

THE FOUNDERS OF THE GARAGE DOOR INDUSTRY

The story that has never been told

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Author's note: The garage door industry marks its centennial year in 2021. As we approach this historic milestone, we present this investigative report about the founding of our industry 100 years ago. This story takes advantage of vast newspaper archives that are now available digitally.

For decades, our industry has stated that C.G. Johnson invented the garage door in 1921 and the garage door opener in 1926. However, new research raises some serious questions about those statements.

Johnson was certainly a key figure, and the 1921 and 1926 dates are firm. But his role in these inventions is, as they say, "complicated." This article seeks to set the record straight about C.G. Johnson and his role in these inventions that launched our entire industry.

Who was C.G. Johnson?

Since Clarence Gilbert Johnson died 85 years ago, no one is alive today to testify about the life of this man who is known as the father of the garage door industry. However, an abundance of documents and newspaper articles allow us to piece together an illuminating portrait of this historic figure.

ALERT FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES

When C.G. Johnson registered for the World War I draft in 1917, he was described as having medium height, slender build, blue eyes, and brown hair. This ambitious industrialist was someone who was always on the go, constantly alert for new opportunities.

In 1912, at age 22, Johnson went to Houston when the automobile was revolutionizing America, spawning opportunities and new technologies around every corner. Houston's population was doubling every 10 years in the early 1900s, creating an ever-increasing demand for services.



THE JITNEY: A jitney car, ca. 1915.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

C.G. Johnson

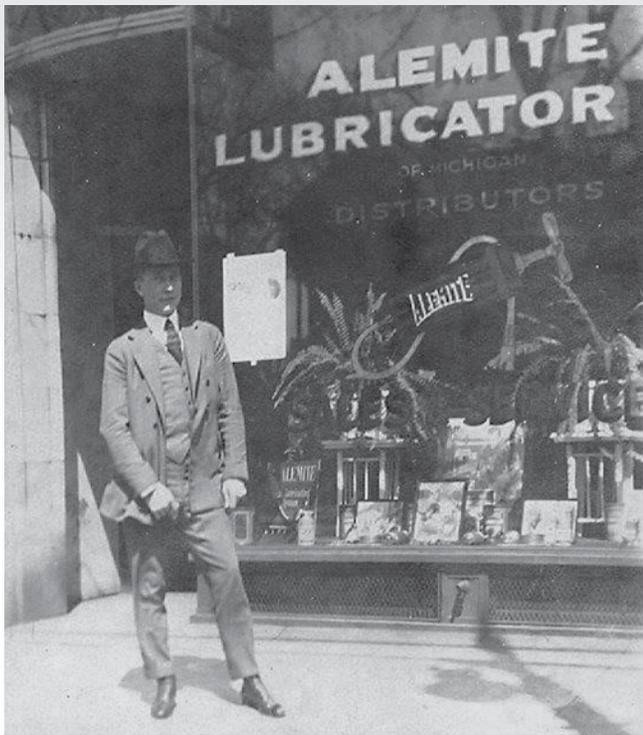
From 1912 to around 1919, Johnson held at least three jobs in Houston. He started as an auto mechanic for the burgeoning auto industry and then had the idea to start Houston's first jitney service, a kind of taxi to compete with electric streetcars.

The jitney idea spread quickly. Scores of others started offering the same service, and the downtown Houston streets became jammed with jitneys. However, by 1916, new local laws greatly curtailed the jitney industry because it was harming the municipal streetcar business.

Adapt and move on

Johnson quickly adapted. He became a manager and mechanic with a company that had recently invented a new and cleaner way to heat homes and large buildings. This novel oil-burning system offered a better way to ensure stable temperatures without the filth of coal furnaces.

However, World War I interrupted his plans, and he was drafted. Johnson served outside Houston in one of the nation's first flight training bases and worked on yet another new technology.



1920 DETROIT: Before entering the garage door business, Johnson distinguished himself as a sales expert for Alemite Lubricator in Detroit.

Photo courtesy of Dick Johnson, Marquette, Kan.

When Johnson was discharged, Detroit was booming with Henry Ford's innovative assembly line factories, and Model T sales were skyrocketing. So, in early 1920, Johnson moved to the Motor City and landed a job as a salesman for Alemite Lubricator, another cutting-edge invention. The Alemite system provided an easy and cleaner way to lubricate a car's chassis in just 10 to 15 minutes.

In Detroit, with these new cars everywhere, sales opportunities were unlimited. Johnson was the man hired to introduce this new system to the pivotal Detroit market.

Again, Johnson was adapting to the rapidly changing world. By the 1920s, he had acquired an in-depth knowledge of automobiles, sales experience from hustling rides as a self-employed jitney driver, and an awareness of how the latest technology can make life easier.

Johnson meets Dautrick

It is unknown how Johnson met up with Owen L. Dautrick, but Detroit was where it happened. In 1921, the 31-year-old enterprising salesman connected with the 51-year-old experienced woodworker and shop foreman.

But here's the key discovery from our new research. Dautrick, not Johnson, was the person behind the revolutionary idea for a garage door that lifts up and out of the way. (See "Who was Owen Dautrick?" on page 32.)

Johnson must have realized the potential of Dautrick's invention right away. With thousands of new cars, garages were also on the rise. They were perceived as greatly increasing the value of the entire property. And, of course, with every garage came the need for a garage door.

The old side-hinged barn doors may have been fine for the slower pace of a horse-and-buggy society, but the modern life of the Roaring Twenties required something faster, easier, and better: the upward-acting sectional garage door. So, in 1921, the two formed the Dautrick-Johnson Mfg. Co. in Detroit to make these doors.

A SALES SAVANT

If Dautrick was the idea man, what did Johnson bring to the table? A similar question could be asked about Herbert Blodgett, who had in February of 1926 filed an application for an "automatic electric door control" patent. (see "Herbert Cady Blodgett" on page 34). If Blodgett was the brain behind the garage door operator, why did he need Johnson?"

Three reasons: vision, drive, and sales savvy. Dautrick and Blodgett could invent the product, but it would take an entirely different set of skills



THE FIRST?: This Model T Ford truck (ca. 1922) may have been Johnson's first vehicle to display the company's invention.

Photo courtesy of Dick Johnson and Brian Hopp, Marquette, Kan.

to market those products to the masses.

In a critically important early move, Johnson built an innovative display of an operating garage door on the back of a Model T truck. Equipped with this eye-catching showroom-on-wheels, Johnson and his new wife, Flora, hit the road at the beginning of 1923.

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GETTING ATTENTION: The Overhead Door display turned heads at the Detroit Auto Show in 1923 (Detroit Free Press, Jan. 26, 1923).



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Johnson first put his sales skills to the test at the annual New York automobile show Jan. 6-13, 1923. And two weeks later, after he attended the Annual Automobile Show in Detroit, his "Overhead Door" exhibit earned a flattering article in the Detroit Free Press. The story mentions that 800 doors had already been installed in Detroit.

For the next several weeks, Johnson took his Model T door display on the road for thousands of miles, traveling to car, home, and builders' shows in Cleveland, Des Moines, Indianapolis, and elsewhere, enlisting dealers to sell his product.

America was ready for his message. Wherever he went, Johnson found people who were embracing the convenience of modern technologies like automobiles, telephones, radios, and electrical appliances.



SCOUTING LOCATIONS: The Times-Tribune (Alexandria, Ind.), May 19, 1923.

A strategic plan

Johnson was not only selling to consumers and builders; he was also selling communities on the idea of building garage door factories in strategically located sites around the nation. This strategy was part of his genius.

He likely didn't have the funds required to build even one factory. So he needed to get community leaders to embrace his vision for the rapid success of this "overhead door" invention and then invest the big bucks needed to build a factory to produce it.

It required skill to sell one upward-acting garage door to one person. But it required an entirely different level of sales savvy to persuade an entire

community to buy a factory. C.G. Johnson was the man for the job.

Hartford City, Ind., and Lewistown, Pa., are two cities where Johnson's sales success became apparent. In May 1923, Hartford City's

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Who was Owen L. Dautrick? The inventor of the garage door

Owen L. Dautrick was born in 1870 outside Reading, Pa. His schooling ended after the eighth grade, which was common at the time. After marrying a local girl, Abbie Printz, in 1896, the two set out in search of a better life.

He worked in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Nebraska, often as a foreman and a cabinetmaker, before coming to Detroit around 1915. At that time, workers were flooding into the Motor City after Henry Ford announced in 1914 that he would pay his workers a generous five dollars a day.

Acting alone in 1919, Dautrick applied for a patent (granted in 1922) for an upward-acting "rollable or flexible" garage door that does not interfere with the vehicle. It's unknown if he ever began to manufacture the product, but since he filed for a patent, he was likely thinking of the possibilities of mass production.

The Dautrick-Johnson Mfg. Co.

In 1920, Dautrick was a 50-year-old superintendent at a Detroit lumber company. It's a mystery how Dautrick and Johnson connected in 1921, but the combination of their talents as the Dautrick-Johnson Mfg. Co. created a powerful impetus for a new company.

Dautrick's 30 years of woodworking and management experience made him an ideal person to oversee production of a sturdy wood product that interacted with rollers and hinges. Johnson, then a

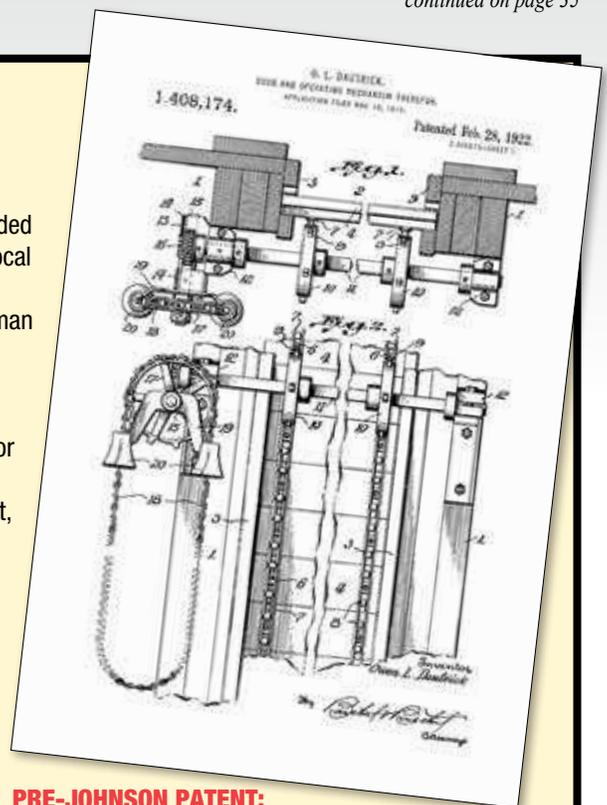
31-year-old salesman in

the auto specialties industry, had the vision and drive to promote their innovative product and to continually expand the company.

Yet, in the first two years of their partnership, they went their separate ways when Johnson bought out Dautrick's interests in the company. After separating from Johnson, Dautrick continued to innovate.

By 1943, he had been awarded at least 20 door and window patents. Some of these were assigned to companies such as Overhead Door, Crawford Door, Dautrick Company, and the Super Door Mfg. Company. Yet, Dautrick's success and financial reward never reached the level of Johnson's.

By 1940, Dautrick had returned to a job as a foreman. Abbie, his wife of 49 years, died in 1945, and in 1949, Dautrick died in Detroit at age 79.



PRE-JOHNSON PATENT:

This is Dautrick's first patent for the garage door, filed in 1919, which was likely many months before he met C.G. Johnson.

NEW MICHIGAN CORP

FOR WEEK ENDED NOVEMBER 12, 1921
Dautrick Johnson Mfg. Co., 5065 Rohms Ave., Detroit; to manufacture and sell overhead door to be used on garages and other buildings; C. G. Johnson, 2640 Cass Ave.; Owen L. Dautrick, Arthur Kraska, Detroit.....\$ 10,000
The Straits Rubber Co., Detroit; to buy, sell, prepare, compound, mix all

Hays, A. M. Young, Wilb 200 Palmer Drug Ave., Detroit sell and deal chemicals and tall drug bus turing and Palmer, 92 A

BIRTHDAY: This notice of a new Michigan corporation appeared in the Nov. 19, 1921, issue of the Michigan Manufacturer and Financial Record.

Who was Herbert Cady Blodgett?

The inventor of the garage door opener

To some degree, every automatic garage door operator owes a debt to Herbert Cady Blodgett (1881-1949). Yet, it seems that his name and his fame have been lost to our industry.

Blodgett was born and raised around Ludington, Mich., the son of a respected college professor. After graduating from high school in 1898, the younger Blodgett spent about 25 years as a salesman. In the 1920s, he switched careers and became a mechanical engineer.

Unlike most workers of that era, Blodgett was college educated, having earned a degree from Michigan Business College in Detroit. He lived in the booming Motor City when C.G. Johnson and Owen Dautrick were also there, but there is no evidence that they met in Detroit.

The pivotal year of 1926

In 1926, Blodgett was in search of new career, and his marriage of 24 years ended in divorce, a rarity in those days.

In February, while in Kalamazoo, Mich., Blodgett filed an application for an “automatic electric door control” patent. His invention provided “an electrically operated mechanism for the opening and closing of doors or gates, either of the rolling or swinging type.”

Prior to 1926, others had also attempted to produce a garage door opener. In early 1923, the Boss Automatic Door Opener was advertised as an option for the new Overhead Door produced by Dautrick-Johnson Mfg. Co. However, the Boss opener was not mentioned after January 1923. It’s possible that the product simply didn’t live up to expectations and disappeared from the market.

In May 1926, the Muncie, Ind., newspaper reported that Blodgett was in Hartford City “trying to locate a factory there for the manufacture of an electric control device he

invented for overhead doors.” For Blodgett, Hartford City was conveniently located only eight miles from Upland, Ind., where his father was a professor at Taylor University.

That visit may be when he had his first contact with C.G. Johnson. It appears that Johnson jumped at the opportunity to produce this revolutionary innovation and to have this 45-year-old educated engineer on staff. When Blodgett’s patent was approved in 1928, it was assigned to Overhead Door.

In July 1926, Blodgett was named president of the Door Control Company, which was likely a part of the Overhead Door Company in Hartford City, Ind. Johnson was named vice president, and Clyde Strait, who was the general manager at Overhead Door, was secretary-treasurer of the Door Control Company.

Life with Overhead Door

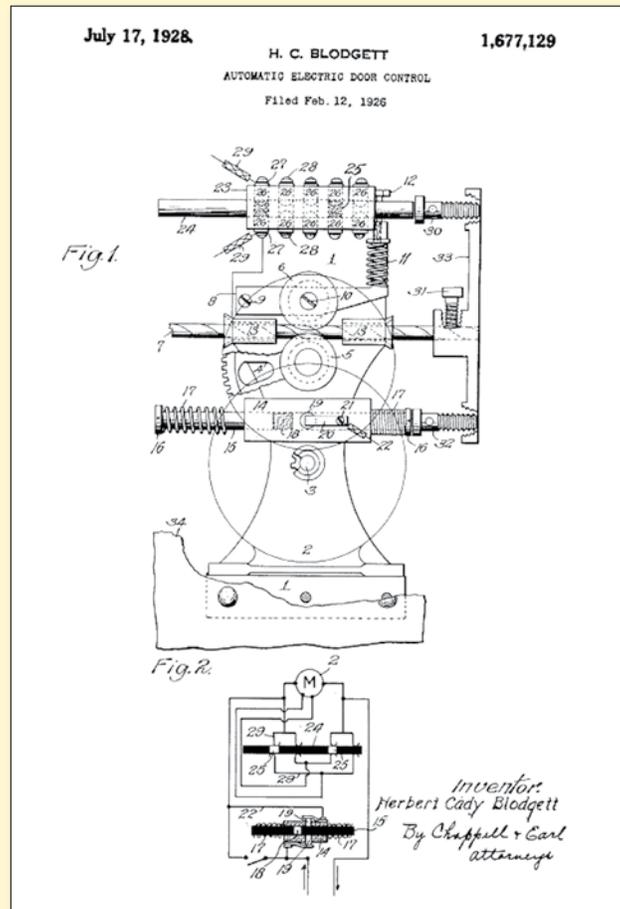
Blodgett spent the rest of his life as an engineer with

Overhead Door in Hartford City. As an inventive engineer, he was named on at least seven other door and operator patents, all assigned to the company. He filed his final patent application in 1947 when he was 66.

His health began to fail in 1948, which was also the year of his high school’s 50th class reunion in Ludington, Mich. Unable to attend the event, he sent a letter to the reunion committee, noting that he had “patented a few things and made a fair living.”

He wrote, “When you drive in a building with Overhead Doors, and they open and close with an operator and a push button, you can tell them you knew the fellow that made the operator.”

In 1949, just a few months later, Herbert Cady Blodgett died in Hartford City at age 68.



INVENTOR: Blodgett filed this patent application in February 1926 from Kalamazoo, Mich. In May, he traveled to Hartford City, Ind., to see if Overhead Door would manufacture it.

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Chamber of Commerce agreed to start selling stock to build an Overhead Door factory. In April 1924, the Lewistown Chamber was also raising funds for the plant in Pennsylvania.

Although both towns had only 5,000 to 10,000 people, both garage door plants would eventually employ hundreds of workers for decades to come. All those careers began with one compelling sales pitch by C.G. Johnson.

CONNECTED WITH COMMUNITY

In these towns, a new aspect of Johnson's personality was revealed: his commitment to community.

Perhaps he had grown tired of the big bustling cities of Houston and Detroit. Perhaps he wanted to avoid the hassles of big-city labor unions. Perhaps he sought a place with a lower cost of living. No matter the reason, when it came time to locate a headquarters and factory for his company, Johnson chose Hartford City.

Since locals owned stock in his factory, he embraced the partnership. Every time the company decided to add new factories and
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FIRST CONVENTION: This flyer was created for Overhead Door's first distributor convention, held in Hartford City in 1927.

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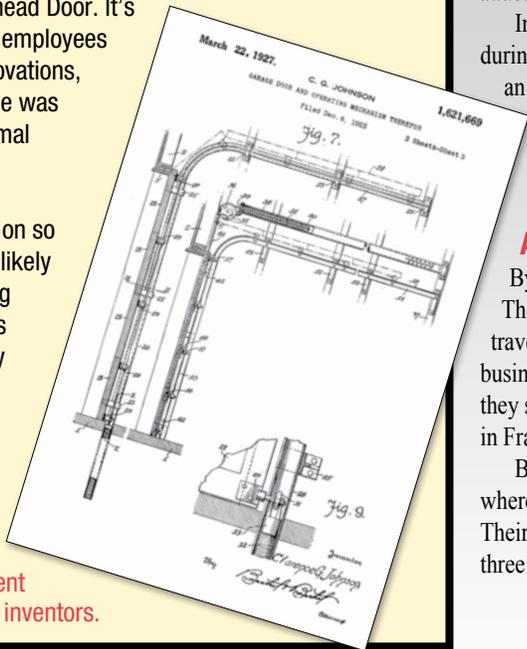
C.G. Johnson and his patents

If C.G. Johnson was not the inventor of the garage door or the garage door opener, did he actually invent anything?

Yes. His name is listed as inventor on as many as 21 U.S. patents pertaining to the garage door. But all these patents were filed from 1922 to 1933, during his leadership at Overhead Door. It's possible that other employees invented these innovations, but Johnson's name was attached to the formal application.

Yet since he is explicitly identified on so many patents, it is likely that he had a strong hand in the process of developing many innovations for the garage door.

21 PATENTS: This patent, applied for in 1923, is Johnson's earliest known patent that listed no other inventors.



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when Johnson launched the company's first distributor convention in 1927, Hartford City was the location chosen.

Hartford City was also home for the Johnsons. There, Flora Johnson gave birth to their first child, Clarence G. Johnson Jr., in 1928.

When the stock market crashed and the Great Depression hit in late 1929, Johnson kept Hartford City alive. When many businesses retreated or closed in Hartford City, Overhead Door added new factories.

In 1930, the company announced a "job-for-everyone" plan during the Christmas holidays. As a bonus, the firm granted all locals an additional 30% discount for new Overhead Door purchases.

In return, the local community embraced the employer as a treasured citizen. Employees were proud to belong to such companies, and the quality of their work showed it.

A BALANCE OF WORK AND LIFE

By the late 1920s, the successful industrialist had become wealthy. The once workaholic began to give way to a man who embraced travel, adventure, and leisure. But some activities were mixed with business. In 1927, for example, he and Flora sailed to Europe, where they spent 10 weeks establishing European headquarters with interests in France, England, Belgium, and Holland.

By 1929, the couple had rented a home in Beverly Hills, Calif., where Flora gave birth to their second child, Hal Warren Johnson. Their home on the palm tree-lined Hillcrest Road included a staff of three servants: a cook, a butler, and a nurse.

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By 1934, the family had homes in Hartford City, Beverly Hills, and Washington, D.C., but ultimately returned to Houston, the city where Johnson's career had begun. Since he loved the outdoors, he acquired a 7,000-acre ranch in the Rio Grande Valley.

The man-on-the-go stops

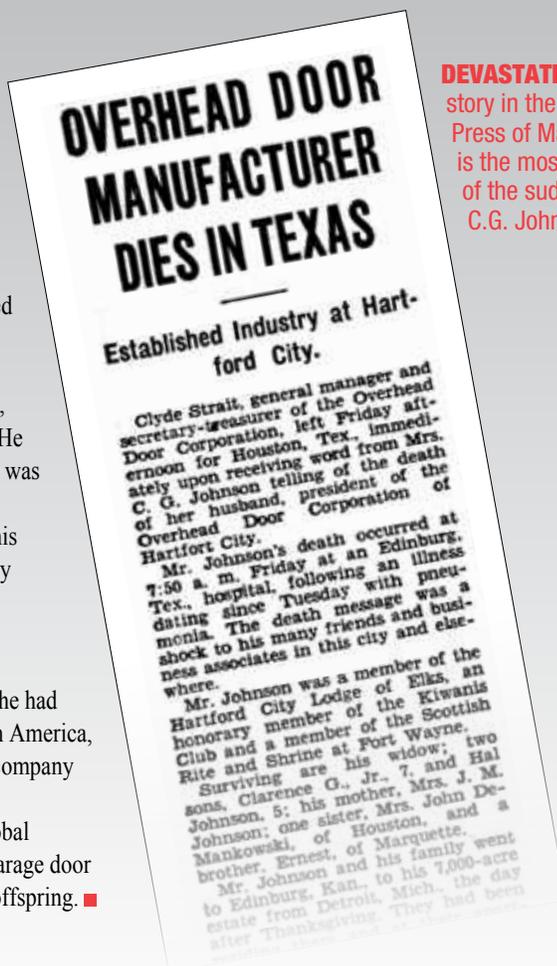
On March 19, 1935, just after his 45th birthday, C.G. Johnson settled in to enjoy his new sprawling estate. But his enjoyment was short-lived when he suddenly came down with a severe case of influenza and pneumonia.

On March 22, Clarence Gilbert Johnson died. This man-on-the-go, this visionary leader with a keen eye for opportunity, finally stopped. He left behind his widow and two sons, Clarence G. Jr., 7, and Hal, 5. He was buried in Houston.

Tragic, yes. But Johnson had lived more than some people twice his age. He achieved great success in his work life and found time to enjoy leisure activities that he loved.

Best of all, he left behind a company that not only survived the Depression, it thrived. Internally, he had already been entrusting the company's operations to capable people in Hartford City. Externally, he had dealers to sell his product in every state and in Mexico, Canada, South America, and Europe. So, although Johnson's busy life had come to a halt, his company continued to drive forward.

In effect, C.G. Johnson had built not just a company but a new global enterprise. As such, he can be rightly described as "the father of the garage door industry." And, no matter what brand of door you sell, we are all his offspring. ■



DEVASTATING NEWS: This story in the Muncie Evening Press of March 23, 1935, is the most detailed report of the sudden death of C.G. Johnson.



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