

The  
Catskills  
of  
New York:

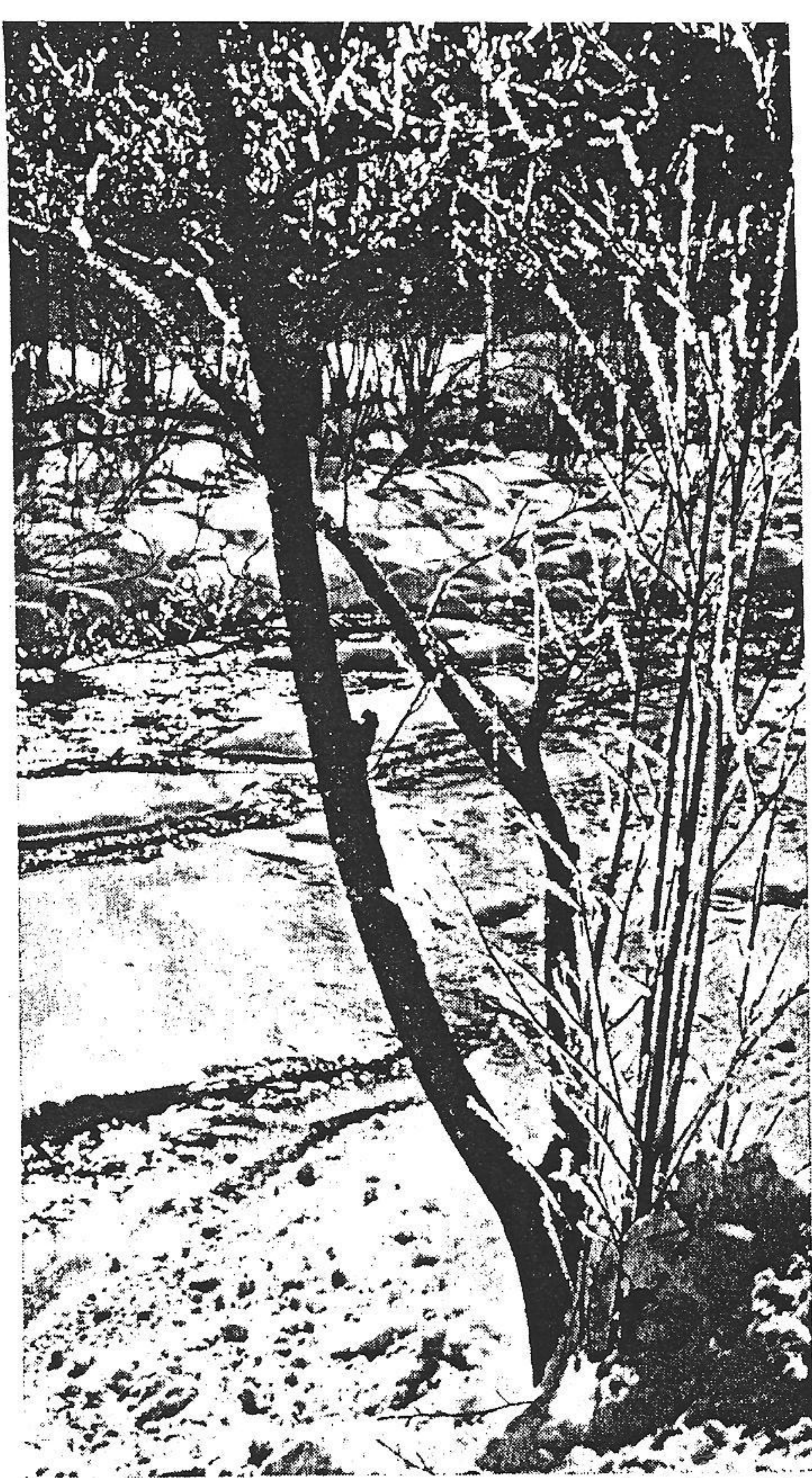
**PAST,  
PRESENT,  
POTENTIAL**

By SHERRET S. CHASE





Catskill Mountains of New York. Waterfall in wintertime



West Brook in winter *Gene Ahrens photos*

**M**ANY YEARS AGO my grandmother purchased an abandoned Catskill mountain farm from a local, long-established family named Winchell. Recently, going back through deeds to the property, now a family summering place, I was pleased and amused to note that an earlier version of the Winchell name was Van Winchell and, even earlier, Van Winkle! Dutch place names, Dutch family names and the Rip Van Winkle "legend" of Washington Irving are still very much a part of the Catskill country. "Catskill" is, I understand, a corruption of Kaaters Kil, wild cat creek. The mountains are full of "kills"—the Plattekill, the Pantherkill, the Beaverkill, the Bush Kill, the Kaaterskill, the West Kill—to name a few. Most are fine trout streams.

The Catskill region, broadly defined, contains parts of seven New York counties: Ulster, Greene, Albany, Schoharie, Otsego, Delaware and Sullivan. It is roughly 50 miles from north to south and 50 miles from east to west. Annual rainfall is about 46 inches. Approximately 600 thousand acres are contained within the boundaries of the Catskill State Park; of these, somewhat less than half are the state owned lands constituting the Catskill Forest Preserve. Large areas are also owned by New York City, as sites and protective reservations for large reservoirs on the Esopus, the Schoharie, the Rondout, the Neversink and the Delaware. Other smaller areas are owned by local towns and villages for water supply and other purposes.

Many fine streams take their

source in the Catskills. The Esopus flows from the central area to the southeast out of the mountains and then, well below the Ashokan Reservoir, elbows abruptly northeast to flow into the Hudson at Saugerties. The Rondout, draining to the south, similarly elbows abruptly northeast to enter the Hudson at Kingston. The Neversink drains to the southwest to the Delaware; the two branches of the upper Delaware, flowing in parallel courses, drain the western reaches of the region. The Susquehanna, farther west and parallel to the two branches of the Delaware, drains the northwest extension of the Catskill Plateau. Along the eastern face of the mountains are minor streams, the Sawkill, Plattekill and Kaaterskill, flowing eastward to the Hudson. At the northeast is the Catskill,





Each season has its special charms—in winter, the silent fall of snow, the joy of skiing or snowshoeing through the woodlands

flowing southeastward to the Hudson. Of the major streams only the Schoharie flows north, to the Mohawk River.

Once isolated, a place of mystery and superstitious awe to the Indians and early Dutch settlers of the Hudson Valley, now an easy two and a half hours from central New York City by the New York Thruway, the Catskills still afford the solitude of wilderness—though the mountains today are fringed and spotted with areas of intense human activity. Indeed no part of the area is untouched by man. Only the spruce-fir forests of the highest ridges closely approximate their virgin state. There one can still find the tracks of the snowshoe rabbit and wildcat on new snow in winter, and there the hiker or hunter coming upwind may chance to see a bear or cat, though briefly. The forests of the Catskills have been ravaged of their hemlocks by the tan-bark peelers of the early eighteen hundreds and of their superb chestnuts by the even more destructive chestnut blight of the

early nineteen hundreds. The birch, beech, oaks and maple, pine and hickory have been cut and recut for cordwood and timber; and fires, some intentionally set to favor the blueberry, others accidental, have in years past burned vast areas. In spite of all this, there is more forest today than eighty years ago and much of it is in remarkably good condition. This is more tribute to nature than to man, though both have had their role. The hemlock is regaining its hold in the more cool and humid areas of the mountains. The chestnut persists as a minor part of the flora, reduced to a shrub element of the hardwood forest, dying back and resprouting again with amazing tenacity. The deer population is large, possibly too large; greater today than it was in the primeval forest.

Though I have sampled all the seasons in the mountains, never has time permitted being there through all the year. Each season has its special charms—the first warm days, the pale tree flowers of early spring; then the succession of flowering

shrubs, wild and half wild, the shad-blow, the cherry and apple, lilac and pinkster, and finally the mountain laurel and in a few southern valleys the rhododendron also; on the forest floor and in the marshes one finds the delicate herbaceous flowers: arbutus and marsh marigolds first, later the pogonias, trilliums and ladyslippers—to name only a few. In summer, there are the gentle evenings with the call of the whippoorwill or the drama of thunder, lightning and violent rainstorms, the verdant foliage of the deep forests. In autumn, the crisp, cold days and spectacular displays of yellow, orange and red foliage. In winter, the silent fall of snow, the clean, white carpet in the fields and forest, and the joy of skiing or snowshoeing through the woodlands and open fields.

These are the beauties; the region also has its ugly aspects—the defoliation of acres of forest by the larvae of the gypsy moth; the dumps of tin cans and other litter along the highways and country lanes; the beer





Gene Ahrens photos

In summer, a boy and his dog can enjoy a solitary swim or go for a long hike in the woods

cans and paper in the trout streams and on the mountain trails; the scars on mountain slopes, tolerable in winter but ugly in summer, of the vast new ski developments; the graveyards of discarded automobiles; the hideous, oversized, misplaced billboards; the misguided straightening of streams and widening of minor roadways; the garishness of some of the resort towns and hotels; the cheapness of some new housing developments, cheap in imagination and taste though not in cost. To me a particularly personal affront is Route 28 west from Kingston, for this is my approachway. Shoddy is the kindest word for it; a four lane strip of ugliness becoming uglier each year with misguided, second-rate commercialization.

The Catskills are not proper mountains in the geologic sense. The region is an uplifted plateau, dissected by erosion. The rock is sedimentary—shales, sandstones, a few infinitesimal lenses of coal, and a cap of once massive conglomerate at the topmost level. Most is red

shale and bluestone. The strata slope to the west. Indeed the western edge of the Catskill region is hard to delimit. The highest peaks, where the cap of conglomerate is found, are over 4,000 feet in elevation. Since the Hudson River on the east is at sea level, the sharp mountain rise on the eastern face is, at least to the city dweller of the East, spectacular.

For the climber, many trails afford 2,000 to 3,000 feet of ascent. If that is not enough for one day, one can take a ridge trail over a number of peaks. A special favorite of mine is the circuit of Wittenberg, Cornell and Slide mountains from Woodland Valley back to Woodland Valley. Only the well-trained should attempt it in one day.

The glacial age left its mark on the Catskills in many ways, in moraine deposits, altered valley drainage, granite erratics from the far north, scratches on the bedrock marking the direction of ice flow, dry channels of great rivers active in the ice age.

Man's use and exploitation of the Catskills can be divided into eras, though these overlap and do not, in most cases, have clear beginnings or endings. First is the era of the Indians. Of this little is known. It is thought, except for the game and the valley trails, the Indians had little use for the mountains. The Dutch came next, in the sixteen hundreds, first to the Hudson Valley and then to fringe areas of the Catskills to east and south. They too, in these times, had little use for the mountains though they were eager to trade with the Indians for furs. Then the English came, following the treaty of 1667, and the Dutch stayed on and grew in number. During the Revolutionary War four forts were built in the eastern area to block the Iroquois trails from the west and north. Two were in the Esopus Valley, one at the present site of Woodstock and one at Palenville. These forts were the first substantial encroachment into the wilderness.



In terms of land use, the historical eras are: the era of the farmer, starting early with the first venturesome Dutch and English settlers, rising to a peak of activity in the eighteenth hundreds, and continuing only on the better lands today; the era of the sightseer and summer visitors, also starting surprisingly early, about 1824 when the toll road to the site of the old Catskill Mountain House was built up the precipitous east face of the mountain wall overlooking the Hudson, and continuing today in ever-increasing strength; the era of tan-bark gathering and the tanning of hides shipped in from the Argentine; the era of the great bluestone quarries supplying building stone and sidewalks for construction of the city of New York; the eras of glass manufacture, of furniture manufacture, of hoop and barrel making, of general lumbering. Each era has its own fascinating, often tragic history and each has left its mark, major or minor, on the region.

Today we still exploit the mountains—for water supplies, for highway routes, for skiing slopes and summer resorts, and, more and more, simply as a place in which to live and work. Much of this seems good, some mixed, some bad.

With the expanding pressure on the region, land use planning has become an essential, and multiple use a way of life. Fortunately, conflict of interest is, with one important exception, minimal. There are the usual conflicts between those responsible for the roads with their wish to have them wide and straight and easily plowed of snow in winter and the lovers of nature and narrow, winding country lanes; there is the same conflict with utility companies with their power and pipe lines. These are the conflicts of short term commercial gain with other economic interests of vastly greater long term value, as along Route 28. However, fortunately for the region, the fundamental interests of most people and groups with a stake in the future of the Catskills can be contained in the philosophy of *multiple use conservation*. The city of New York, with its concern for water supply, is a powerful political force for conservation of the purity of the mountain streams and the protection of the forest cover; the state of New York, though its interests are mixed, is also largely on the side of conservation in its stewardship of public lands and obligations to fishermen, hunters, vacationers and local residents. The resort owners and

local businessmen, though prone to fall into the easy trap of short term gains at the expense of their own longer term interests, also have a strong stake in conservation for it is the beauty of the mountains and the recreational opportunities that bring most visitors and many permanent residents to the region.

### Inflation—Danger

The greatest danger to the Catskills today lies in the inflating value and increasing cost of holding private lands. Or, to put this more bluntly, the danger is from the pressure of increasing population. The Catskill region can furnish livelihood and recreation to vastly more people than it does today—without damage to the beauty of mountains and valleys, without pollution of the streams and rapid silting of reservoirs, without creating rural slums, asphalt supermarket deserts and billboard jungles. But this can be done only if regional land use is carefully and responsibly planned, and only if rather rigid controls of land use are established.

The region will be used. Being close to New York City and other major population centers of the East, and accessible, use will increase substantially in the next few years. The only question here is whether it will be used well for man's purposes or badly.

The several counties of the Catskill area are presently, to greater and lesser degree, and with varying effectiveness, beginning to tackle seriously the problems of land and resources utilization within their jurisdictions. It seems to me that these counties should, with the participation of the state and local governing units, establish a regional authority for the Catskill area similar in structure and function to the metropolitan municipalities being established to enable politically fragmented metropolitan areas to solve regional problems of sewerage disposal, water supply, transportation and land use.

Parallel to this, and in anticipation, the special interest groups of the separate counties or towns or the region—historical associations, garden clubs, sportsmen's clubs, farmers' organizations, groups of resort owners, retail businessmen, manufacturers, etc.—would be well advised to intensify their studies of regional problems and potentials and to bring themselves into association with other local groups of both parallel and divergent interests in order to develop realistic solutions

for present problems and to plan goals for the future.

At some time in the next few years special enabling legislation will be required for the further protection of the Catskill area. This region, because of its unique values and its situation close to major population centers, is too valuable to waste. It is to be hoped that the people of the Catskills will be the initiators of action rather than those on whom outside action will be imposed. There is a special opportunity here, if it is taken now, to develop a stable multiple use regional economy with a satisfactory ecological balance between man and nature; a model for other similar inhabited areas of unique aesthetic value which can not reasonably be protected by excluding man from them.

### Citizens Should Act Now

The people of the seven county Catskill region need not await special legislative action in order to take effective, constructive roles in the conservation and enhancement of the area. The members of historical societies, for example, might join together now in a survey to establish what places and buildings have special historical or cultural value, which are currently threatened and what present means can be taken to save and restore valuable sites and structures. The members of garden clubs, in similar fashion, might join together to consider problems within their domain of interest; for example, they might draw up plans and recommendations for the landscaping of regional highways, with special consideration of native plant species and their use. These clubs might also survey the region for sites of unique botanical interest with the long term objective of preserving representative floras. Local merchants might consider the developmental patterns of local commerce and population and the effect of these on the regional economy, the growth of their own towns and their businesses. The members of hunting and fishing clubs also have community interests in Catskill problems. So also do the members of religious organizations, professional societies, and school-related parents organizations. Students through their school organizations have often proven to be particularly effective in mobilizing community interest in community and regional affairs.

At some time in the near future it might be well to draw such organized local groups together in conference to discuss regional problems



and opportunities. A good model for action is the "Mid-Hudson Pattern for Progress" conference held at New Paltz State University College on December 5, 1964; a meeting convened to discuss the need for regional planning, research and development in the Mid-Hudson area (a region overlapping that of the Catskills in parts of Sullivan, Ulster and Greene counties). This productive meeting led to formation of the "Mid-Hudson Pattern for Progress, Inc.", a non-profit, non-partisan, locally controlled regional planning, research and development organization with an annual budget of \$150,000 and a professional staff "dedicated to the objective of fostering

balanced plans and programs for the economic development, the enhancement of the scenic and historical values, and the conservation and wise use of the natural resources of the Mid-Hudson Region of New York State." A parallel, more modest, non-profit, non-partisan, locally controlled organization for the Catskill region, charged with forwarding the wise use of the resources of the Catskills would be a worthy, practical goal for the citizens' groups of the Catskill area. This type of organization, as guardian of local interests and assuring local concern and action, in parallel with a regional authority established by legislative action and charged

with developing plans for insuring the long term well being for the region, its plant, animal and human populations, vested with power to zone land for kind and intensity of use, with power to purchase easements and to trade, buy or sell state lands so as to maximize wilderness, aesthetic and recreational values, and with responsibility for control of the disposal of human wastes of all sorts whether trash, garbage, old cars, sewerage, fumes, or industrial wastes, would go far toward assuring the future of the Catskills as a productive, healthy, aesthetically pleasing ecosystem of which we humans are an integral part. ■

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