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UNDER THE BIG SKY

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JACKSON J. BENSON

Under the Big Sky

A Biography of A. B. Guthrie Jr.

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For Katrina and Kevin
and
Belinda and Brian

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CHAPTER ONE

"By George, I'm Free!"

Alfred Bertram Guthrie Jr. was a hell of a writer, but he could be an ornery cuss. Bud, as he was called, could be dogmatic, insistent, opinionated, and contrary. At the same time, however, he was a gentleman in the old-fashioned sense of the word—gallant, fair-minded, generous, and kind. Some people hated him for his unabashed political and environmentalist opinions, while others loved him for the man he was. He had a firm social conscience and was determined in his writing to reflect what he saw as the historical truth. But he was not a stern man—he could be funny, a prankster, and a person who loved a good time, drinking, socializing, and telling stories. People liked to be around him.

There is no doubt that his novel *The Big Sky* was his greatest achievement. He has said that his attraction to the subject of the mountain man came out of his attachment to the history of the West and a desire to tell the truth about a character that was too

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often treated heroically. He wanted to balance the scales, presenting both the character's unworthy and his worthy traits. He was at his core a realist. In trying to achieve this balance, get at the historical truth, and represent that truth in fiction, Guthrie joins a whole list of writers about the West who have tried to refute Western myth, to tell it as it was. These writers include Wallace Stegner, Ivan Doig, Fredrick Manfred, Vardis Fisher, Willa Cather, William Kittredge, Norman Maclean, James Welch, Mari Sandoz, Frank Waters—the list goes on and includes almost every Western writer we consider "literary" versus what Guthrie called the purveyors of the "gun and gallop" story.

Guthrie joins these other writers in another way: like them, he writes nostalgically of a West lost, lost to exploitation, development, and population growth. What Walter Van Tilburg Clark called the essential characteristic of the West, its open spaces, would seem either gone or in the process of going. Like these other writers, Guthrie was in love with the land he came to know intimately, and much of his fiction is touched by a regret for a lost love.

His childhood is the story of how he came to become so attached to the plains, benches, and mountains of Montana, an attachment that marked him so deeply that it became the generator of his character and the motive for his writing. He was born on January 13, 1901, in Bedford, Indiana—another among the many prominent Western writers born in the East or Midwest. Six months after his birth his family moved to Choteau, Montana, which, although he didn't always live there after he grew up, became his place, the center of his writing universe.

Choteau is in the central northwest of Montana, on the windswept, short-grass plains some thirty miles from the Eastern Front of the Rocky Mountains, which rise up steeply from the flatland without much in the way of foothills. The historian Joseph Kinsey

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Howard talks about the appearance of these mountains as "a flat gray-blue silhouette . . . gigantic paper cutouts against the sky." As much a historian as fiction writer, Bud has said about the area he called home that "the nation got its first real knowledge of the region from the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804–1806. The news the captains brought back alerted the fur dealers of St. Louis and the east, and it was a very few years before keelboats plied the upper Missouri, bringing trappers who scattered to the beavered streams."

Located on the Teton River, Choteau started in the early fur-trading days in the 1830s and 1840s as a trading outpost and then an Indian agency. Later it became a settlement, and at the turn of the century, a village with several hundred people. When the Guthries moved there in 1901, it had one church, four saloons, two general stores, and an elementary and high school.

To the north of Choteau is a large Blackfeet Reservation, which originally extended to include the town's present location. At that time, the town was the reservation headquarters, called Old Agency. The trading post was named after the general manager of the American Fur Company of St. Louis, Pierre Chouteau Jr. (the misspelling of the town was allowed to stand in order to distinguish it from nearby Chouteau County). In more recent years, the town has become the Teton County seat. Surrounding Choteau are the sheep and cattle ranches that supported and still support it. Farther out, going west up Teton Canyon Road, we can now enter what has become the Lewis and Clark National Forest; beyond that we encounter the vast Bob Marshall Wilderness area.

Bud's father had a friend, an attorney in Choteau, who helped him secure a position as the first principal of Teton County Free High School. The elder Guthrie had graduated from the University of Indiana, Bloomington, and had taught for several years in

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that state, but he looked toward the West, hoping for a challenge and a more open environment. His wife was also a college graduate, earning her degree from Earlam College, a Quaker school in Richmond, Indiana.

On their way to Choteau, the Guthries, with a small girl in tow and a baby in arms, got off a narrow-gauge railroad coach at the small station in Collins, some thirty miles from their destination. Speculating about their arrival, Bud has said that what they encountered must have been a shock: "They had never seen blanket Indians before, never beheld the rude makeshifts of early settlement, never had to reckon with what must have struck them as a body of rough and unreckoning men."

They traveled that last thirty miles by stagecoach and entered, in Choteau, what certainly seemed to them the frontier. To the town, Guthrie's parents must have seemed strange. As the son has pointed out, they were different for being college graduates and for loving books and caring about ideas. For some time after they arrived, although they made friends, the mother and father depended almost exclusively on each other for intellectual stimulation.

Nevertheless, the father luxuriated in his new environment. He told Bud about his first morning in Choteau. He had gotten up early and gone outside. He looked around him and saw that to the south rose two lonely buttes, westward stood the great blue lift of the Rockies, benches climbed out of the Teton River valley, and then to the east they leveled into flatlands that seemed to run on forever.

> Overhead—you could almost say on all sides, too—was the sky—deeper, bluer, bigger than he had ever known.
>
> He breathed the air. He looked. He heard the ring of silence. He felt somehow afloat in space. A shudder shook

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> him, the shudder of delight. He stretched his arms wide and said aloud, "By George, I'm free!"

"It is a feeling," his son said reflecting on this, "that surely everyone must have who has stood under the great sky and looked and lost his eye in the distance, and has listened and heard the silence sing."

Though the Guthries were closer to Unitarian than Fundamentalist in belief, the only church in town they could affiliate with was Methodist—that foe of fun, as Bud has described it. While the Guthries tended to equate drink with sin, the social centers of the town were the saloons, where the stockmen gathered to discuss cattle, sheep, and grass. Many of them thought of teaching as a sissy occupation. But the elder Guthrie was no sissy. He was one tough customer.

Shortly after the Guthries arrived in town, he was challenged. A man named McDermott, sitting on his horse, mocked him, and the senior Guthrie pulled him off his horse. As George Coffey recalls, Guthrie then invited the man to have it out, but the invitation was not accepted. Bud later used the incident as the basis for a short story, "First Principal." On another occasion, as Bud recollects, his father walked up to a man pointing a pistol first at a friend and then at him and disarmed him. But what was most remembered about him was his skill as a teacher and his scholarly bent. Although bookish, he was a strict disciplinarian and brooked no disturbance in his classrooms, and even though he was not a big man, he dealt with the big farm boys with a firm hand.

Underlining his bookishness, Mrs. Carl B. Field recalls that the senior Guthrie read a dictionary while presiding over study hall periods. Bud recalled his father's abilities as a teacher: "Latin, English, mathematics, history, the science of that time—he could teach

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them all and teach them well. Subjects came to life under his tutelage. Interests broadened. His advice gave depth and directions to more lives than I can say." George Coffey, who was in the 1905 graduating class, the senior Guthrie's second class, remembered that "he was a very fine instructor. . . . More than one student has come home to say Mr. Guthrie was a better instructor than he ever got in college." He received a number of offers to go elsewhere, but was never tempted to leave Choteau. His son felt that his father was afraid to go: "Outside the local, outside the physical, he had little confidence and, unsure of himself, stood solid and sullen against wider opportunity."

Nevertheless, the he was a remarkable man and had a great influence on his son's interests and the course of his life. Bud's brother, Charles, or "Chick," has written a remembrance of the relationship of son and father:

> Bud always was a great reader, with great ability to concentrate. Noise never seemed to distract him. His father must be given a great deal of credit for rousing Bud's interest in the West and its history. He had quite a library of western Americana and Bud took full advantage of it. *The Lewis and Clark Journals*, Chittenden's *American Fur Trade of the Far West*, Francis Parkman's *Oregon Trail* were grist for his mill. Also the old *Youth's Companion* and the *American Boy*, magazines which ran stories by James Willard Schultz, who was married to a Blackfeet squaw and who lived with or near the Blackfeet for many years.
>
> Dad and Bud did considerable hunting and fishing together, they took walks through the fields, studied birds and plants. The whole family enjoyed camping in the mountains and dad would spin yarns at the campfire, some real and many apocryphal.

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Bud himself testified that he never had his father as a teacher; he recalled, "The stimulus and guidance that I got from him I got at home. I'm grateful for it. But for his interest in literature, but for his profound attachment to nature and the West, which took me into books and carried me afield to buffalo wallows, birds' nests, landmarks and sites of old excitement and made his loves my own, I doubt I would be writing now." He first learned from his father about the notable mountain men, such as Jedediah Smith, Tom Fitzpatrick, and Liver Eating Johnson. His father's tales about the adventures of these men were the main stimulus toward his voracious reading about the mountain men, even as a youngster.

Of all the books in his father's library of western lore, the one that seems to have made the strongest impression was Chittenden's *American Fur Trade of the Far West*. First published in 1902, Bud read it early in his life, later took notes on it, and then went back to it frequently in preparation for *The Big Sky*. Francis Parkman's *Oregon Trail* led father and son to go over a good part of the Oregon Trail, which, in turn, is related to the genesis of *The Way West* (he would go over the trail again twice later in life, once with Bernard DeVoto). Then father and son went to the scene of the Marias Massacre, which Bud used effectively, and sadly, to end *Fair Land, Fair Land*.

Bud had fond memories of his father reading aloud on long winter evenings, not just to the family but also to what friends the children (Bud, Chick, and Janie) had made:

"They would gather after supper and lie with us on the floor of the living room, where the Cole's Hot Blast maintained a sometimes spasmodic warmth, and from his seat in the Morris chair my father would reach for his book." Guthrie added that his father had a fine sense of theater, an elastic baritone voice, and an ability to assume dialects: "When he spoke for Uncle Remus, he *was*

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Uncle Remus." And, of course, the children gathered around on the floor always begged for just one more. Telling stories and making up stories was part of Bud's childhood.

But the relationship was not entirely positive. Writing in his autobiography, Bud said about his father, "He loved us, this I know, but devils dwelt in him, inexplicable and uncontainable. He was a man of vast impatience, of dark and instant angers. Stupidity, the unforeseen, chance variations and interruptions of plans and routines, God knows what—these fired his blood."

Bud's son remembered his father telling him about a time when his grandfather was coming home from a trip to inspect the school in Bynum. One of his duties was to visit all the county schools at least once a year. On his return trip, driving his Model-T, it was nearly dark when he got three flat tires, one after another. In those days, for each flat, you had to jack up the car, take off the wheel, pry off the tire with a tire iron, take out the tube and patch it, and then put it all back and pump up the tire. When he was through, his anger far surpassed the normal irritation. He was so furious when he got home that everyone in the family faded away into the background or hid, afraid to be anywhere near him.

Mr. Guthrie's temper and stern temperament became legendary in the community. George Coffey recalled him as "a different kind of man from normal. He was Victorian, with a good sense of humor; but when he wasn't joking he was a very stern man."

His sternness would seem to have come out of a Victorian Puritanism. That and his quick temper, which was often aroused by trespasses against his Puritan consciousness, are both illustrated in a story that Bud told in his autobiography and in a piece of short fiction, "Ebbie." It is a sad and shocking tale of how his father, trying to teach his bird dog not to wander, blinded her in one eye when he "dusted her with birdshot." Then, when the dog, called

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Jimps in real life, came into heat and male dogs hung around the house, his father became acutely embarrassed. Bud writes, "In his mind, I'm sure, there was an association here with evil. Sex on his doorstep!" One night Jimps escaped through the screened-in back porch and mated in the garden. In a fury, Bud's father grabbed his son's baseball bat, rushed out, and clubbed the dog on the head. The blow burst out the dog's one seeing eye, so that the father determined she would have to be shot, which he did reluctantly, "the demon in him overcome too late."

George Jackson, a lifelong friend of Bud's, remembered the incident and has said that "Buddy was quite a while getting over that. . . . Yep, he was quite a while getting over that." Mr. Guthrie's temper could be as quick as a lash, or as son Charles has said, "That aroused, he had all the good will of a rattlesnake." But as George Jackson has noted, his temper was "quick to mend"—still, that didn't necessarily make a situation better.

Relations between father and son, therefore, were complicated, as were Bud's emotional reactions to his father, whom he loved dearly but at times felt strongly he did not. In his autobiography, written long after his father's death, he wrote, "Whatever hate I had for him I loved is gone. I feel sorrow; and when I cast back to him without casting farther, I see his smile and feel his hand kind on my shoulder and hear his cheerful voice; and we have a chaw of licorice and catch a trout or find an arrowhead and speculate about the men who lived before us." However, Bud never really got over the religious fundamentalism in which he was raised and, he felt, indoctrinated. As he reached maturity, he rebelled strongly against it, drinking, smoking, and then, as a newspaperman, gambling (although he was considered by early friends to be "prim" in his relations with women). And fundamentalism seemed to be constantly in his mind as he wrote his novels, and it is invariably

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pictured as destructive. It begins, really, with his second novel in the series, *The Way West*, where, as Charles E. Hood put it, "Curtis Mack, a member of the Oregon-bound wagon train, recalls with bitterness the church back home "that had left its scars on him." . . . But Mack is victimized by his wife's puritanical upbringing as well as his own . . . [her] lingering sexual guilt makes her frigid."

The resulting frustration leads to a general anger that prompts Mack to wantonly kill an Indian and leads to a hunger that causes him to seduce a young woman, setting off a series of disastrous events. The expression of anti-fundamentalism we see here becomes stronger with each succeeding novel. Personal experience had given Guthrie insight into the Puritan mind and at the same time fueled the emotional reaction that kept the theme on his mind.

On the other hand, his father was not simply a fundamentalist. That strain in his character, as strong as it might have been, was balanced by another strain, his intellectualism. And whereas Bud reacted against the one, he embraced, with encouragement from his father, the other. The senior Guthrie's affinity for liberal thinkers would seem to contradict his Methodist Puritanism.

"I was reading Thoreau and John Burroughs during college, partly because my father liked them," Guthrie remembers. This conflict was never resolved in Guthrie's mind. "My father had the habits of fundamentalist, the observation of Sunday and all that. He was a liberal in philosophy and absolutist in behavior." By the time Guthrie was in college, his father was reading, and apparently appreciating, Darwin's theory.

Guthrie's mother, born Jenny June Thomas, was a different matter entirely. Her understanding love was crucial in providing an emotional anchor for Bud throughout his years of off-and-on conflict with his father and helped moderate his later rebellion. Whereas the father was a strict disciplinarian, intolerant of violations

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of his fundamentalist code, and impatient, Bud's mother was just about the opposite—tolerant, patient, and fun loving. Her tolerance, based on love and kindness, was almost beyond belief. As stern as her husband might have been, it was she who was clearly in charge of the home.

Chick, Bud's younger brother, has written a remembrance of their mother, in which he described her as a poor housekeeper. She tried, but she didn't want to be constantly fussing around—straightening rugs, rearranging chairs, and putting books and magazines where they belonged and thereby making everyone uncomfortable. He added, "She might have blamed her sons and their pals for the rumpled house. It was headquarters for the gang and the gang tracked in mud and brought disorder. In bad weather we played hide-and-seek inside, also ping-pong [on the dining room table] and marbles. Mom's supervision invariably was low-key and her patience practically unlimited. Being a scold was too high a price for a slick house."

Chick goes on to recall that his mother would wonder why she couldn't budget her time better and get more housework done. But the answer was plain even to her children—she didn't demand enough order from those who brought disorder. There were too many pillow fights and wrestling matches. She even let the kids play "basketball" in the dining room. They were restricted to four players and had to stay away from the china cabinet. They used a beanbag and threw it up to catch on a hook that was screwed into the doorframe between the dining and living rooms. They had success, a "basket," when the beanbag stuck on the hook (later they used the cylinders from an old Edison phonograph). She admitted to Chick that she shouldn't have allowed the game, but she was glad she did. She laughed, "You boys had fun and I had fun watching you." Chick concluded, "She made the house too popular. George

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Jackson was there daily. So was Frankie Monroe, a quarter-breed Indian boy who lived across the street. Ted MacDonald came. Also Jack Rose, Clark Coffey and Fatty Cowgill. They were all fond of Mom. She joked with them, listened to them, advised them, and gave them lemonade, bread, peanut butter and affection."

Although she was slow to anger, a major infraction of the rules of behavior would set her off. Chick recalled that when he and Bud pushed Frankie Monroe out of the hayloft and he sprained his ankle, punishment from his mom came swiftly and emphatically. Proper conduct was important to her, and she insisted on good manners. She wouldn't put up with rudeness, and as Chick notes, if you told a playmate to shut up, you wouldn't want to do so in earshot of his mother.

Mrs. Guthrie had fame among the neighbors and family friends as an excellent cook, although she was consistently modest about her cooking. Sitting down at the table for supper, she would regret that the meat was tough, the mashed potatoes dry, and the biscuits overdone. None of this was true, as evidenced by the many requests by family and guests for more meat, potatoes, and biscuits. She did all of her cooking on a wood stove, a Great Majestic, and she had to be alert, check the heat frequently, and then adjust the damper or feed more wood or coal when needed. There were no dials to set or buttons to push to regulate anything. If the heat was restored too late, a cake could collapse or a dinner be long delayed.

Chick recalled that Sunday was especially challenging for his mother:

> On the day of rest housewives hurried home from church to slave in the kitchen. A big dinner was as mandatory as prayer. It meant chicken or roast, mashed potatoes and a gallon of gravy. It meant creamed peas and corn pudding,

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> cranberry jelly or spiced peaches and, of course, pie or cake and ice cream. No pre-cooked ham or rolls, no frozen vegetables, no packaged potatoes or mixes. Not even running water. Just Mom and the Great Majestic doing their thing the hard way.
>
> Dad would be in the living room with the guests. These might be widows or spinsters—or rootless and grizzled men. Mom was ever ready to share the family bounty with the homeless and deprived.

Bud has said that he is both amazed and oppressed as he thinks back on his mother's day-to-day situation. For water, they had a hand pump; for a toilet, they had an outhouse, and on frigid nights, chamber pots and slop jars. For light, they used coal-oil lamps (for those of us used to electric lights, these can be almost impossible to read by). And for washing, his mother had a tub and a board. For hot water, they had teakettles, buckets, and the reservoir on the kitchen range. For heat, there was the cooking range and a coal stove in the sitting room. They had no ice in the summer, and heat made it hard to tell the difference between butter and batter. Everyone in the family bathed in a circular washtub, taking turns in the same warm water.

Bud's memories of his mother's daily occupations differ somewhat from his brother's. Chick remembered a rumpled household and a mother who tried hard but didn't succeed. Bud recalled a mother constantly occupied: "Washing. Ironing. Dusting. Pushing broom or Bissell sweeper. Cooking. Pumping. Dumping swill. Sewing. Mending. In season canning wild and brought-in fruits. . . . Toting coal and firewood when we forgot or skimped our chores. By night and morning straining milk and putting it away to cool and then to skim. Churning. Making cottage cheese. Filling lamps. Trimming wicks. Polishing smoked chimneys. Putting

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down sauerkraut. Putting up mincemeat. Tending a baby in arms or carrying one in a womb. And all the time finding time for us who were older and for our friends." Bud's recital here not only details the rather hectic life of his mother but gives us a sense of the texture of life in small town, rural Montana in the early nineteenth century.

The mother's burdens, referred to above, involved not only multiple and ongoing household tasks but almost constant pregnancy from 1898 to 1913 (mother and father were married in 1896). Nine children were born, but only three survived—A. B. Junior, or Bud, born 1901; Charles, or Chick, born 1903; and Margaret Jane, or Janie; born 1913. His mother's many pregnancies and the many tragic infant deaths that resulted became another cause for Bud's resentment, although he never spoke of it to his father. In his autobiography, Bud wrote, "Twenty years and more after her death, I think of my mother as constant lovingkindness, and as constant, largely inward anxiety, for mortality ran so high among her children that people said privately we came of weak blood."

Whatever the reasons for the deaths might have been, Bud, when he was old enough to understand, resented his father's keeping his mother pregnant so much of the time—particularly when one death followed another. Both he and Chick recalled what seemed to be a central fact of their childhood; as Chick has said, "Too many deaths, too many funerals." Bud wrote in his autobiography, "My memory is full of funerals, of the cold, still parlor, of the cold coffin and the cold, still body lying in it." Bud thought this sad procession came from his father's lack of self-control, and to put it bluntly, he thought his father was oversexed and, in his relations with his wife, selfish. He never expressed these feelings to his father because talk of sex in the home was forbidden. He speculated long after his father's death: "Sometimes I wonder if he didn't fear

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sex because he had too much appetite for it, too much for a man committed to monogamy."

However, other aspects of nature were, for his father, subjects to be studied. With the aid of field guides, he came to know all the native birds and plants, and he became an excellent fisherman. He tied his own flies, Professors and Royal Coachmen, and could cast them exactly where he wanted, without cracking the line or slapping the water. He knew the waters, the favorite holding places of the native cutthroat trout, and what the fish would be feeding on in that season and stage of the river. What was odd, though, was he would be wearing—nearly always—a suit, white shirt, and bowtie, even though he would take off his jacket and sometimes roll up his sleeves and put on a fishing vest. He was a formal man in an informal, rough environment.

He passed on his knowledge of the outdoors and his hunting and fishing skills to his children. And they, in turn, spent what time they could get—after school, between chores, and during the summer—in the mountain forests, in the fields, and on the streams. Bud has reflected on this aspect of his childhood, writing: "I'm glad I grew up where I did, in the town of Choteau, in Teton County. I fished the streams, hunted the thickets, hunted the ponds, swam in Spring Creek in water so cold we always built a bonfire to gather 'round, blue-chilled and gasping after a few strokes. In June I gathered serviceberries, in September chokecherries. Nature was my teacher, and I loved the lessons."

Being so close to nature in childhood had long-term effects on his character and attitudes. One was an aversion to cities, places of stone and steel and crowds of people. That aversion began when he was a youngster visiting Great Falls, not really a city but a town of only twenty thousand. He worried that each of the people he encountered "instead of being green like [himself], was surely

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seasoned and disdainful." He added, "I feared that by some word or deed I'd betray my total ignorance." When he was twelve, Bud went with his mother and baby brother John to California, where they hoped that the baby would recover his health (he didn't). He wrote to Nancy, a classmate in Choteau, from Berkeley: "I am expecting a nice long letter from you, because you can write about a decent town, and I can only write a note about a crazy city." (This was 1913.) Throughout his life he never felt at ease in a city, however large or small it might be.

Another effect of his early exposure to nature was his commitment to environmentalism, a gradual commitment that grew more intense with every passing year. Looking back over the benefits of his Choteau childhood in nature, he wrote in his late eighties, only a few years before his death, "I would save these riches for the youngsters who come along in all the years ahead. I want them to enjoy what I did. I want the places to remain rewarding for them. That's one of the reasons I am an environmentalist."

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