

JOURNALISTS AND JOURNALISM **FEATURE**

The Motorcycle Gangs

A portrait of an outsider underground.

By Hunter S. Thompson

MARCH 2, 2005



Hunter S. Thompson (AP Photo/Ed Andrieski)



This article is part of The Nation's 150th

Anniversary Special Issue. Download a free PDF of the issue,
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This article first appeared in the May 17, 1965 issue.

San Francisco

Last Labor Day weekend newspapers all over California gave front-page reports of a heinous gang rape in the moonlit sand dunes near the town of Seaside on the Monterey Peninsula. Two girls, aged 14 and 15, were allegedly taken from their dates by a gang of filthy, frenzied, boozed-up motorcycle hoodlums called “Hell’s Angels,” and dragged off to be “repeatedly assaulted.”

A deputy sheriff, summoned by one of the erstwhile dates, said he “arrived at the beach and saw a huge bonfire surrounded by cyclists of both sexes. Then the two sobbing, near-hysterical girls staggered out of the darkness, begging for help. One was completely nude and the other had on only a torn sweater.”

Some 300 Hell’s Angels were gathered in the Seaside-Monterey area at the time, having convened, they said, for the purpose of raising funds among themselves to send the body of a former member, killed in an accident, back to his mother in North Carolina. One of the Angels, hip enough to falsely identify himself as “Frenchy of San Bernardino,” told a reporter who came out to meet the cyclists: “We chose Monterey because we get treated good here; most other places we get thrown out of town.”

But Frenchy spoke too soon. The Angels weren't on the peninsula twenty-four hours before four of them were in jail for rape, and the rest of the troop was being escorted to the county line by a large police contingent. Several were quoted, somewhat derisively, as saying: "That rape charge against our guys is phony and it won't stick."

It turned out to be true, but that was another story and certainly no headliner. The difference between the Hell's Angels in the paper and the Hell's Angels for real is enough to make a man wonder what newsprint is for. It also raises a question as to who are the real hell's angels.

Ever since World War II, California has been strangely plagued by wild men on motorcycles. They usually travel in groups of ten to thirty, booming along the highways and stopping here and there to get drunk and raise hell. In 1947, hundreds of them ran amok in the town of Hollister, an hour's fast drive south of San Francisco, and got enough press to inspire a film called *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando. The film had a massive effect on thousands of young California motorcycle buffs; in many ways, it was their version of *The Sun Also Rises*.

The California climate is perfect for motorcycles, as well as surfboards, swimming pools and convertibles. Most of the cyclists are harmless weekend types,

members of the American Motorcycle Association, and no more dangerous than skiers or skin divers. But a few belong to what the others call “outlaw clubs,” and these are the ones who—especially on weekends and holidays—are likely to turn up almost anywhere in the state, looking for action. Despite everything the psychiatrists and Freudian casuists have to say about them, they are tough, mean and potentially as dangerous as a pack of wild boar. When push comes to shove, any leather fetishes or inadequacy feelings that may be involved are entirely beside the point, as anyone who has ever tangled with these boys will sadly testify. When you get in an argument with a group of outlaw motorcyclists, you can generally count your chances of emerging unmaimed by the number of heavy-handed allies you can muster in the time it takes to smash a beer bottle. In this league, sportsmanship is for old liberals and young fools. “I smashed his face,” one of them said to me of a man he’d never seen until the swinging started. “He got wise. He called me a punk. He must have been stupid.”

The most notorious of these outlaw groups is the Hell’s Angels, supposedly headquartered in San Bernardino, just east of Los Angeles, and with branches all over the state. As a result of the infamous “Labor Day gang rape,” the Attorney General of California has recently issued an official report on the Hell’s Angels. According to the report, they are easily identified:

The emblem of the Hell's Angels, termed "colors," consists of an embroidered patch of a winged skull wearing a motorcycle helmet. Just below the wing of the emblem are the letters "MC." Over this is a band bearing the words "Hell's Angels." Below the emblem is another patch bearing the local chapter name, which is usually an abbreviation for the city or locality. These patches are sewn on the back of a usually sleeveless denim jacket. In addition, members have been observed wearing various types of Luftwaffe insignia and reproductions of German iron crosses.* (*Purely for decorative and shock effect. The Hell's Angels are apolitical and no more racist than other ignorant young thugs.) Many affect beards and their hair is usually long and unkempt. Some wear a single earring in a pierced ear lobe. Frequently they have been observed to wear metal belts made of a length of polished motorcycle drive chain which can be unhooked and used as a flexible bludgeon... Probably the most universal common denominator in identification of Hell's Angels is generally their filthy condition. Investigating officers consistently report these people, both club members and their female associates, seem badly in need of a bath. Fingerprints are a very effective means of identification because a high percentage of Hell's Angels have criminal records.

In addition to the patches on the back of Hell's Angel's jackets, the "One Percenters" wear a patch reading "1%-er." Another badge worn by some members bears the

number “13.” It is reported to represent the 13th letter of the alphabet, “M,” which in turn stands for marijuana and indicates the wearer thereof is a user of the drug.

The Attorney General’s report was colorful, interesting, heavily biased and consistently alarming—just the sort of thing, in fact, to make a clanging good article for a national news magazine. Which it did; in both barrels. *Newsweek* led with a left hook titled “The Wild Ones,” *Time* crossed right, inevitably titled “The Wilder Ones.” The Hell’s Angels, cursing the implications of this new attack, retreated to the bar of the DePau Hotel near the San Francisco waterfront and planned a weekend beach party. I showed them the articles. Hell’s Angels do not normally read the news magazines. “I’d go nuts if I read that stuff all the time,” said one. “It’s all bullshit.”

Newsweek was relatively circumspect. It offered local color, flashy quotes and “evidence” carefully attributed to the official report but unaccountably said the report accused the Hell’s Angels of homosexuality, whereas the report said just the opposite. *Time* leaped into the fray with a flurry of blood, booze and semen-flecked wordage that amounted, in the end, to a classic of supercharged hokum: “Drug-induced stupors... no act is too degrading... swap girls, drugs and motorcycles with equal abandon... stealing forays... then ride off again to seek some new nadir in sordid behavior...”

Where does all this leave the Hell's Angels and the thousands of shuddering Californians (according to *Time*) who are worried sick about them? Are these outlaws really going to be busted, routed and cooled, as the news magazines implied? Are California highways any safer as a result of this published uproar? Can honest merchants once again walk the streets in peace? The answer is that nothing has changed except that a few people calling themselves the Hell's Angels have a new sense of identity and importance.

After two weeks of intensive dealings with the Hell's Angels phenomenon, both in print and in person, I'm convinced the net result of the general howl and publicity has been to obscure and avoid the real issues by invoking a savage conspiracy of bogeymen and conning the public into thinking all will be "business as usual" once this fearsome snake is scotched, as it surely will be by hard and ready minions of the Establishment.

Meanwhile, according to Attorney General Thomas C. Lynch's own figures, California's true crime picture makes the Hell's Angels look like a gang of petty jack rollers. The police count 463 Hell's Angels: 205 around L.A. and 233 in the San Francisco-Oakland area. I don't know about L.A. but the real figures for the Bay Area are thirty or so in Oakland and exactly eleven—with one facing expulsion—in San Francisco. This disparity makes it hard to accept other police statistics. The dubious

package also shows convictions on 1,023 misdemeanor counts and 151 felonies—primarily vehicle theft, burglary and assault. This is for all years and all alleged members.

California's overall figures for 1963 list 1,116 homicides, 12,448 aggravated assaults, 6,257 sex offenses, and 24,532 burglaries. In 1962, the state listed 4,121 traffic deaths, up from 3,839 in 1961. Drug arrest figures for 1964 showed a 101 percent increase in juvenile marijuana arrests over 1963, and a recent back-page story in the *San Francisco Examiner* said, "The venereal disease rate among [the city's] teen-agers from 15-19 has more than doubled in the past four years." Even allowing for the annual population jump, juvenile arrests in all categories are rising by 10 per cent or more each year.

Against this background, would it make any difference to the safety and peace of mind of the average Californian if every motorcycle outlaw in the state (all 901, according to the state) were garroted within twenty-four hours? This is not to say that a group like the Hell's Angels has no meaning. The generally bizarre flavor of their offenses and their insistence on identifying themselves make good copy, but usually overwhelm—in print, at least—the unnerving truth that they represent, in colorful microcosm, what is quietly and anonymously growing all around us every day of the week.

“We’re bastards to the world and they’re bastards to us,” one of the Oakland Angels told a *Newsweek* reporter. “When you walk into a place where people can see you, you want to look as repulsive and repugnant as possible. We are complete social outcasts—outsiders against society.”

A lot of this is a pose, but anyone who believes that’s all it is has been on thin ice since the death of Jay Gatsby. The vast majority of motorcycle outlaws are uneducated, unskilled men between 20 and 30, and most have no credentials except a police record. So at the root of their sad stance is a lot more than a wistful yearning for acceptance in a world they never made; their real motivation is an instinctive certainty as to what the score really is. They are out of the ball game and they know it—and that is their meaning; for unlike most losers in today’s society, the Hell’s Angels not only know but spitefully proclaim exactly where they stand.

I went to one of their meetings recently, and half-way through the night I thought of Joe Hill on his way to face a Utah firing squad and saying his final words: “Don’t mourn, organize.” It is safe to say that no Hell’s Angel has ever heard of Joe Hill or would know a Wobbly from a Bushmaster, but nevertheless they are somehow related. The I.W.W. had serious plans for running the world, while the Hell’s Angels mean only to defy the world’s machinery. But instead of losing quietly, one by one, they have banded together with a mindless

kind of loyalty and moved outside the framework, for good or ill. There is nothing particularly romantic or admirable about it; that's just the way it is, strength in unity. They don't mind telling you that running fast and loud on their customized Harley 74s gives them a power and a purpose that nothing else seems to offer.

Beyond that, their position as self-proclaimed outlaws elicits a certain popular appeal, however reluctant. That is especially true in the West and even in California where the outlaw tradition is still honored. The unarticulated link between the Hell's Angels and the millions of losers and outsiders who don't wear any colors is the key to their notoriety and the ambivalent reactions they inspire. There are several other keys, having to do with politicians, policemen and journalists, but for this we have to go back to Monterey and the Labor Day "gang rape."

Politicians, like editors and cops, are very keen on outrage stories, and state Senator Fred S. Farr of Monterey County is no exception. He is a leading light of the Carmel-Pebble Beach set and no friend to hoodlums anywhere, especially gang rapists who invade his constituency. Senator Farr demanded an immediate investigation of the Hell's Angels and others of their ilk—Comancheros, Stray Satans, Iron Horsemen, Rattlers (a Negro club), and Booze Fighters—whose lack of status caused them all to be lumped together as "other disreputables." In the cut-off world of big bikes, long

runs and classy rumbles, this new, state-sanctioned stratification made the Hell's Angels very big. They were, after all, Number One. Like John Dillinger.

Attorney General Lynch, then new in his job, moved quickly to mount an investigation of sorts. He sent questionnaires to more than 100 sheriffs, district attorneys and police chiefs, asking for more information on the Hell's Angels and those "other disreputables." He also asked for suggestions as to how the law might deal with them.

Six months went by before all the replies were condensed into the fifteen-page report that made new outrage headlines when it was released to the press. (The Hell's Angels also got a copy; one of them stole mine.) As a historical document, it read like a plot synopsis of Mickey Spillane's worst dreams. But in the matter of solutions it was vague, reminiscent in some ways of Madame Nhu's proposals for dealing with the Vietcong. The state was going to centralize information on these thugs, urge more vigorous prosecution, put them all under surveillance whenever possible, etc.

A careful reader got the impression that even if the Hell's Angels had acted out this script—eighteen crimes were specified and dozens of others implied—very little would or could be done about it, and that indeed Mr. Lynch was well aware he'd been put, for political reasons, on a pretty weak scent. There was plenty of

mad action, senseless destruction, orgies, brawls, perversions and a strange parade of “innocent victims” that, even on paper and in careful police language, was enough to tax the credulity of the dullest police reporter. Any bundle of information off police blotters is bound to reflect a special viewpoint, and parts of the Attorney General’s report are actually humorous, if only for the language. Here is an excerpt:

On November 4, 1961, a San Francisco resident driving through Rodeo, possibly under the influence of alcohol, struck a motorcycle belonging to a Hell’s Angel parked outside a bar. A group of Angels pursued the vehicle, pulled the driver from the car and attempted to demolish the rather expensive vehicle. The bartender claimed he had seen nothing, but a cocktail waitress in the bar furnished identification to the officers concerning some of those responsible for the assault. The next day it was reported to officers that a member of the Hell’s Angels gang had threatened the life of this waitress as well as another woman waitress. A male witness who definitely identified five participants in the assault including the president of Vallejo Hell’s Angels and the Vallejo “Road Rats” advised officers that because of his fear of retaliation by club members he would refuse to testify to the facts he had previously furnished.

That is a representative item in the section of the report titled “Hoodlum Activities.” First, it occurred in a small town—Rodeo is on San Pablo Bay just north of Oakland—where the Angels had stopped at a bar without causing any trouble until some offense was committed against them. In this case, a driver whom even the police admit was “possibly” drunk hit one of their motorcycles. The same kind of accident happens every day all over the nation, but when it involves outlaw motorcyclists it is something else again. Instead of settling the thing with an exchange of insurance information or, at the very worst, an argument with a few blows, the Hell’s Angels beat the driver and “attempted to demolish the vehicle.” I asked one of them if the police exaggerated this aspect, and he said no, they had done the natural thing: smashed headlights, kicked in doors, broken windows and torn various components off the engine.

Of all their habits and predilections that society finds alarming, this departure from the time-honored concept of “an eye for an eye” is the one that most frightens people. The Hell’s Angels try not to do anything halfway, and anyone who deals in extremes is bound to cause trouble, whether he means to or not. This, along with a belief in total retaliation for any offense or insult, is what makes the Hell’s Angels unmanageable for the police and morbidly fascinating to the general public. Their claim that they “don’t start trouble” is probably true more often than not, but their idea of “provocation” is dangerously broad, and their

biggest problem is that nobody else seems to understand it. Even dealing with them personally, on the friendliest terms, you can sense their hair-trigger readiness to retaliate.

This is a public thing, and not at all true among themselves. In a meeting, their conversation is totally frank and open. They speak to and about one another with an honesty that more civilized people couldn't bear. At the meeting I attended (and before they realized I was a journalist) one Angel was being publicly evaluated; some members wanted him out of the club and others wanted to keep him in. It sounded like a group-therapy clinic in progress—not exactly what I expected to find when just before midnight I walked into the bar of the De Pau in one of the bleakest neighborhoods in San Francisco, near Hunters Point. By the time I parted company with them—at 6:30 the next morning after an all-night drinking bout in my apartment—I had been impressed by a lot of things, but no one thing about them was as consistently obvious as their group loyalty. This is an admirable quality, but it is also one of the things that gets them in trouble: a fellow Angel is *always right* when dealing with outsiders. And this sort of reasoning makes a group of “offended” Hell's Angels nearly impossible to deal with. Here is another incident from the Attorney General's report:

On September 19, 1964, a large group of Hell's Angels and "Satan's Slaves" converged on a bar in the South Gate (Los Angeles County), parking their motorcycles and cars in the street in such a fashion as to block one-half of the roadway. They told officers that three members of the club had been recently asked to stay out of the bar and that they had come to tear it down. Upon their approach the bar owner locked the doors and turned off the lights and no entrance was made, but the group did demolish a cement block fence. On arrival of the police, members of the club were lying on the sidewalk and in the street. They were asked to leave the city, which they did reluctantly. As they left, several were heard to say that they would be back and tear down the bar.

Here again is the ethic of total retaliation. If you're "asked to stay out" of a bar, you don't just punch the owner—you come back with your army and destroy the whole edifice. Similar incidents—along with a number of vague rape complaints—make up the bulk of the report. Eighteen incidents in four years, and none except the rape charges are more serious than cases of assaults on citizens who, for their own reasons, had become involved with the Hell's Angels prior to the violence. I could find no cases of unwarranted attacks on wholly innocent victims. There are a few borderline cases, wherein victims of physical attacks seemed innocent, according to police and press reports, but later refused to testify for fear of "retaliation." The report asserts very

strongly that Hell's Angels are difficult to prosecute and convict because they make a habit of threatening and intimidating witnesses. That is probably true to a certain extent, but in many cases victims have refused to testify because they were engaged in some legally dubious activity at the time of the attack.

In two of the most widely publicized incidents the prosecution would have fared better if their witnesses and victims *had* been intimidated into silence. One of these was the Monterey "gang rape," and the other a "rape" in Clovis, near Fresno in the Central Valley. In the latter, a 36-year-old widow and mother of five children claimed she'd been yanked out of a bar where she was having a quiet beer with another woman, then carried to an abandoned shack behind the bar and raped repeatedly for two and a half hours by fifteen or twenty Hell's Angels and finally robbed of \$150. That's how the story appeared in the San Francisco newspapers the next day, and it was kept alive for a few more days by the woman's claims that she was getting phone calls threatening her life if she testified against her assailants.

Then, four days after the crime, the victim was arrested on charges of "sexual perversion." The true story emerged, said the Clovis chief of police, when the woman was "confronted by witnesses. Our investigation shows she was not raped," said the chief. "She participated in lewd acts in the tavern with at least three

other Hell's Angels before the owners ordered them out. She encouraged their advances in the tavern, then led them to an abandoned house in the rear... She was not robbed but, according to a woman who accompanied her, had left her house early in the evening with \$5 to go bar-hopping." That incident did not appear in the Attorney General's report.

But it was impossible not to mention the Monterey "gang rape," because it was the reason for the whole subject to become official. Page one of the report—which *Time's* editors apparently skipped—says that the Monterey case was dropped because "... further investigation raised questions as to whether forcible rape had been committed or if the identifications made by victims were valid." Charges were dismissed on September 25, with the concurrence of a grand jury. The deputy District Attorney said "a doctor examined the girls and found no evidence" to support the charges. "Besides that, one girl refused to testify," he explained, "and the other was given a lie-detector test and found to be wholly unreliable."

This, in effect, was what the Hell's Angels had been saying all along. Here is their version of what happened, as told by several who were there:

One girl was white and pregnant, the other was colored, and they were with five colored studs. They hung around our bar—Nick's Place on Del Monte Avenue—for

about three hours Saturday night, drinking and talking with our riders, then they came out to the beach with us—them and their five boyfriends. Everybody was standing around the fire, drinking wine, and some of the guys were talking to them—hustling ’em, naturally—and soon somebody asked the two chicks if they wanted to be turned on—you know, did they want to smoke some pot? They said yeah, and then they walked off with some of the guys to the dunes. The spade went with a few guys and then she wanted to quit, but the pregnant one was really hot to trot; the first four or five guys she was really dragging into her arms, but after that she cooled off, too. By this time, though, one of their boyfriends had got scared and gone for the cops—and that’s all it was.

But not quite all. After that there were Senator Farr and Tom Lynch and a hundred cops and dozens of newspaper stories and articles in the national news magazine—and even this article, which is a direct result of the Monterey “gang rape.”

When the much-quoted report was released, the local press—primarily the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which had earlier done a long and fairly objective series on the Hell’s Angels—made a point of saying that the Monterey charges against the Hell’s Angels had been dropped for lack of evidence. *Newsweek* was careful not to mention Monterey at all, but the *New York Times* referred to it as “the alleged gang rape” which, however, left no doubt in

a reader's mind that something savage had occurred. It remained for *Time*, though, to flatly ignore the fact that the Monterey rape charges had been dismissed. Its article leaned heavily on the hairiest and least factual sections of the report, and ignored the rest. It said, for instance, that the Hell's Angels initiation rite "demands that any new member bring a woman or girl [called a 'sheep'] who is willing to submit to sexual intercourse with each member of the club." That is untrue, although, as one Angel explained, "Now and then you get a woman who likes to cover the crowd, and hell, I'm no prude. People don't like to think women go for that stuff, but a lot of them do."

We were talking across a pool table about the rash of publicity and how it had affected the Angel's activities. I was trying to explain to him that the bulk of the press in this country has such a vested interest in the *status quo* that it can't afford to do much honest probing at the roots, for fear of what they might find.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Of course I don't like to read all this bullshit because it brings the heat down on us, but since we got famous we've had more rich fags and sex-hungry women come looking for us than we ever had before. Hell, these days we have more action than we can handle." **N**

Hunter S. Thompson In 1965 Hunter Thompson was living in San Francisco. He had recently quit the *National Observer* and was dead broke. When Carey McWilliams sent him a query, enclosing a report of the California Attorney General’s office on motorcycle gangs and an offer of one hundred dollars for an article, Thompson accepted. He later expanded his *Nation* article into his bestselling book, *Hell’s Angels*. Thompson, the founder of “gonzo” journalism, went on to write, among other books, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* and *The Great Shark Hunt*.

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This Is All Very, Very, Very Normal

An oh-so-normal week in Washington, in review.
By Tom Tomorrow

TODAY 6:00 AM

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW

**THIS IS ALL
VERY, VERY,
VERY, VERY,
VERY, VERY
NORMAL**

A LOOK BACK AT THE WEEK THAT WAS

1) THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES REPEATEDLY HARASSES HIS OWN ATTORNEY GENERAL ON SOCIAL MEDIA, WHICH IS AN ENTIRELY NORMAL THING TO DO!

Why doesn't pathetic Jeff Sessions investigate Crooked Hillary's email or really ANYTHING that will take attention away from Russia??

What a LOSER!
I like people who
DIDN'T recuse,
and can there-
fore fire Mueller!

2) MITCH MCCONNELL STRUGGLES--
AND ULTIMATELY FAILS--TO TAKE
HEALTH CARE AWAY FROM MILLIONS
OF AMERICANS BY ANY MEANS
NECESSARY. ALSO VERY NORMAL!

THE LATEST VERSION OF THE BILL IS
HERE--INSIDE THE **MYSTERY BOX!**

NO, YOU
CAN'T
LOOK.

3) TRUMP ANNOUNCES BAN OF TRANS SERVICE MEMBERS VIA TWITTER, CATCHING EVERYONE--INCLUDING THE PENTAGON--BY SURPRISE. HAVE WE MENTIONED THE NORMALCY?

**RED ALERT! POTUS IS TWEETING!
I REPEAT--POTUS IS TWEETING!**

FUN EXTREMELY NORMAL FACT: DURING THE NINE MINUTE GAP BETWEEN TWEETS, MILITARY OFFICIALS WONDERED IF THE PRESIDENT WAS ABOUT TO ANNOUNCE WAR WITH NORTH KOREA.

4) ANTHONY SCARAMUCCI DENOUNCES COLLEAGUES TO REPORTER IN OBSCENITY-LADEN RANT, LIKE ANY NORMAL WHITE HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR!

I AM **VERY** GOOD AT MY JOB AND
WILL **DEFINITELY** NOT BE THROWN
UNDER THE \$\$\$!% BUS BY DONALD
TRUMP! UNLIKE SOME OTHER \$\$\$!
PEOPLE AROUND HERE!

5) IT'S JUST ANOTHER TYPICAL WEEK IN AMERICA, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF A MAN WHO PERSONIFIES THE VERY **CONCEPT** OF NORMAL BEHAVIOR!

"WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE LATE, GREAT ABRAHAM LINCOLN, I CAN BE **MORE** PRESIDENTIAL THAN ANY PRESIDENT THAT'S EVER HELD THIS OFFICE, THAT I CAN TELL YOU!"

A cartoon illustration of Donald Trump with a speech bubble that reads "ACTUAL TOTALLY NORMAL QUOTE!". He is shown from the chest up, wearing a grey suit, white shirt, and red tie. He has his characteristic blonde hair and is making a hand gesture with his right hand. The background features stylized American flags.

NEXT WEEK: MORE OF THE SAME, EXCEPT EVEN **MORE** NORMAL!

TOM TOMORROW © 2017

(Tom Tomorrow © 2017)



This article is part of The Nation's 150th

Anniversary Special Issue. Download a free PDF of the issue, with articles by James Baldwin, Barbara Ehrenreich, Toni Morrison, Howard Zinn and many more, here. **N**

Tom Tomorrow

Tom Tomorrow Tom Tomorrow is a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist, and the 2013 Herblock Prize winner.

COMMENTS (0)

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