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This interview was conducted with George Potter on March 26, 2013, in Spokane, Washington. The interviewers are Tamara Belts and Jerry McBride.

TB: Today is Tuesday, March 26, 2013. My name is Tamara Belts, and I'm here with George Potter and Jerry McBride of the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club, and we're going to do an oral history with Mr. Potter. And our first question is always how did you get started fly fishing?

GP: Well, my dad was a fly fisherman all his life, and the first time I remember fly fishing on my own I was six years old, and got lost. But that was up on the Kern River in California. Of course my dad being a fly fisherman, I went with my dad back and forth in the Sierras from one end to the other when I was a kid, and then as I got older, my fishing partner and I used to do a lot of backpacking into the high lakes and the major rivers, Kern River and San Joaquin and Stanislaus and so forth. So it's just been part of my life from the beginning.

TB: Okay, could you share a little bit more about that? What is it about fly fishing that attracts you?

GP: Well, I guess I don't know any better. But it's just a neat way to go. It takes a little more skill and it's rewarding, more than bait fishing, which I haven't done since I was a little kid.

TB: Could you tell me a little bit then about how you got up to the Spokane area and got involved in the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club?

GP: Yes, the particular business I had for many years, I worked with cattle feeders and all over the western states and western Canada, and a lot of my business was in Washington. And I had a dealer that I used here in Spokane, and they convinced me I should move up here, and they were willing to pay my way and so forth, and so I liked this up here, and there was some family history, and it's just been a great place. It couldn't have been better. Everything that we want with the fishing is right here, from steelhead on through. I'm not into warm water species. I just don't do that. But trout fishing is as good as you can get in this world, I think, in our backyard, so here we are.

TB: So how'd you get involved in the club?

GP: Well, I joined the club in 1966. I had become good friends with a fellow by the name of Mike Runge, which was one of our originators, and he convinced me I should join. And so ever since, it's a unique organization, and what is there, 120 of us in the club?

JM: Well, I think 135 is—

GP: Oh yes, that's right.

JM: --the limit on the membership.

GP: Anyhow, when you get along with everybody, that's a good outfit. But of course we have something in common, so that's the history of the club from my standpoint. I continue to work on behalf of the club through projects and so forth. I've never gone through the chairs. I'm just not that great a public speaker, so I've shied away from that, but I'm still totally involved. Someday I'll have to quit I suppose, but I'm not sure when that's going to be. So that's, very quickly, my history with the club.

TB: We're not looking for quick here though.

GP: Oh, I see.

TB: I would like you to elaborate on some of the projects that you've worked on?

GP: Well, let's see. We've always had an association with the Fish and Game Department, and they've called on us many times for club projects, and I guess I haven't known any better, I just jumped in and went to work. So they still call on me to pull these together and so forth. We've got a project going right now as an example. We're putting aeration into one of our lakes here locally, West Medical, and the club is supporting that financially, and then I put together work crews and so forth, and that's kind of typical of what we do. Rehabbing lakes has been one of the things we've been involved in for many years.

TB: So why don't you elaborate on what it means to rehabilitate a lake.

GP: Well, there are various lakes that we have here that have had warm water species in them. Some of them, you know, they plant them to trout, and then people sneak in other things. So we work with the game department on rehabbing some of those lakes. And like I mentioned, this West Medical, even though it's open to all kinds of fishing, it is only a trout lake, and not fly fishing only, but we try to support that as well. I guess maybe you could say it keeps them out of our water if ... but that's a good lake to fish anyhow. We do, we take the [granny lake?] boys out there every spring. So those are the kinds of projects we like to be involved in.

The club is very lenient with the money. They're always willing to spend for good causes. And so I think our treasury has supported all these years various projects like this. And for some reason I got involved in leading that. I don't know why, but we get the job done. Jerry's been involved in many projects, so he knows what I'm talking about.

So I think, you know, as far as the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club, I think doing these kinds of things with the game department has really been a big plus, and we haven't been very stingy with our money. We're always ready to help. And you know, when you get a hundred guys that are all good friends, there's always a crew ready to go. I think that's one of the pluses for our club. There are many other things that are good about our club.

TB: Tell me what they are.

GP: Well, the fact that we're always ready to help on projects. The fact that we've got a gang of guys that all seem to get along real well and there's always somebody ready to go fishing. And through our regular meetings and then this so-called Liars Club that you just attended, that's kind of unique. A gang of us get together with no organization and just talk fly fishing. I don't know, maybe at that end of the table you talked about some other things today, but I doubt it.

TB: Some of the other things that you're credited with or that the club is, is imposing selected gear regulations on lakes and streams? So could you tell me about that? Because that sounds like it's more than just limiting it to fly fishing. What kind of gear would you try not to have people use?

GP: Well, it depends on the particular body of water. If it's open to everything, like this lake we're working on right now, this West Medical, that's trolling gear, fly fishing, anything you want to do, bait, so forth. But that type of thing, we try to support because it leaves some of our fly fishing only water alone then. But I think for a gang of guys that are just dreaming about fly fishing all the time, we're pretty lenient with the other types of fishing. Even though we don't do it ourselves, we don't look down our nose at it either. I think as a whole the gang is broad minded, and we just want to help the overall sport.

TB: So, if you're imposing selected gear regulation, would that be like trying to prevent people from trolling with a fly, or what really-- I understand the separation in having some lakes that are open to everything and some fly fishing only, but is there any other intermediary step there?

GP: No, not really. The state really tells us which lakes can be this or that, and they've designated years back a number of lakes for fly fishing only or restricted gear, and then of course many are anything you want to do. But I'd say we've got half a dozen or more lakes in our area that are special regulations though, like fly fishing. And of course we support that. I don't know what else I can tell you about it, other than that the state has the final say so, and if they designate something that suits our purpose, well, we're going to dive in and try to make it better.

JM: There is kind of a petitioning process that you can go through. They have what they call major and minor year. In the major years, you can submit fairly substantial changes in the regulations for approval, and then of course you go and testify in favor of that. And of course people that would oppose them have the right to speak against them, and then they make a decision. Probably the one that I can think of most recently was Amber Lake, and that's some time ago, but we changed that from a general regulation through the process that they have, to a selected gear regulation, which is you can't use bait but you can use spinning outfits or—

Interruption

JM: So anyway— they could use, like spinning gear, and they can troll, but they can't use bait, is the primary thing-- they can't use bait.

TB: So what's the attractor on the end of the line, then?

JM: Could be a spinner or a spoon or a fly, anything like that, but it can't be bait is the main thing. Then usually those lakes have a lower limit. Like I think at Amber I think you can only keep one fish, right?

GP: Yes.

JM: Most of the general regulation lakes, you can keep five.

TB: Okay.

GP: A lot of times they'll refer to these selected gear lakes, so that limits like the big fishing and so forth.

TB: Good. Do you want to talk a little bit about the McDowell Lake project?

GP: Well, that's one that we've certainly promoted and worked on. It's up on the Little Pend Oreille game range. We first got involved in that, gosh, let me think a minute, I guess it'd be 40 years ago anyhow, if not a little longer, and we've helped the state plant the lake, and we've helped them get scrap fish out of there. We've in fact given the game department trap nets and helped them do just that. We put in pond mills there one time, which is a wind driven device that has a propeller down under the water that stirs it up, trying to prevent any winterkill. So that lake has been real special to us from way back. There's always been a little lake there, but then many years ago the state put in an earth dam that raised the level of it, and from there on it's been one of our most popular fly fishing lakes. I guess we haven't had any projects just recently, but through the years that's been important to us.

TB: And then you've really been successful I've heard with Sprague Lake, making that really come back—

JM: That's just another one of George's projects, just going back to McDowell Lake, George headed that up, and he had the challenge of dealing with—the wildlife refuge is administered by the federal government. It's part of their wildlife refuge program. And the fish are done by the Washington State. So he had to deal with both the feds and the state people. And I don't know, why don't you talk about what we provided money for, which I thought was fairly significant.

GP: Well, we to this day still do some work there. When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took that over from the state, we were quite involved because we didn't want to lose what we had and we became friends with the manager and so forth. Then they set up an advisory committee to develop a set of rules for the lakes and fishing on the refuge. There were people from—the cattle people, the forest service, the army, because there was a survival school up there, in that area. Fortunately I was asked to serve on the committee; I was the only one representing fishing. But it worked out fine, they paid attention to us. So we've gotten along good with the feds since they took over. The quality of fishing in McDowell Lake and—the two lakes, McDowell and Bailey Lake is the other one, both fly fishing only. So the feds didn't leave us high and dry. They went along and have been managing them accordingly. Some of our favorites spots, those two lakes. Jerry fishes—he's a champion on a couple of the lakes.

JM: What I was thinking about is the helicopter time we bought on McDowell. You know helicopter time is very expensive, anyway—to treat McDowell thoroughly.

GP: Yes, we, you know, they use rotenone on the lakes for—and a lot of tench had gotten into McDowell Lake, and so they decided to rehab it, but we participated with them. They decided to use a helicopter to spread the rotenone because it was down in kind of a depression and it was hard to do with boats, so we participated in the cost of the helicopter for that purpose, which is one of the many types of things that we've become opposed to. The Bailey Lake thing is quite unique in that we've always had some pretty big fish in that lake. It's such a unique place. You see all kinds of wildlife. You see moose up there, we've seen bear, eagles, you know, on and on, and it's just a neat thing. But through our efforts we've been able to keep that just restrictive enough that nobody makes a mess out of it. It's very special.

JM: Talk about the spawning channel.

GP: Yes, that was one of our projects. On the inlet stream to the lake, we put in a series of small check dams and spread gravel in behind these check dams so that the lake with the fish—if they can get up and spawn it enhances their lifespan, and of course then they get bigger after each year that they spawn. Although there, we don't get any return particularly in the lake, from the rainbow trout, because their time for spawning is such that the water is coming into the lake. Even though we get a hatch on the eggs, the warmer temperatures in the water, the small fry won't make it. There was a time when there used to be a lot of brookies in that lake, and they're fall spawners, and that worked out fine. We were getting return out of that. But I don't know whether it's the feds or the state, but they decided not to put brookies in there anymore, so that doesn't work. But the rainbows will relieve themselves of the egg and milt, and consequently that enhances their life. It adds, we don't know how long, but two or three years probably to the life of the fish, of course that means bigger fish, because they go back to the lake. So that's been a fun project, and it's still ongoing.

TB: Were you at all involved in the plugging of the lake?

GP: Oh, that's another one. Yes, there's been a leak in the lake bottom, because it's a rocky formation, and that lake is not a natural lake. It was a meadow that had ponds in it apparently. But many years ago, whoever owned the property at that time, put in an earthen dam, but where they put that in, its structure is very erratic and broken and so forth. Through the years that's opened up some, and we get leaks and it loses a lot of the depth of the lake, and so the club went through all kinds of maneuvers to try to stop that lake. Of course it never worked, although I think we slowed it down. It's not as bad as it used to be. That was kind of a different kind of project, all by club members.

TB: Do you want to tell some stories about you, especially go up to Whitetail up in Canada, the caribou region? Do you want to tell some stories about your fly fishing up there?

GP: Well, we spent the last half an hour talking about it.

TB: We weren't on tape. You weren't on tape.

GP: Well, that's a unique spot. I first went up there in about 1966, and I've been going back every year since. Jerry McBride is the guy you really need to talk to. He catches more fish than the rest of us up there.

JM: He got there way before me though. He got all the good fishes.

GP: But it's a very unique spot and a good bunch of people up there all the time. I guess we get along pretty well with that bunch of Canadians. We talk the same language. But yes, that's one of our favorite ponds, all these years, and we're going back this year of course. So the Canadian fishing, that's probably one of our most favorite spots.

There are several other places we fish in Canada. The Douglas Lake Ranch, which is out of Merritt, BC. There are several lakes there, and a whole gang of us go up there every year and have for many, many years. There's a lot of other Canadian lakes and rivers, and from time to time we've all fished some of them, but those two though, now we're kind of narrowed down to that. It's close to us, you know, four or five hours and we can be up there.

TB: So what are some of the changes you've seen in fly fishing since you started, like the equipment, technology?

GP: Well, I think back to when I was a kid and through the teenage years and so forth. Of course in those days, bamboo fly rods were the thing. As far as techniques, we've all learned things and we fish a lot of different methods now. We talk about chironomid fishing, and that's different than dry fly fishing certainly. Way back then, like in my case, some of the rivers I used to fish, like the Owens River in the Sierras, over on the east side of the Sierras, we used to fish that with fly rods, but we'd bait fish during the day, natural stone nymphs, worms, whatever, grasshoppers. But then as far as fly fishing, we wouldn't do that until evening. Of course now we fly fish all the time. That was a change; it went from everything down to specializing. But the equipment has changed a lot in that time. Again, in the Forties and Fifties, and before even, bamboo fly rods is all we used. Now of course we've invented the glass rod, fiberglass and graphite. It's rare that any of us ever use bamboo anymore. I've still got a bunch of them but I don't use them. But evolution of fly fishing and the equipment has gone right along with that. The fly lines we use today are so superior, and the rods and reels, and you name it all, improvement just makes it better. It doesn't catch any more fish. We'd like to think it does but it doesn't. So sometimes evolution doesn't change things a lot, but we get more sophisticated as we go and think it's going to change, but I don't know that we do any better today. So I don't know.
How many rods do you have, Jerry?

JM: I don't know; I've kind of lost track. I've probably got a dozen or so, I suppose. I don't know. I got two or three that I use, and the rest of them sit in the garage.

GP: Yes, I've got a rack that's got about a dozen rods; and maybe three of them are—

JM: I guess what intrigues me is that the rod that you thought was just the finest thing you ever felt, a few years later you go like, God, did I used to fish with this thing? It feels terrible.

GP: Yes, you thought.

TB: How do you know when it's time to get a new rod? Is it just because you want to try the latest technology and what they're saying?

GP: Yes, I think that's right. You know, they've got this new deal it's got to be better than what we have, until we put the old one on the rack. Then the first thing you know they make another change.

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JM: Yes, my wife asks that question, “How come you need more than one fly rod?” I said, “Well, look in the closet. How many pairs of shoes you got in there?”

GP: Well, it’s a little more sophisticated than that, I hope. Oh, fly fishing is such a unique thing. It’s one of those things that the more you do, the more you want to do, and the more involved you get in the techniques and the rods and the lines and, you know, it’s just, you got to keep up with it. Somebody might do better than you do, so you don’t want to get left behind. But it’s a unique thing, no question about it, just being out there. It’s a good excuse to get out and away from people and all that goes along with it.

TB: Did you used to fish at North Silver Lake? Did you ever fish out of Bill Butler’s spot?

GP: Oh yes, sure.

TB: Why don’t you tell me from your side? I mean, we heard a little bit about him and why he got it started and whatever. What’s the side of the patron’s point of view? Did you ever rent or use his boats?

GP: No, no, no. I never did agree much with Bill on some of his ideas, but we got along as friends. I didn’t think he knew any more about fishing than I did and that wasn’t much I guess.

TB: I just knew he had a shop out there.

GP: Yes.

TB: What are some other things that we haven’t talked about that you’d like to tell us about? And I want you to brag, because I really do want to get your story. This is your chance.

GP: Oh, I don’t have much to brag about, except that probably one of my most favorite fisheries is the St. Joe River, but you shouldn’t print that or let anybody know that.

JM: Just northern Idaho.

TB: Okay.

GP: That’s a cutthroat stream, and it’s probably the prettiest spot as any place we fish, though we have several of those streams over here, like the Coeur d’Alene and St. Joe that are just something special. And I spend about, oh, close to 30 days on the St. Joe every fall, particularly the month of September. I go up there Monday mornings and come back on Friday evenings. Strictly dry fly fishing and catch and release, that’s just something real special. But we’ve got a couple of those, like I say. Coeur d’Alene is nearly as good, and the clear water streams and several more down in Idaho that are very good. So that’s unique to our area. That’s really something that we’ve really got that’s special. Lake fishing is probably as good here as it is anywhere. And between having those cutthroat streams this close to us, having all these lakes here, being close to Canada, Spokane is a neat place, and that we don’t want to broadcast. But being associated with the fly fishing club, the Inland Empire Fly Fishing Club, and all of the people that are so dedicated, that is just something that’s neat. I don’t think you can buy this kind of experience. But it’s a way of life.

TB: What are some of the differences between high lakes and regular lakes in terms of fishing?

GP: Well, I’ve fished both a lot, particularly in the Sierras. A lot of those lakes are up there, 10-11,000 foot. In fact, one thing I remember, I caught a golden trout at 12,000 foot elevation, in a lake on Mono Pass. But as a little kid, my folks spent their vacations every year in the Sierras. And on the east side of the Sierras, in the Bishop country, we camped at 10,000 foot elevation. You talk about clear water and so forth, there’s nothing like that. But

it's a different kind of fishing. It's pretty skillful—skills are required really to do very well. But up here in this area, I don't bother with the high lakes anymore. Maybe I got too old or something, I don't know.

The river and stream fishing in the Sierras, and I talk about that because that's where I grew up, that was unique in itself. There's nothing like that here even. So I've been fortunate. I've had a range of places and types, from British Columbia to California. So I don't know what else I can tell you about that, other than it—having done it all my life, it's something pretty special.

TB: Do you have any thoughts about the future of fly fishing?

GP: Well, I think it might even be improving. The restrictions on some of the water I'm sure has helped this, and some restriction on type of gear and so forth, I think it's actually improved things in our region for lake fishing particularly. It's like we were talking about Sprague Lake and the rehab of that. We were hoping that they would make it more restrictive but they didn't. So there's big fish in there but you can fish with bait or flies or whatever you want to do. I guess I'd have to say that we've learned to share, and are getting along just fine. So I don't know what else I can tell you that would be more than any of the other fellows that you talked to.

TB: Every story's individual though.

GP: Oh, I suppose.

TB: So is there anything else we haven't asked him that we should be asking him?

JM: Well, I'd like to have him talk a little bit about-- I'm trying to remember where it was in California, I mean, it was a real deep canyon you used to go into, and then at some point, I can't remember whether it was the power company or whatever, which had to be...

GP: Well, I've mentioned the fishing on the east side of the Sierras, and what the area is you're referring to is the Owens River, and that heads up in an area near a town called Lee Vining. That river, as a young guy, there was no restrictions on it from the standpoint of dams or anything like that. I'm sure the best fishing I've had in my life was on the Owens River, and then what we called the Owens River Gorge. The gorge was 24 miles long, and it's about 1000 feet down from the top to the bottom, actually you had to go down over the side. But the fishing in those days, we did use bait during the day. When I say bait though, it was usually natural stone nymphs. We worked harder to get the stone nymphs than we would the fish. But we used fly equipment, fly rods and so forth. We used those during the day, and then during the evening we'd switch strictly to fly fishing.

But that river was so unique, the first eight miles was kind of a meandering river. It was a fairly good current. The middle eight miles was a pretty rough place to get into, but a lot of fast water and all, but some excellent fishing. The lower eight miles was a meandering river, slick water, and that was probably the best fishing I've ever had. It was rarely we'd come out of there without a weight limit, and in those days we had to keep fish, and why I don't know to this day. But that was just the best fishing I've ever had anyplace.

Well when I say more recent years, going clear back to just after the war, there was an area called Long Meadow, which was the head of the gorge, and that was about a seven mile long meandering river. That was quite unique. L.A. Water and Power, the dam, they crossed just after the war at the bottom of that meadow and flooded that, restricted the flow in the gorge somewhat. But then through the years, the first thing they did, for some reason, I never have figured out why, they blew in the middle eight miles, just made a chute out of it, and then they flooded the bottom eight miles and made another lake, and then they just left a trickle in the upper eight miles. No fishing at all in the middle 8 miles and flooded the bottom 8 miles. That was L.A. Water and Power, they really did a job. In fact, that whole Owens country was that way. Clear back in the Twenties, I've heard shooting wars with L.A. people when they start taking all that water and put in an aqueduct to feed Los Angeles. So some of the most special fishing that I've ever experienced was in that area, it doesn't exist anymore. So that was some history that I just really feel bad about. But that was just the greatest fishery.

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TB: And that's O-W-E-N-S, Owens?

GP: Yes. There was so many fish in the gorge area, there were true Loch Levens. And now, today, there's no such thing. They're crossed up with Browns to where you can't tell one from the other. But in those days those were brought in from Scotland, and that was very unique, ancient history.

TB: Is there some other stuff we need to ask him?

JM: I wouldn't mind talking about some of the flies that you've developed. He's always tinkering with fly patterns.

GP: Well, just anybody that ties flies gets into that trap.

JM: He's usually got something that he's just developed. Eventually he shares it with us.

GP: Well, not always with Jerry, because he always beats me anyhow, so why would I help him?

TB: So let's talk about that.

GP: Well you know we were talking about Whitetail today and the flies and so forth. You know I started monkeying with that Mitch's Sedge that we used up there for the hatch when it comes out, a sedge hatch. I've changed the colors of the wings and so forth, because if you watch those things on the water, they're not tan like Mitch's Sedge is. And so, yes, I monkey around with those patterns from time to time and come up with my versions. I don't think I've invented anything new.

TB: So you're thinking that they look different on the water than—

GP: Yes, well, like we was talking about this sedge pattern, in the book the Mitch's Sedge is tied with blonder, tan hair, and for this particular lake that we use those on, I've gradually gone to different materials, like a green hackle rather tan, and do better on it. It's just monkeying around with what you think would work, and sometimes it does. But I can't beat McBride, so you know, what's the use?

TB: Do you tie at the Ellensburg show?

GP: No, no. I don't tie any but my own. I've got so many boxes now I don't really have to do much tying anymore. No, I'm not an expert. I get by, but my flies look kind of rough. I think while McBride here, I mean— Jerry, well his are something special but— Bob Bates, you know, I couldn't compete with him if I tried, as far as perfection, but I get by. As long as I catch fish, that's what we tie them for.

TB: Okay, is there anything else we haven't talked about that we should?

JM: Well, I don't know whether he wants to talk about any of his fishing partners. He's had some pretty unique and interesting fishing partners over the years.

GP: Well, yes, that's an ongoing thing.

TB: But tell us about it.

GP: Well one that Jerry would remember that I used to fish a lot with was a guy by the name of Mike Runge, and old Mike was really something special. He didn't know how to cast a fly unless he was throwing to the end of his line every cast. None of us could do that like he did. But he was probably one of the most unique partners I've had. Unfortunately he's gone now. All of this bunch in the Inland Empire Club, a number of us fish, and we trade around

partners quite a bit. I can't just single any one, other than old Mike maybe, that's any better than the next one, but it's a great gang. It just couldn't be better.

JM: Why don't you tell her about fishing up there at Williams with Mike, and he went through the ice. That's one of the more interesting stories you have and you can get a picture in your mind about that.

GP: Yes. Well, what Jerry is referring to is Williams Lake, up above Colville, Washington. It's a lake they have an aerator in so it keeps some open water when everything else is frozen up. We used to go up there and fish it quite a bit. We would stand on the ice and fish across the open water that the aerator was creating, but we always were pretty careful to not get too close to that edge. But this one particular day, we were doing very well, and Mike Runge just stood in one spot for several hours there. And all of a sudden, a round hole opened up just about the diameter of him, and he went straight down, but his arms caught on the ice so he was hanging there. So I managed to crawl out and get him by the nape of the neck and start inching back, and he was waving his elbows to try to get up on the ice. So we got him out of there alright. He decided he ought to go up to the car and warm up. The only extra clothes was stuff that I had. Well Mike was over 6 foot tall. The next thing we know, he comes out with my extra clothes on. It was just a comical thing.

JM: You get the picture.

TB: Yes.

GP: So that's just one of the many things that have gone wrong. There's just always something unique. But when you got a bunch of characters you run around with, anything can happen.

TB: So do you have any thoughts about the Federation of Fly Fishers?

GP: Oh yes, I belong. I have for years and years. I'm not active, other than supporting them. I've been to some various meetings and so forth and some of the conclaves. But it's a good outfit. I'm glad they're staying together and continuing to work at improving our fishing. So that's why I support them of course. And Trout Unlimited, I support them, and of course our clubs and so forth, just trying to help the sport as a whole. But those are good organizations. I've only gone to a couple of the conclaves, but they're worthwhile, very good. So I don't think there's anything else I can tell you, other than I have good thoughts about them.

TB: Okay. Is there anything else we haven't talked about that we should?

JM: I can't think of anything.

TB: We're all freezing in here, so if that's it. If that's it, we'll say, Thank you very much.

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