Early German-Russian Church Construction in Emmons County (ND)

by Lewis R. Marquardt

Ceaselessly has mankind demonstrated a predilection for the religious, or spiritual, realm. Indeed the two major modes of human existence—the sacred and the profane—are, according to Mircea Eliade, “two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history.” Man is essentially a “religious man” (homo religiosus), Eliade believes; “his behavior forms part of the general behavior of mankind.”¹ In point of fact even as early as 1915 Emile Durkheim in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life affirmed, “Religion is something eminently social.” His extensive discussion of course, undertook an analysis of the origins of religious thought and closely examined the nature of religion in society. Only after an exhaustive study of the earliest forms of religious activity was Durkheim able to conclude: “The source of religion and morality is in the collective mind of society and not inherent in the isolated minds of individuals.”² To be sure, both Durkheim and Eliade are concerned with the phenomenon of religiosity and speak to early forms of the religious; but a cursory glance at some of the activities of the pioneering homesteaders in Dakota Territory and later North Dakota herself will, interestingly enough and to all outward appearances, prove analogous to these academic theories.

As one of the last acts of outgoing United States President James Buchanan, two days before he left office, a bill providing temporary government and a surveyor general for Dakota Territory was signed on March 2, 1861. Since this date of signing was directly amidst the beginnings of the American Civil War (1861-1865), many issues and problems, both political and economic, were paramount; the least of which was securing enough people to populate and cultivate the newly established territory. After 1860, federal census figures showed 4837 people in all of Dakota Territory, an area then comprising the present-day states of North and South Dakota, most of Montana, and about half of Wyoming. Curiously, a census taken by Dakota Territorial Governor William L. Jayne in 1861 showed but “2042 whites for the entire [Territorial] area.” Nevertheless it was the region now called South Dakota which held the majority of the populace: approximately 829 souls resided there; in the northern half, the region today called North Dakota, even fewer resided. Yet shortly after Buchanan’s signing of the territory bill, the Sioux City Register of April 27th, the only newspaper with any local coverage before June 6, 1861, when the Yankton (SD) The Weekly Dakotian began, spoke of a “rush of emigrants” for Dakota. Soon a land office was opened at Vermillion and treaties with the Indians were conducted to gain more land for the arriving settlers.

By 1862 the Federal Homestead Act was passed, opening Dakota Territory for homesteading on January 1, 1863; but Indian uprisings and the increasing involvement with the Civil War kept people away. No railroads reached into the Dakotas at this time and only by 1870 did railroad construction link up the most southeasterly tip of the territory (at Sioux City, Iowa) with the East; in North Dakota, just one year later, the Northern Pacific reached Fargo in 1871. Then, by 1873, Bismarck, North Dakota, became the western terminus of the Northern Pacific. That same year North Dakota’s oldest newspaper, The Bismarck Tribune began publication. The growth of the populace and the effects of the railroads, which strongly promoted territorial expansion, were beginning to show; after all, two sections of land in each township were allocated by the Homestead Act to the railroads.

The discovery of gold in the Black Hills in 1874 further increased the number of people entering the territory. In fact, by 1870, 11,776 people were counted in South Dakota, while North Dakota registered only about one-fifth that amount, 2,405. Still, drought and grasshoppers, as between 1873 and 1875, scared many away. Finally, it was The Great Dakota Boom of 1878-1887 which encompassed a rapid expansion of the railroads and created an extensive increase in cultivated land, as well as population, in both Dakotas, that ultimately allowed the two areas to seek statehood. Again drought struck; severe in 1886-1889; still the newly immigrated pioneers stayed. Vincenz Maier, then of McIntosh County, in a 1939 W.P.A. Historical Data Project form told of ten months in 1888 when “no rain fell”; a year of great drought, indeed! Not only was there complete crop failure that year but the following winter brought about one of the worst blizzards on record. The ensuing spring, prairie fires followed the drought; still, by 1889, Max Keller in another

Historical Data Project form reported “most of the land around Hague [Emmons County] was already taken or filed on,” and new settlers had to move further north and west, some traveling as far as Canada, others to Montana and beyond. Finally, in South Dakota by 1890, one year after statehood, most major railroad construction was completed. Steady growth would follow the railroads: in 1880, South Dakota’s populace numbered 98,268; North Dakota’s 36,909; within ten years, by 1890, South Dakota tripled her numbers to 348,600; North Dakota merely quintupled to 190,983. By 1900 South Dakota more-or-less stabilized at 401,570, and North Dakota at 319,146. But if this booming rapidity of growth took place between 1870 and 1900, approximately the span of but one generation, where did the people settle and what was the importance of the religious factor in this growth?

It is recorded that the first Christian service in Dakota Territory probably took place at Pembina, North Dakota, when Father Joseph Dumoulin and Father Joseph Provencel opened the first Roman Catholic Mission and School on September 8, 1818. The “first recorded act of worship” in South Dakota took place in early June of 1823 by Jedediah Smith, a devout Methodist. But it was probably the 1840’s which gave rise to the largest Christianizing of the area when Fr. Pierre Jean de Smet visited the Sioux Indians and other tribes along the then navigable Missouri River. As early as 1830 priests were sent into the field to do missionary work among the Indians, and certainly other pioneering ministers of every denomination followed, many at the request of the Missouri River traders. But it was probably around 1851 when smallpox and cholera broke out violently among the populace that missionary work in the Dakotas began in earnest. According to Jane Boorman in Dakota Panorama, “Since most of the Dakota Reservations were assigned to Episcopalians, Roman Catholic activity came largely after the areas were opened to all denominations. Priests and nuns of the Order of St. Benedict [O.S.B.] pioneered this [missionary] work.”

After Easter of 1877, St. Benedict’s Mission near Fort Yates, North Dakota, was founded. By August 12, 1879, when Monsignor Martin Marty, O.S.B. of St. Meinrad, Indiana, arrived at Yankton as the Apostolic Prefect, his diocesan see held twelve priests and twenty churches. One of these churches was St. Benedict of Fort Yates; and one of his priests was soon to be Fr. Bernard Strassmaier, the missionary priest of not only the

Emmons County, which lies approximately midway between the eastern and the western boundaries of North Dakota, is located immediately above the South Dakota-North Dakota boundary line. To the west the county is bordered by the eastern bank of the Missouri River (“at the low water mark”), though now, as a result of the dam constructed at Pierre, South Dakota, the river has become Lake Oahe. To the east the county is bordered by Logan and McIntosh counties; to the north, by Kidder and Burleigh counties. The county of 1,562 square miles was created by an act of the Territorial Legislature on February 10, 1879, and was organized November 9, 1883.

It was very shortly thereafter that the first German-Russian pioneers began their immigration into the new county, arriving predominantly from the Black Sea area of South Russia and joining the Norwegians and Swedes, the Hollanders, and a group of early pioneers from Ohio, all of whom had arrived in Emmons County slightly earlier. If one discounts the area around Zeeland in nearby McIntosh County in which some of these German-Russians settled as early as 1884, it was probably the small village of Hague, originally called Selz after the first immigrants' home in South Russia, that in the summer of 1885 saw the initial influx of these agricultur-
al pioneers into Emmons County. Soon, however, other areas of the county began to be settled: north of Hague, in the Beaver Creek area of Exeter township, the soon-to-be St. Aloysius' Parish began in the spring of 1886 with the arrival of the first settler in the area, Anton Senger, on May 4, 1886. During the spring of 1887 more settlers arrived from the Ukraine. Then in October of 1888, “five daring, dashing young men” came to Strasburg, followed on May 7, 1889 by eleven families. Still other pioneers arrived further to the west and north; they arrived in Hazleton by 1888, into Linton by 1889 and 1890, and quite a bit later into Temvik, by 1907. Other settlements within Emmons County were also established during this period, present day villages such as Hull and Westfield, which earlier, calling themselves the Hope Settlement, had constructed the first church in

"See Richard Sallet, Russian-German Settlements in the United States, trans. LaVern J. Rippl and Armand Bauer (Fargo, N.D.: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), pp. 36-37. To this day Hague has remained a small rural village. Yet for its size, it has produced one of the most beautiful churches in all of North Dakota, probably not once, but twice! While its 1970 population stood at 146, and it probably never exceeded 500, in 1910 the population stood at 183 souls; by 1920, 315; and by 1930, the year of the construction of their present church, 504. Actually, by 1920, while Hague was comprised almost totally of Black Sea Germans from Russia, 1893 persons in all of Emmons County had listed their birth places as Russia, and Sallet adds, the 1900 census of 4349 total souls “numbered the Russian-Germans in third place among the foreign born in North Dakota next to the Norwegians and Canadians. In McIntosh County they comprised 95.5%, in Emmons, 72.9% of all foreign born inhabitants.” (Page 28.)

Emmons County in the fall of 1887, the Hope Reformed Church. Kintyre and Braddock were also settled about this time, as had been Livona, Wincheste, Williamspfort, and Winona; but for the purposes of this paper the author will focus on the county's German-Russian settlements, on the Catholic parishes of Hague, Strasburg, St. Aloysius, Hazelton, Katzenbach, Krassna, Rosenthal, St. Anthony's of Linton, St. Michael's and St. Joseph's.

Initially, and commencing as early as 1884, the greatest number of Catholic settlers immigrated and lived within the large area served by the so-called "Mother-Church," the Church of St. John the Baptist. Although this church is presently situated about five miles north of the town of Zeeland in McIntosh County, it proved to be the primary gathering point for the early Catholic pioneers of Emmons County. Even in their former country these Germans from Russia had always been known for their fervent religious devotion and it should come as no surprise to find the continuation of that spirit, whether or not a church building was physically present on the plains of Dakota Territory. Even after the region's disastrous prairie fires of 1866 and 1887, after the drought of 1888, after all the hard winters—the faith of these pioneers remained unshaken. Their struggle was of the land; their attainments, spiritual.

It was probably Fr. Bede Marty, O.S.B. who first visited the area's pioneers in July of 1886 on a trip from Fort Yates to McIntosh County; but it was also the well-known Fr. Bernard Strassmaier, O.S.B. (1861-1940), and who at this time was stationed at Kenel, South Dakota, who visited the area in the fall of 1887. Continuing his visits for many years thereafter, this dedicated missionary eventually labored more than fifty years among the Indians and pioneers of both North and South Dakota; and after his assignment in 1890 from Kenel, South Dakota to Fort Yates, North Dakota, located across the Missouri River from Emmons County, the "good monk" shepherded the pioneers of Emmons County as if they were his very own parishioners.

Since Fr. Strassmaier lived across the Missouri, crossing the river became an experience well remembered by many of the pioneers. There is an amusing story told by one of the early pioneers, a certain Peter Vetsch, about his own marriage. Vetsch tells the story:

_In the spring of 1889 he was married to Katherine Goldade at Fort Yates. They, with John Goldade and Ferdinand Kraft as witnesses, had driven a team to the Missouri, where they waved to the Indians on the opposite shore and got them to come over to take them across. The team was tied in the bushes where they would be safe and have plenty to eat until the next day. The group stayed all night at the Mission, and the next morning, Rev. Bernard Strassmaier performed the marriage ceremony. There was no time for a big wedding then such as the German-Russians have._

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*a Called the Cottonwood Church because the roofboards were of cottonwood and came from a sawmill on the Missouri River, this congregation seems to have held its services and Sunday School first in an old building at Hull. Organized with 39 charter members, the church was constructed of material hauled from Eureka, South Dakota, a distance of fifty miles. A second building was erected in 1889, and by 1934 the third church of 1928, which seated 400 parishioners, could boast of the "largest Sunday School Enrollment within the Tri-County Sunday School Association."*
Of course there were no churches in the area as yet, (Vetsch claims, "About 1890, the people in the German settlements built two churches, one at Hague and the other in McIntosh County") and whenever possible, masses were often held in the small sod houses of the pioneers. Organizing St. John's Parish in the fall of 1887, Fr. Bernard encouraged the parishioners to construct a 30 by 50 foot church after the 1888 fall harvest. Being stopped by winter but continuing once again in the spring of 1889, the church was soon completed and officially blessed in honor of St. John the Baptist on May 12, 1889 by Fr. Bernard Strassmaier himself. The church was to become the first Catholic church in the area and still stands to this day—possibly the oldest standing church in all southern North Dakota. For more than 116 years, and although his official assignment remained at Fort Yates, Fr. Bernard was to minister directly to these people. Finally, by 1893, a parish house was built at St. John's and a permanent priest, Fr. Henry Schmitz, assigned. Perhaps the greatest impetus for the permanent residence was demonstrated on October 15, 1891, when 220 people were confirmed at St. John's by Bishop John J. Shanley, the newly appointed Bishop of North Dakota, stationed at that time not at Fargo, but at Jamestown. And thus it wasn't long before other churches were to spring up in neighboring Emmons County—curiously enough, almost all of them instigated by Fr. Bernard Strassmaier, himself.

Strassmaier assisted with the twin settlements of Selz and Elsass, which confusingly enough were located in Selz and Elsass townships, respectively. Like the two neighbors they were in South Russia, these two tiny settlements soon became new neighbors near the present village of Hague, Selz to the east and Elsass to the west. Though Sallet states that "the first post office which the United States Government established in that region received its name, Tiraspol, in honor of the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese in South Russia," the first post office was more probably located in Selz, in the home of Anton Vetter, by 1896. But just as the Tiraspol post office did have to move into Strasburg after the arrival of the new railroad line from Eureka (SD) to Linton, so too did the post office at Selz move into the newly founded village of Hague, by 1903. Since the railroad passed between Selz and Elsass, and since the railroad company itself decided upon the placement and the new name of Hague, there was precious little for the pioneers in the twin settlements to do except to close down their business places and to move into Hague, themselves. This they did and the village of Hague was incorporated by 1908.

According to Aberle again, Fr. Strassmaier organized the parish of Elsass as early as 1887; Rath states that the congregation was established in 1889, and Sallet speaks of a St. Plazidus Parish of 1888. In spite of these discrepancies the first church of St. Mary's was constructed in 1890 and was located approximately a mile and a half west of the present village of Hague and about a half mile south of the still-standing old cemetery. The second church of St. Mary's was built in the new village of Hague proper and was situated directly north of the present church where its original entrance now stands as a grotto. The cornerstone of this second church is dated 1906 and the church was dedicated August 20, 1908. Bids for a 40 by 100 foot church and a 31 by 32 foot rectory were requested in July of 1906. By May of 1907, Fr. Schardt was able to report that the stonework "was almost completed."

But this second church of St. Mary's was to stand for no more than 23 years, for on Ash Wednesday, February 13, 1929, St. Mary's burned to the ground. Hague had to build anew. Those who recall the second church believe it was even more lovely than the present church. Again a new cornerstone was laid, this time on August 4, 1929. The Romanesque styled brick church, planned to seat over 500, was to be in the dimensions of 44 by 137 feet and would cost the parishioners $61,000. Designed with two frontal un-
matched towers, the main south tower would rise to a height of 114 feet, and the church would face toward the east. Beautiful chandeliers were ordered, a marvelous pipe organ purchased for $8,000, and a set of bells weighing 500, 600, and 900 pounds was installed in the south tower. Moreover, costly religious paintings on canvas were prepared and attached to the decorated ceiling. The dedication took place June 19, 1930, and since St. John’s of Zeeland is now closed to regular worship, this St. Mary’s of Hague, from 1887, becomes the oldest continuous German-Russian parish in all of North Dakota. The immeasurable beauty of this small village church stands as priceless evidence of the unshakable faith of these early industrious and religious pioneers.

As stated earlier, the village of Strasburg was settled in 1889. During that same year the congregation of Saints Peter and Paul’s Parish was likewise organized. Again it was Fr. Bernard Strassmaier who came to Strasburg in 1888 and who in the fall of 1889 “said the first Holy Mass in the home of Mr. Frank Baumgartner.” 14 By 1892 the parish became a mission of St. John’s “Mother-Church” of Zeeland, and by 1893 a 28 by 64 foot wooden church was constructed at Tiraspol, about two miles north of the present town of Strasburg, on the Caspar Feist homestead. 15 It was here in Tiraspol on May 3, 1898 where a post office was established and the first postmaster, Egidii Keller, appointed. But as with Hague to the south, on the first of December, 1902, the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad came to Strasburg extending their line from Eureka (SD) to Linton, and bypassed Tiraspol to the north by a few miles, thereby effectively forcing the newly settled pioneers to move again. Soon trains began to run regularly and by spring, the post office, on the 29th of April, 1903, too, had to be moved into the new village of Strasburg. Gradually the little community began to grow.

Amidst considerable debate and turmoil by the parishioners of Saints Peter and Paul’s, the newly erected church at Tiraspol was also moved to town and served the parish there until 1910. Due to the disagreement over the moving of the church, by 1907 a new pastor, Fr. Alois Strigl, O.S.B. had to be assigned to bring peace and harmony back to Saints Peter and Paul’s. A decision was made to erect a new church to be located east of the new moved church building. The new bishop of Bismarck, himself, Bishop Vincent Wehrle hauled the first wagonload of rocks, and by 1909 the basement of the new church was begun. By the spring of 1910 the “foundation was ready for the laying of the cornerstone.” 16 On Christmas eve, 1910, the brick Romanesque-like church held its first mass. It received its official blessing June 29, 1911. The cost was near $45,000 and seating planned for approximately 900. To further show the devotion expressed by the parishion-

ers of Strasburg, it has been related that they maneuvered their building debts on the new church so that it stood “legally debt-free.” On the 28th of June, 1916, after all encumbrances were free and clear, Saints Peter and Paul’s Parish was consecrated by Bishop Vincent Wehrle and some 25 additional priests. It was only the second parish in the entire state to be so consecrated; and that with a village population of but slightly over 500 people, not all of whom were of the Catholic faith, for the Reformed Church was organized in the same village by 1916.

Further west of both Hague and Strasburg the parish of Krassna was settled by 1890. Again Fr. Strassmaier was at work. By 1901 the Holy Trinity Parish of Krassna was established as a mission church of Saints Peter and Paul’s, Strasburg; and the church which still stands was probably built at that time. Though others cite the date of the first church as 1899, 17 church records begin in 1901 and the parsonage was erected in 1914. An interesting sidelight is that while Krassna was first established as a mission church of Saints Peter and Paul’s, it was a certain Peter Miller of Krassna who lent Strasburg’s building fund its first $600.

Still other Catholic churches were to be erected in the county. The aforementioned predominantly Catholic Beaver Creek area north of St. John’s had settlers arriving from Taurida as early as 1884, when the area was first surveyed. Three years later St. Aloysius’ Parish was organized. 18 Again Fr. Strassmaier said the first mass, probably in the home of Jakob Fischer, in June of 1887, after arriving from Fort Yates with a horse and two-wheeled cart, and two Indian companions and guides. Fr. Strassmaier continued these trips for a number of years, always notifying the people of his arrival via letter and coming four to five times per year. Fr. Strassmaier’s routine was to arrive the day before the celebration of mass and to make all arrangements for confessions, baptisms, mass, marriages, vespers, etc. For the services, usually the largest sod home in the area was selected, a small table used as the altar, and the people would gather from miles around traveling on foot, wagon or horseback to see their beloved missionary priest. The day was a day of religious and social uplift.

The first small church of 20 by 30 feet was built in 1897 on Anton A. Fischer’s land, but burned in the fall of 1906. The church had a “very beautiful interior” and was built with no bell tower. A bell hung from two poles erected in front of the church. By 1907, a second church of 30 by 60 feet was built and that too eventually burned on May 21, 1953. The second church contained an organ donated by Kasimir Mastel in 1923 and had a 25-foot addition built on to

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14Ellen Woods and Euvagh Wenzel, editors, Emmons County History Compiled for the Bicentennial, 1976, no pub., p. 100.
15Fr. Bernard Strassmaier was the first pastor; Fr. J. Widmer, O.S.B. followed, and Fr. Stephen Stegener of St. John’s, the third. From 1899 to June of 1948, 1143 baptisms were recorded, the first being a Wendelin W. Horner and the first burial, Nicholas Heisler, on December 19, 1898. Interestingly, the first marriage recorded in all of Emmons County took place in July of 1884 when Charles Lock of Winona married Ella Goodjohn.

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the rear section. Finally in 1953 a new brick building arose which remains standing today. However, as early as 1906, St. Aloysius' already had two mission churches of its own: St. Michael's to the north (situated directly east of Linton) and St. Joseph's to the northeast. Rosenthal's Sacred Heart Parish was also to become a mission of St. Aloysius' Parish.

St. Michael's Parish was organized around 1890 when most settlers in Dakem and Marie townships tired of traveling such long distances to St. Aloysius'. As in other areas their masses too were first held in many of the larger farm homes, but by Christmas of 1914 the idea of building their own church came to fruition. At a cost of $2200 a small wooden church was constructed. Ground was broken on March 15th and by September of 1915, on the Sunday falling closest to the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel, the little wooden church was dedicated. Eventually St. Michael's became their own parish with a resident priest and then absorbed St. Joseph's to the west about 12 miles. St. Joseph's church was built in 1916 in township 132, range 76 and burned to the ground November 3, 1954. It was not rebuilt.

Further west and south, near Katzenbach, a characteristic formation on Cattail Creek, the mission church of St. Bernard's was constructed in the early 1900's, again by Fr. Bernard for the settlers in the western half of the county. While it is said the mission had its beginnings before the turn of the century, until 1915 the church was served by the Benedictines. However, when Fr. Eichner was sent to Holy Trinity at Krasna, St. Bernard's became a mission church of Krasna's Holy Trinity Parish. In 1933 a larger basement church was constructed nearer the market roadway and the old church moved to the site to be used as a parish hall. In 1964 Holy Trinity closed its doors and St. Bernard's became a mission of St. Anthony's of Linton.

North of Strasburg the Sacred Heart Parish of Rosenthal was constructed in 1907 and struck by a tornado that same year. The parish was probably organized around 1906 and a second church built in 1908. It too was destroyed and now rests in ruins.

Probably the first mass in the Linton area was celebrated in November of 1899 by Fr. Thuille, O.S.B. at the Peter Schwietzer home in the "old town" section. Traveling to Strasburg, Fr. Thuille stopped over in Linton and said mass there. Naturally enough Fr. Strassmairer too came to Linton and held mass in homes or in the court house, but more frequently the people had to travel to Strasburg for their services. From 1908 to 1910 the people of Linton were served by the priests of St. Aloysius' Parish, but by 1911 a new church was built on the present site. Later, the old church was moved to the rear and by 1926 a rather large new brick church dedicated to St. Anthony, was built on the same spot as the former.

In Braddock, which claims to be the oldest existing town in Emmons County, the Church of the Epiphany was built in 1913 and dedicated June 3, 1914. It changed its name to St. Mary's in 1937 and later to St. Katherine's in 1949. Fire damaged the old church in 1945 but it remained in use until St. Katherine's was completed in 1949. While Braddock may be the oldest existing town in Emmons County, it probably never contained any Germans from Russia in appreciable numbers. St. Paul's of Hazelton, however, did; and probably began when the old Woodman Hall from Williamsport was purchased in 1889 and sold to the Hazelton Catholics who remodeled it into a church around 1904 or 1905 at a cost of $250. Thirty-six horses were used to move it to Hazelton, but in October of 1916 a new brick church was begun and completed in the spring of 1917 at a cost of $10,000. The church sat 280 and had a full basement to be used for socials and/or community meetings. The interior of the church was of fir, stained with oak, and the church was made of Hebron pressed brick. A rector was added in 1951.

Yet all this religious activity reflects but a portion of the combined efforts of the early pioneers of Emmons County. For in similar measure the Reformed, the Lutherans, the Baptists, built; the Methodists and the Episcopalians, as well as others, all constructed communal buildings of prayer and of worship during the same 75-year period. From 1880 to 1955, from a population as small as 35 (in 1880) to a peak of 12,407 in 1930, Emmons County churches of all denominations have grown and prospered. No matter what the faith, no matter what the belief, there stand a great number of architectural monuments representative of the spiritual realm of mankind. That some of these early churches truly represent the deepest beliefs and the greatest efforts of man there can be no question! Nor can one question the impact this building activity must have had on society in general. As Durkheim stated, it is the collective mind of society, the sum total of all the efforts of mankind that manifests the source of the religious. And it is the religious factor which kept alive the very spirit and industry of these early pioneers of the barren plains of Dakota Territory. That the German-Russian people have had a small part in this unique societal structure they can be genuinely proud!

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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