luxury. People then were obliged to live more simply than they live to-day. The governor had a salary of 1200 francs a year, or about 240 dollars of the money of the present day. At that time, it is true, food and clothing were cheaper than they are now, so that this sum would buy a great deal more than it would at the present time; and the governor had other slight resources, for he was able to add to his official income the profits of a small farm and of a trading post on the St Maurice river. Still, it was a small income on which to support a family of ten lusty children, and at the same time keep up the dignity of the position as governor of an important town. Pierre, therefore, like most of the other boys of New France, had to shift for himself at an age when the boys of to-day are still at school.

In those days there was practically only one career for a gentleman's son – that of a soldier. Accordingly we find Pierre entering the army as a cadet at the age of twelve. Nothing is known of his military service up to the year 1704. In that year, however, he took part in an expedition against Deerfield, on the north-western frontier of the colony of Massachusetts. The expedition was commanded by a well-known guerilla leader, Hertel de Rouville, and consisted of about fifty Canadians and two hundred Abnakis and Caughnawagas. These adventurers and redskins were accustomed to all kinds of hardship. In the depth of winter they set out from Montreal to make a journey of nearly three hundred miles. They travelled on snow-shoes through the forest, carrying supplies and provisions on their backs. At the end of a long day's tramp, some comparatively sheltered spot would be found for the camp; the snow would be cleared away with their snowshoes, and a big camp-fire built in the midst of the clearing. Round this the weary men, white and red, would gather to eat their simple meal and smoke a pipe; then each man would wrap himself in his cloak or blanket and fall asleep, with his feet towards the fire. From time to time some one, warned by the increasing

cold, would spring up to throw on the fire another log or two. With the first appearance of dawn, the party would be once more astir; a hasty breakfast would be swallowed, and they would be off again on their long tramp to the south.

So day after day they journeyed until at last, just when they had come to the very end of their provisions, they arrived within sight of the doomed little English frontier village of Deerfield. In the dead of the night Rouville called a halt in a pine forest two miles from the village, and made preparations to surprise the inhabitants. The people of Deerfield were wholly unconscious of the danger from the approach of the French raiders. Although the place had a rude garrison this force was ineffective, since it had little or no discipline. On this particular night even the sentries seem to have found their patrol duty within the palisades of the village so uncomfortable, in the bitter night air, that they had betaken themselves to bed.

Parkman has described the next step:

Rouville and his men, savage with hunger, lay shivering under the pines till about two hours before dawn; then, leaving their packs and their snow-shoes behind, they moved cautiously towards their prey. There was a crust on the snow strong enough to bear their weight, though not to prevent a rustling noise, as it crunched under the weight of so many men. It is said that from time to time Rouville commanded a halt, in order that the sentinels, if such there were, might mistake the distant sound for rising and falling gusts of wind. In any case, no alarm was given till they had mounted the palisade and dropped silently into the unconscious village. Then with one accord they screeched the war-whoop, and assailed the doors of the houses with axes and hatchets.

The surprised villagers, awakened out of their sleep to find a howling force of French and Indians in their midst, hastily barricaded their doors, and fought desperately with any weapons they could snatch up. In some cases the defenders succeeded in keeping the enemy at bay; but others were not so successful. The French and the Indians, hacked openings in the doors and the windows of some of the houses, and through these shot down the inmates. Finally, when day broke, the French had gained possession of most of the village. Then they collected their prisoners and drove them out to their camp in the forest. A few burned houses, a score or so of dead bodies, not only of men but of helpless women and children, and a crowd of shivering prisoners, some of whom were butchered by the way, were the evidences of this inglorious victory.

From the plunder of the houses the victors obtained some provisions which helped to feed their party on the long homeward journey. Before noon of the following day they had started northward again, driving their captives before them through the deep snow. The mid-winter tramp through the wilderness proved extremely trying to both the French and their prisoners, but particularly to the prisoners, among whom were many women and children. Many of them were unaccustomed to snowshoes. Yet now they had to make long forced marches in this way over the deep snow. Food, too, was scarce. Some of the prisoners died of starvation; others of exhaustion. Finally the remnant reached the French settlements on the St Lawrence, where they were kindly treated by the inhabitants. Some were afterwards exchanged for French captives in New England, but many never again saw their former homes.

The year after his return from the expedition to Deerfield, Pierre de La Vérendrye took part in another raid against the English settlements. On this occasion, however, the attack was not upon a New England village, but against the town of St John's, in Newfoundland. The expedition was commanded by an officer named Subercase, who afterwards became governor of Acadia. St John's was defended by two forts, with small English garrisons. The French, who had about four hundred and fifty soldiers, found themselves unable to capture the forts. They therefore abandoned the attack

on St John's and returned to the French settlement of Placentia, burning, as they went, a number of English fishing villages along the shore.

This kind of warfare could not bring much honour to a young soldier, and it was probably joyful news to Pierre to learn that he had been appointed an ensign in the Bretagne regiment of the Grenadiers serving in Flanders. He sailed from Canada in 1706, and for three years fought with his regiment in what was known as the War of the Spanish Succession, in which the English armies were commanded by the famous Duke of Marlborough. Finally, at the terrible battle of Malplaquet, in which thousands of both English and French were killed, Pierre so distinguished himself that he won the rank of lieutenant. He received no less than nine wounds, and was left for dead upon the field. Fortunately he managed to escape, to render to his country in the years to come much greater service.

Finding that there was little hope of further promotion in the French army, since he had no influence in high quarters, Pierre returned to Canada. After several years' service in the colonial forces, he abandoned the army, and engaged in the fur trade. As a boy at Three Rivers, he had enjoyed many chances of meeting the fur-traders who came down to the little town on the St Lawrence with their packs of valuable peltry, and had shown an especial and fascinated interest in their stories of the boundless country that lay north and west of the string of settlements on the St Lawrence. This country was so vast in extent that even the most remote tribes yet visited by the white traders could state nothing definite as to its outer boundaries, though, in answer to the eager questions of the white men, they invented many untrue tales about it.

The fur-traders themselves were divided into two classes. The more staid and respectable class built trading forts in the interior on the borders of territories occupied by the Indians. Here they kept a supply of the things required by the natives: guns, powder and balls, tobacco, blankets, bright-coloured cotton, axes and small tools, flints and steels, vermilion for war-paint, and beads of every colour and description. The Indians brought their furs into the forts and bartered them for the goods that they needed. Sometimes, with no sense of real values, they traded beaver skins and other pelts of high worth for a piece of gaudy cotton, a little vermilion, or a handful of beads. The white men, of course, brought things which rapidly became indispensable to the Indians, whose native bows and arrows and hatchets of stone seemed almost useless compared with the muskets and the steel axes brought from Europe. To acquire these things became vital to the Indians, and the traders who now supplied them acquired each year thousands of beautiful furs. These were tied up securely into packs and carried in canoes down to Montreal or Three Rivers, where they were bought by the great merchants and sent by ship to France. The furs that had been bought from the Indian for a mere trifle fetched hundreds of francs when they finally reached Paris.

The second class of traders, known as *coureurs de bois*, or wood-runners, were very different from the first. Speaking generally, they were young men, sometimes of good family, who found life in the older towns and settlements prosaic and uninteresting, and when they went to the interior did not care to be tied down to the humdrum existence of the trading forts. Instead of requiring the Indians to bring their furs down to some fort, these enterprising rovers of the forest went into the Indian country. Sometimes they took light trading goods with them to barter with the redskins for furs, but oftener they themselves hunted and trapped the beaver, the otter, and the fox. The *coureurs de bois* were generally men of reckless courage, ready to face danger and hardship. From long living among the savages they themselves became in time half savage. Some of them took Indian wives and were adopted into the tribes.

When one of these wood-runners had obtained a quantity of furs, he made them up into packs, loaded them carefully in his canoe, and set out for the distant settlements, Montreal, Three Rivers, or Quebec. He knew the wild northern streams as well as any Indian; he could run his canoe safely down a rapid where an inch one way or the other would dash it against the rocks; and he could paddle all day with only an occasional stop for a meal or a smoke. When he came to an impassable rapid or waterfall, he beached his canoe and carried everything – canoe, packs, gun, and provisions – overland to the

navigable water ahead. At night he pulled his canoe ashore, built a campfire, and cooked over the flames a partridge, a wild duck, or a venison steak. If he had not been fortunate enough to meet with such game, he made a simple meal of pemmican – dried venison mixed with fat – a supply of which he always carried in a bag in case of need. Then he smoked his pipe, rolled himself in his blanket, placed his gun within reach, and slept soundly until the sun awakened him on the following morning. When he reached the far-off towns on the St Lawrence, he traded part of his furs for any goods which he needed, and was only too likely to get rid of the rest in dissipation. As soon as his money was spent, he would turn his back on civilization and live once more the wild life of the Indian country.

From such men as these, who were constantly to be seen in the little town of Three Rivers, Pierre de La Vérendrye heard many stories of the wonderful country that lay far towards the setting sun. They told him of mighty rivers and great lakes. Some of these they had seen; others they had heard of from the Indians. Always the young man heard rumours of a great *Mer de l'Ouest*, or Western Sea, which French explorers had been seeking ardently ever since the days of Jacques Cartier and Samuel Champlain. In the earlier days, when the French first came to Canada, this Western Sea was supposed to be somewhere above Montreal. Probably the Indians who first spoke of it to Jacques Cartier meant nothing more than Lake Ontario. Then, in the days of Champlain, the sea was sought farther westward. Champlain heard rumours of a great water beyond the Ottawa river. He paddled up the Ottawa, reached Lake Nipissing, and, descending what is now known as French River, found the immense body of water of which the Indians had told him. He had discovered Lake Huron, but this, again, was not the Western Sea. Other explorers, following in his footsteps, discovered Lake Michigan and Lake Superior; but still neither of these was the Western Sea. So, in La Vérendrye's day, men were dreaming of a Western Sea somewhere beyond Lake Superior. How far was it westward of Lake Superior? Who could tell? The Indians were always ready with a plausible tale, and many believed that the Western Sea would still be found at no great distance beyond the uppermost of the Great Lakes.

La Vérendrye was a young man of ambition and imagination. The spirit of adventure called him to a great exploit in discovery, as it had called earlier explorers French in blood – Jacques Cartier and Champlain and Radisson, Nicolet and Etienne Brulé, Marquette and La Salle. They one and all had sought diligently for the Western Sea; they had made many notable discoveries, but in this one thing they all had failed. La Vérendrye determined to strive even more earnestly than any of his great predecessors to discover a way to the Western Sea, not so much for his own advantage as for the honour and glory of his native country. This great idea had been taking form in his mind from the days of his early boyhood, when, seated before the great log fire in his father's home in Three Rivers, he had first listened to the stirring tales of the woodrunners.

Years went by, however, before he could attempt to put his plans into execution. Soon after his return from the French wars, he married the daughter of a gentleman of New France named Dandonneau and made his home on the island of Dupas in the St Lawrence, near Three Rivers. Here four sons were born to him, all of whom were later to accompany their father on his western explorations. His principal occupation at this time was to look after the trading-post of La Gabelle on the St Maurice river, not far from the point where it discharges its waters into the St Lawrence.

La Vérendrye's experience and capacity as a fur-trader, gained at this post of La Gabelle, led the governor of the colony to offer him, in the year 1726, the command of an important trading fort on Lake Nipigon, north of Lake Superior. With his great project of western exploration always in mind, he eagerly accepted the offer. For three or four years he remained in command of the Nipigon post, faithfully discharging his duties as a fur-trader, but with his mind always alert for any information that might help him later to discover a way to the Western Sea.

One day there came to him from the Kaministikwia river – on which the city of Fort William now stands – an Indian named Ochagach. According to his own story, Ochagach had travelled far towards the setting sun, until he came to a great lake, out of which a river flowed westward. He said that he had paddled down this river until he reached a point where the water ebbed and flowed.

Through fear of the savage tribes that inhabited the shores of the river, he had not gone to its mouth, but he had been told that the river emptied into a great salt lake or sea, upon the coasts of which dwelt men of terrifying mien, who lived in fortified towns; he had been told that these men wore armour and rode on horseback, and that great ships visited the towns which they had built on the coasts.

Ochagach's story made a deep impression on La Vérendrye. Not that he accepted the whole account as true. He knew too well the wild imagination of the Indian, and his delight in telling marvellous tales to the white men. But the river that flowed westward and fell into a great sea answered so closely to his own dream, and seemed on the whole so probable, that he was persuaded of the truth of the story. He determined, therefore, to surrender his command of the Nipigon post and to equip an expedition for the discovery of the Western Sea, which now seemed to be within comparatively easy reach. To do this, he must obtain the permission and support of the governor-general of Canada, the Marquis de Beauharnois. He therefore set out for Quebec, taking with him a rough map which Ochagach had drawn for him. This map professed to make clear the position of the countries which Ochagach declared that he had visited.

The governor at Quebec was keenly interested in these plans for western discovery, and wrote immediately to the French king, urging that La Vérendrye should be provided with one hundred men and the necessary supplies and equipment. But King Louis at this time was deeply engaged in European wars and intrigues and could not spare any money for the work of exploration. All that he would grant was a monopoly of the western fur trade. That is to say, La Vérendrye was to be allowed to build trading forts in the country which he was about to explore, and, out of the profits of his traffic with the Indians, he might pay the cost of his expedition to the Western Sea. No other French traders would be permitted to trade in this part of the country.

This was sorry encouragement to a man whose only desire was to bring glory and honour to his native country; but it was all that could be hoped for from the government or the king. La Vérendrye was too true a leader to abandon plans merely because the road was not made easy for him. As the king would not pay the cost of his expedition, he made up his mind to find help from some other source. He must have men; he must have canoes, provisions, and goods to trade with the natives. All this demanded a great deal of money. He devoted at once to the cause his own little fortune, but this was far from sufficient. Off he went to Montreal, to plead with its merchants to help him. The merchants, however, were not much interested in his plans for western discovery. They were business men without patriotism; they looked for something that would bring profit, not for what might advance the interests of their country.

It thus happened that if La Vérendrye had had nothing to offer them but the opportunity of sharing in the distinction of his great discovery, they would have turned deaf ears to his appeal, no matter how eloquent he might have been. But he was too shrewd a man to urge plans to which he knew the merchants would not listen. He could turn the king's monopoly to good account. 'Give me money to pay my men,' he said, 'and goods to trade with the western tribes, and I will bring you rich returns in beaver skins. No other traders are permitted to go into the country west of Lake Superior. I will build trading forts there. From these as a base I will continue my search for the Western Sea. All the profits of the enterprise, the rich furs that are brought into my posts, shall be yours.' Here was something that the self-seeking merchants could understand. They saw in the fur-trading monopoly a chance of a golden harvest, a return of hundreds for every franc that they advanced towards the expenses of the undertaking. With cheerful haste, therefore, they agreed to pay the cost of the expedition. La Vérendrye was delighted and lost no time in employing such persons as he needed – soldiers, canoe-men, and hunters. Birch-bark canoes were procured and laden with provisions, equipment, and packages of goods to trade with the Indians; and in the early summer of 1731 all was ready for the great western journey. With La Vérendrye were to go three of

CHAPTER II

FIRST ATTEMPT AT EXPLORATION

As La Vérendrye led his men from the gates of Montreal to the river where waited his little fleet of birch-bark canoes, his departure was watched with varied and conflicting emotions. In the crowd that surrounded him were friends and enemies; some who openly applauded his design, others who less openly scoffed at it; priests exhorting him to devote all his energies to furthering the missionary aims of their Church among the wild tribes of the West; jealous traders commenting among themselves upon the injustice involved in granting a monopoly of the western fur trade to this scheming adventurer; partners in the enterprise anxiously watching the loading of the precious merchandise they had advanced to him, and wondering whether their cast of the dice would bring fortune or failure; busybodies bombarding him with advice; and a crowd of idle onlookers, divided in their minds as to whether La Vérendrye would return triumphantly from the Western Sea laden with the spoils of Cathay and Cipango, or would fall a victim to the half-human monsters that were reputed to inhabit the wilderness of the West.

But now everything was ready. La Vérendrye gave the word of command, and the canoes leaped forward on their long voyage. A new search for the Western Sea had begun. No man knew how it would end. The perils and hardships encountered by the discoverers of America in crossing the Atlantic were much less terrible than those with which La Vérendrye and his men must battle in exploring the boundless plains of the unknown West. The voyage across the sea would occupy but a few weeks; this journey by inland waterways and across the illimitable spaces of the western prairies would take many months and even years. There was a daily menace from savage foes lurking on the path of the adventurers. Hardy and dauntless must they be who should return safely from such a quest. Little those knew who stood enviously watching the departure of the expedition what bitter tribute its leader must pay to the relentless gods of the Great Plains for his hardihood in invading their savage domain.

The way lay up the broad and picturesque Ottawa, rich even then with the romantic history of a century of heroic exploits. This was the great highway between the St Lawrence and the Upper Lakes for explorers, missionaries, war parties, and traders. Up this stream, one hundred and eighteen years before, Champlain had pushed his way, persuaded by the ingenious impostor Nicolas Vignau that here was the direct road to Cathay. At St Anne's the expedition made a brief halt to ask a blessing on the enterprise. Here the men, according to custom, each received a dram of liquor. When they had again taken their places, paddles dipped at the word of command, and, like a covey of birds, the canoes skimmed over the dark waters of the Ottawa, springing under the sinewy strokes of a double row of paddlers against the swift current of the river. Following the shore closely, they made rapid progress up-stream. At noon they landed on a convenient island, where they quickly kindled a fire. A pot of tea was swung above it from a tripod. With jest and story the meal went on, and as soon as it was finished they were again afloat, paddling vigorously and making quick time. Sunset approached – the brief but indescribably beautiful sunset of a Canadian summer. The sun sank behind the maples and cedars, and a riot of colour flooded the western horizon. Rainbow hues swept up half-way to the zenith, waving, mingling, changing from tint to tint, as through the clouds flamed up the last brightness of the sinking sun. A rollicking chorus sank away on the still air, and the men gazed for a moment upon a scene which, however familiar, could never lose its charm. The song of the birds was hushed. All nature seemed to pause. Then as the outermost rim of the sun dropped from sight, and the brilliant colouring of a moment ago toned to rose and saffron, pink and mauve, the world moved on again, but with a seemingly subdued motion. The voyageurs resumed their song, but the gay chorus that had wakened echoes from the overhanging cliffs,

En roulant ma boule,
Rouli, roulant, ma boule roulant,
En roulant ma boule roulant,
En roulant ma boule,

was changed to the pathetic refrain of a song then as now dear to the heart of French Canadians —*A la claire fontaine*.

In the cool twilight the men paddled on, placing mile after mile between them and Montreal. Presently the river widened into a lakelike expanse. The moon rose and shot its soft gleam across the water. No ripple stirred the smooth surface, save where the paddles dipped and the prow of each canoe cut like a knife through the stream. Belated birds flew overhead, making for home. A stag broke through the bushes on the farther shore, caught sight of the canoes, gazed at them for a moment, and then disappeared. It was growing late when La Vérendrye, from the foremost canoe, gave the word to camp. The canoes turned shoreward, lightly touching the shelving bank, and the men sprang nimbly to the land. Fires were lighted, the tents were pitched, and everything was made snug for the night. The hunters had not been idle during the day, and a dozen brace of birds were soon twirling merrily on the spit, while venison steaks added appetizing odours.

Their hunger satisfied, the men lounged about on the grass, smoking and listening to the yarns of some famous story-teller. He would tell them, perhaps, the pathetic story of Cadieux, who, on this very stream, had held the dreaded Iroquois at bay while his comrades escaped. Cadieux himself escaped the Iroquois, only to fall a victim to the *folie des bois*, or madness of the woods, wandering aimlessly in circles, until, famished and exhausted, he lay down to die. When his comrades returned in search of him, they found beside him a birch bark on which he had written his death chant:

Thou little rock of the high hill, attend!
Hither I come this last campaign to end!
Ye echoes soft, give ear unto my sigh;
In languishing I speedily shall die.

Dear little birds, your dulcet harmony
What time you sing makes this life dear to me.
Ah! had I wings that I might fly like you;
Ere two days sped I should be happy too.

Then, as the camp-fires sank into heaps of glowing embers, each man would wrap his blanket about him and with kind mother earth for his pillow and only the dome of heaven above him, would sleep as only those may whose resting-place is in the free air of the wilderness.

At sunrise they were once more away, on a long day's paddle up-stream. They passed the Long Sault, where long before the heroic Dollard and his little band of Frenchmen held at bay a large war party of Iroquois – sacrificing their lives to save the little struggling colony at Montreal. Again, their way lay beneath those towering cliffs overlooking the Ottawa, on which now stand the Canadian Houses of Parliament. They had just passed the curtain-like falls of the Rideau on one side, and the mouth of the turbulent Gatineau on the other, and before them lay the majestic Chaudière. Here they disembarked. The voyageurs, following the Indian example, threw a votive offering of tobacco into the boiling cauldron, for the benefit of the dreaded Windigo. Then, shouldering canoes and cargo, they made their way along the portage to the upper stream, and, launching and reloading the canoes, proceeded on their journey. So the days passed, each one carrying them farther from the settlements and on, ever on, towards the unknown West, and perhaps to the Western Sea.

From the upper waters of the Ottawa they carried their canoes over into a series of small lakes and creeks that led to Lake Nipissing, and thence they ran down the French river to Lake Huron. Launching out fearlessly on this great lake, they paddled swiftly along the north shore to Fort Michilimackinac, where they rested for a day or two. Fort Michilimackinac was on the south side of the strait which connects Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, and lay so near the water that the waves frequently broke against the stockade. Passing through the gates, above which floated the fleurs-de-lis of France, they found themselves in an enclosure, some two acres in extent, containing thirty houses and a small church. On the bastions stood in a conspicuous position two small brass cannon, captured from the English at Fort Albany on Hudson Bay, in 1686, by De Troyes and Iberville.¹

It was now the end of July, and La Vérendrye had still a long way to go. After a brief rest, he gathered his party together, embarked once more, and steered his way on that great inland sea, Lake Superior. All that had gone before was child's play to what must now be encountered. In contrast to the blue and placid waters of Lake Huron, the explorers now found themselves in the midst of a dark and sombre sea, whose waves, seldom if ever still, could on occasion rival the Atlantic in their fierce tumult. Even in this hottest month of the year the water was icy cold, and the keen wind that blew across the lake forced those who were not paddling to put on extra clothing. They must needs be hardy and experienced voyageurs who could safely navigate these mad waters in frail bark canoes. Slowly they made their way along the north shore, buffeted by storms and in constant peril of their lives, until at last, on August 26, they reached the Grand Portage, near the mouth of the Pigeon river, or about fifteen leagues south-west of Fort Kaministikwia, where the city of Fort William now stands.

¹ See *The 'Adventurers of England' on Hudson Bay*, pages 73-88.

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