Theron (Terry) A. Smith

Oral History Interview
Theron (Terry) A. Smith
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Interviewed by Jim King
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Jim: I'm sitting here in the Aleutian Goose with Terry Smith. It evokes a good many memories of fish and wildlife aviation and Theron Smith (Terry's dad) going back a good many years. This airplane was, of course, Theron's dream. I don't suppose it was part of his dream to have his son, Terry, to own it, but that happened! It is really nice to have a chance to sit here in the airplane and talk with Terry.

I'm thinking back perhaps first about yourself because I remember as a young pilot kind of getting started with the Fish and Wildlife Service, you were always there checking up on us.

Terry: The joke at the gathering of the Fish and Wildlife pilots in December was we were supposed to say how many years we had been around the Fish and Wildlife hangar. I started with the Fish and Wildlife in 1952, at the age of 4 years. I was basically raised at the hangar. It was interesting. As the people came through with all different levels of piloting ability, Dad would work with them. I would ride along. It was an aviation education. I'm sure there is no parallel.

Jim: Your dad was certainly a great teacher. It was in 1953 that I checked out. I wasn't a military pilot. I learned to fly in Fairbanks with Holly Evans.

As soon as I had 100 hours, I was down to Anchorage to get my check ride. I didn't know much with 100 hours but he okayed my to fly under Ray Woolford's direction which is the way things worked there. Woolford would give me some easy trips or I could fly when he was in the airplane. I remember coming into Lake Hood; maybe not right away but in that period.

You were always there and you would give a critique on our landing. If there was a bounce, you knew it! If the trailing antennae were still dragging, you advised. If the water rudders were down, you let us know about that too. That was fun.

Terry: Yes, it was fun. Except for having a "know it all kid" around, I really only knew about four things, so that is what everybody got critiqued on. It was certainly an unbelievable group as far as resourcefulness. Airplanes were damaged in remote areas and retrieved. Pilots did exemplary things in saving airplanes. There were all kinds of times where the operation would seem to be not conducive to safety, yet it was done safely for seasons on end. They were in the Bremner for a number of years with the Widgeons and the Gooses. They worked all over the state; on skis in the wintertime, on the predator control, and game management work. It was just a phenomenal group of people all the way around.

Jim: You were on a lot of those trips. I remember you coming with your dad to pick up N704. We had N744. That was the year after Clarence was lost. That was a brand new airplane.

Terry: In fact, during the search for Clarence, Dad flew that one because it didn't have any of the Fish and Wildlife advantages or special stuff. It had practically no radios in it; it was on little bitty tires and it was silver. It wasn't orange and white. It was 5031-E. We had it out of Bettles and Fort Yukon. Then it became N744. We had it on the Tetlin trips. That was probably one of the later pictures of it ever whole again because it was the one that Gordy used up on Mt. Michelson. It was brand new when they turned around in that canyon and damaged the airplane.

Those kinds of trips were always interesting both from the incidents occurring, either on short leg situations or in that case, a direct cross wind in that little slough where you had the banding camp. If you got the nose way up in the air and touched down with the airplane going sideways, it would turn 90 degrees just about on a dime. Then you have to work with the short way of the slough which wasn't nearly enough.

Jim: That was an interesting airplane. It was a 4-place Piper Pacer with Super Cub wings and struts. It would go into a slide or skid pretty easy. I liked it. I flew it out of there in cross winds. I liked the extra space in the cabin. I was really sad to see that go.

Terry: They never put it back together as a super-Pacer. I remember Dad flying it with a lot of people.

Jim: It worked fine. I guess it took that extra bit of practice. When Hank came in there, he hadn't been practicing with it. That was an awkward little spot where we landed. There were no big waves there. That's why we liked

it. Another thing there that was fun was we got you out in the boat. You caught a great big pike.

Terry. That was a big fish! To this day, I keep thinking that it was a bigger fish than it was because I was a little kid. Everybody kept cautioning me to make sure that I stayed clear of that thing when it came aboard because it would bite me.

Jim: I remember watching your dad clean it. I had never seen a fish cleaned just that way before. He cleaned it like a careful mechanic that was taking something apart that he was going to put back together. He took all these little things out of this fish until finally it was cleaned. He would take things like the air bladder out, etc., and he would lay them on little boards around as if he was going to pick them up and put them back in.

Terry. He also had a patented way to get the y-bones out. That pike was certainly edible when he got done with it. It was always considered good meat fish for a lot of people. I've always considered them trash fish.

I hope that this recording doesn't go back to the General Accounting Office. They would probably charge me for all the education over the years. I spent a big chunk of time in the summers whenever there was a recovery. I almost always got to go. Even at Burkholder Lake, it was a pretty minimal spot for a Cub.

When we went over to get the floats and a number of other things off the Cub after part of it had been retrieved, I got to go in the Super Cub with

Dad. I only weighed 70-80 pounds at the most and yet I was another pair of hands to be on the other side of the floats, to wriggle or shove or run the wrench on the other side of something that you couldn't reach around. It didn't take much strength inside or intelligence on the other end of the inaccessible part but somebody had to be there. It made a lot of sense, I guess, to him. I used to go on a lot of retrievals. Those were always good trips with usually a lot of comradery – every body was trying to get something done.

Jim: We talked quite a bit about accidents when we had the panel discussion with the pilots last December when your dad came up. Jerry Lawhorn was there. While there were a lot of fender-bender things that resulted primarily from the fact they were always landing off airports somewhere, there really were very few injuries.

Terry: That is always amazing when you look at it in a real sense. For all of the flying by relatively inexperienced people, there wasn't a tremendous amount of Alaska experienced off airport type pilots and everybody was kind of growing up together. The flight times of the large percentage of the Fish and Wildlife Service pilots was quite low in many cases. It is just a phenomenal feat to have not hurt anymore than they did. At one time, I think there were 42 airplanes before statehood.

If you had an air taxi outfit with 42 airplanes today, the chances would be very high that they would use up more airplanes and probably have more serious accidents than we had then. It was amazing. Most of the airplanes were even rebuildable and most of them flew "home." They would stagger

out of the woods and come home and get put in the rebuild pile. The expertise in the shop was pretty phenomenal. They would just make them new again, whether they were either worn out or damaged. Except for Clarence and a couple on a sheep survey in a Cub on the Hula Hula, the injuries were minimal. He was not supposed to be doing that.

Jim: He was an experienced military pilot but had no experience in a Cub in Alaska. He was in his first month or so of flying in Alaska.

Terry: Dad had told him exactly how this needed to be done and he wasn't supposed to be anywhere near anything like the headwaters of the Hula Hula. That is a nasty place. The Cub was in a nasty place. Dad felt very badly about that. All in all, most of the operations for what got done, the airplanes would operate month in and month out through whole seasons and not get a mark on them. They would be doing things that people wouldn't give you 2-cents to complete once. Some of the operations just called for a lot of remote landings or in the water operations. It was very arduous from the flying standpoint when you were banding ducks and working on Tetlin Lake with big water boiling up and some of the banding operations out on the delta country out of Bethel. Everything just went off as smooth as silk.

Jim: I think that was one of the challenges that Theron had. Clarence would hire biologists with a military flying background who had been officers in the military. They would show up and he would tell them, "well, you have got to learn the ropes here." Some of them had pretty salty military records. They had the attitude that there was nothing to flying the

little airplanes. In most cases, I think he was able to convince them that they had to proceed slowly and see what was going on.

Terry: He was an experienced enough pilot to recognize that this was different. He had done a lot of different kind of flying all over the world and he recognized that this was a heavy task. At times, the biologists would have serious distractions trying to do the job and the flying was not necessarily the first and foremost mental priority of the day. He always tried to move that around to where you flew until you were done flying and then you did the biologist part and then you flew again. Many times, that had to happen concurrently and that was where a lot of the work from a training standpoint lay.

My dad worked awfully hard to make sure that the pilots were as well trained as they could be to do these low level ground reference maneuvers, especially when they were game management agents or biologists trying to look at something on the ground. He always preached that you stabilize the airplane prior to going by what you care about so that the airplane isn't just kind of wandering off air speed wise. That way, you could also get the best look. Those kinds of things hold true for any ground reference maneuver but they were sort of new at that time.

Jim: That sort of accident, when pilots were looking at something on the ground, they would fly into a stall spin at low elevation. That was a major cause of accidents in Alaska but not for the Fish and Wildlife pilots. Somehow he was able to put across that you needed to maintain your

airspeed and maintain control of the airplane and learn to see what you needed to see with the airplane flying properly.

Terry: There were some compromises made over the years because the Beaver was operated at low altitudes. When it ran a tank dry it would just quit. In the shop, even when I was there, we were putting larger and larger fuel light indicators on it and finally it ended up to be basically an unshielded nav light on the window post. It was awfully hard to be anywhere in the cabin of the airplane and not know that the fuel pressure had fallen off. Those kind of things helped too so that you didn't have an obscure little red DeHaviland light buried down on the panel that would blink a couple of times.

Jim: Back to the search for Rhodes. Do you happen to know the name of that major that managed the search out of Fairbanks? We called him the "major." He was a great guy. Everybody respected him. I know there had been some concern about would it be possible for a military officer to run a search with a harem-scarem bunch of civilian Alaska pilots. There was never a problem. Mutual respect developed almost immediately. It was a real team effort.

Terry: I know who you are talking about but I do not remember his name. Until Begich and Boggs, it was the largest search that had ever been put together. Of course, in reality, it probably still is. It went on from August clear into December when Dad and I were in Barrow with the Twin-Beach making transects back and forth across the Brooks Range looking for lights.

We were flying the new 180, running back and forth. We had a full load. Dad was going to do something different and so I wasn't included that day and I stayed in Fort Yukon. We had been working the east end of the Brooks Range out of Fort Yukon up the Chandalar. I would have been 10-11 years old. We worry about kids nowadays, but nowadays, I think we have to worry more about people than outside forces actually hurting them. There didn't seem to be much concern in Fort Yukon. Nobody was worried about me.

As the day went on, the flight service station had talked to Dad on the HF a couple of times. Later on, there was a Teletype that came across the flight service station and it was from Bettles. Basically, it was Dad telling me that I should make my way to Bettles whenever I could. At the time, it didn't seem like a problem at all. Nowadays if I left a 10-year old somewhere and got a few hundred miles away and just told them to make their way across Northern Lights Boulevard, that would be sort of a different thing.

Of course, during the search, a lot was going on. About that time, Jack _____ came through Fort Yukon with a brand new C-123 for fuel and I asked him if he was going anywhere near Bettles and he said he was going right to Bettles. I asked if I could ride along and he stuck me in the jump seat behind him and we went to Bettles.

Jim: There were planes going everywhere. I was looking at Jim Reardon's article that he wrote for the *Alaska Magazine*. He said the peak was 28 airplanes. I'm sure there were at least that many.

Terry: I would say that may have well been just Fish and Wildlife airplanes. The BLM Grumman's were working; FAA, CAA had airplanes working and all of their flight inspection airplanes that were working in the range or anywhere south of the range were always making sashays.

Jim: The military had all their search and rescue out.

Terry: The whole time it was pretty much right there where the search first started, where everybody was looking, on Porcupine Lake.

Jim: They must have gotten covered with snow right off the bat.

Terry: It was either raining or snowing very hard because the cotton rope on the anchor line was only slightly burned on the top from the fuel fire. They said that was indicative of precipitation falling. The plane may have been covered within an hour, as soon as it cooled off.

Jim: Well, it is not the sort of thing that will ever happen again now with all the types of GPS and recording devices that are available.

Terry: You still end up with the odd one. Penn Air lost that Goose out of Dutch Harbor a few years ago and it just went away. Everybody just assumed it went into the water and it indeed did. The top half of the door showed up in a fishing net. There isn't any question as to where the plane is. They had just done a repair job on the door before it disappeared so there wasn't any question that that was the top half of that door.

That was an interesting period of the growth of the State Fish and Game aviation department basically out of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Various airplanes were being shuffled over to the State with people going over to the State in commercial fisheries and game management. It was kind of a different period. The group kind of broke up and as a kid it wasn't quite such a family anymore in the 60's as it had been in the 50's.

Jim: For those of us that stuck it out through the 60's, we never appreciated your dad more. The flying wasn't perhaps as conforming as it had been but we did a lot of extended flying in the 60's. I flew all kinds of weird airplanes independent. I remember thinking I would keep flying for Fish and Wildlife Service as long as Theron was in charge. Then, I didn't want any more of it. I did stick it out for a few years after he left.

Terry: Dad had a good attitude as an aircraft supervisor. I certainly appreciated the guidance, etc., that I got. I think probably most of the pilots did too. Like you say, it was real. It was make good judgement decisions; you don't have to be all you can be. He would do these phenomenal things with an airplane. He would always comment to the people that there was a cushion there, that he wasn't hanging it out quite as far as it might have looked. He would always say to be sure they had a good cushion or a little slack in their program and try to make it the very best day that you have ever had.

The fleet was constantly changing for the better I think. They ended up with 185's, Beavers, Cubs, and the Grummans. The division had gotten fairly streamlined and easier to maintain and manage. As Jerry Lawhorn said

when he came to work, there were 13 airplanes that the Fish and Wildlife Service had and "no two of them were alike." The only two that were similar were two Fairchild 24's. One had a Warner and one had a Ranger. That makes it pretty hard from a maintenance standpoint to keep anything running.

Jim: I always think of you, Terry, as a product of the Aircraft Division. You had a really interesting career. We didn't talk about that at our workshop last fall. I recall when you took off for California to get formal education and aeronautical things that most of us knew nothing about. You then came back and wound up flying this Goose for awhile. You flew a lot of other planes for different people and then got your hands on your dad's Goose for awhile through the Office of Aircraft Services.

Terry: Actually, I went to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service as a pilot. There was still some speculation about OAS but it seemed sort of inevitable. We were all sort of hoping and it was hard at the gathering with the OAS sponsorship to be as candid as one necessarily needed to be. The difference between flying for FWS, which is basically what I had always wanted to do, and flying for OAS was that the focus was a totally different thing.

I left to go to South America with this, the Aleutian Goose. I went down there and came back as an Office of Aircraft Service employee. It was almost like stepping into a different world. The number of airplanes had remained the same but subsequently would shrink. The number of people was just phenomenal. They have actually since built a building entirely for

people; for administration. John McCormick had come from BLM and he was the aircraft supervisor, head of OAS here in Alaska.

We talked shortly after I got back. John wanted to know about the certification status of the Aleutian Goose, N780. I had been working on doing certification flying when we got back from South America, flying for NOAA. He basically informed me that everything was sort of obsolete, that we weren't going to be flying the Grumman's anymore and that we would do all that kind of work with big helicopters, even though the Grummans could do it cheaper. He said, "but we don't have to pay for it." I said, "I'm sorry, I don't understand." He then said, "not that it is any of our business basically, but you see if we put a helicopter contract out then we get 10 percent and we don't have to do anything. We don't have to maintain the airplane or anything, we get 10 percent just for administering the contract and making sure that the operation is safe."

I went home that night and thought about how the BLM had worked within their budget and John had been part of the BLM aircraft division and how FWS had worked. It seemed like we never had enough money and right at the end of the year, the Bureau's would all pony up just a little to make everything kind of come out even and that always worked.

The new deal was that OAS was basically going to make money. The Goose went from $295 to $495 an hour. The long Goose was at $400 an hour and the Aleutian Goose ended up being just $5 under $2,000 an hour when they finally sold it because nobody was using it. Nobody was using it because they had priced it completely out of the Bureau's budget. If you are going to

fly a 100-hour survey over a month's period, that's a quarter of a million dollars!

Jim: Well, I don't want to get into the comparison with OAS. We all have our opinions.

Terry: That is why I left. I was a very short term OAS employee. I didn't think the focus was where it needed to be. I went on to fly corporate jets over most of the world and then I went with Alaska Airlines.

I was flying the Hercules on the slope in 1968-1969 during the big push and also the Constellation.

Jim: You then took all this experience and you are now the Anchorage based chief check pilot for Alaska Airlines on the 737, 200's. All these little things you picked up from your dad?

Terry: There is no question about that, even doing flying checks into Dutch Harbor. We are repeating things that were repeated literally 50 years, 45 years, 40 years ago, etc., to the Fish and Wildlife pilots. They are the same identical things that are keeping the guys alive underneath the overcast with the wipers working, going into Dutch Harbor, Petersburg, or Wrangell.

Jim: I made one of these trips out in the Aleutians when they were still really worried about sea otters. Karl Kenyon had negotiated for this survey and the Fish and Wildlife didn't have a plane to do it. Theron leased a DC-3 from Red Dodge.

Terry: That was after the FWS DC-3 was transferred to BLM. Just before that, they had the DC-3 with the drop tanks and Karl was on those trips. If it was the very first trip, then it would have been the DC-3 that came out of Litchfield(??) Park and they made 701. They put drop tanks on it and the jado(??) bottles to help it through an engine failure, early in the take off. It had been worked against the Coast of Russia all through the late 50's and early 60's. Then because it only had a use at Fish and Wildlife for the long-range surveys, it really didn't have much use.

We hauled the whole Brooks Lake research camp in on the ice from King Salmon to Naknek on the frozen Naknek Lake with no snow on it. John Copps(??) and Dad did that. I was there during the whole trip. We would load for about an hour and then we would fly for 12 minutes and then we would land on the ice then we would off load for an hour and run back again for another load. Other than that, it had very little use besides the surveys. That was kind of the beginning concept of this airplane.

Jim: That trip I made out in the Aleutians with Kenyon, Dave Spencer was along as the co-pilot. The DC-3 was not very good for visibility. I sat way in the back so I could see out behind the wing. Karl Kenyon sat on a barstool between the pilots. He was really funny. He was always kneadling Theron about the barstool that he had to sit on and that this trip was costing him hundreds of dollars for every hour and all he had to sit on was a barstool. I kind of got the feeling that this airplane was a bit of the answer to Karl Kenyon .

Terry: The concept of this airplane had grown. I first saw sketches and heard conversations about it around 1960. It went on for 5-6 years as kind of a concept, a "pie in the sky" sort of thing. The need for the Aleutian Chain aerial surveys and the bird surveys started to come up and it just grew that here would be an omnipotent airplane for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska. It would do camp support and run people all over the state with supplies into the various research labs, etc. It would do the long-range survey work throughout the interior portion of the State that we needed and then, of course, it would have the range and the water capability to run a very safe Aleutian Chain operation.

The other huge factor was that it was completely equipped to fly on instruments and capable of maintaining altitude on one engine. It would operate flawlessly to King Salmon on a bad day or even over to Olson Bay. You could just run over to Johnston Point and let down and run up to Olson Bay and come back. There was no more hassling fighting through Portage Pass like we had done for years.

As it came to fruition, there was a lady representative that came up on a tour of the State and she became quite a backer, or proponent of the airplane. Sure enough, they ended up with the appropriation and built it. It was conceived and designed almost entirely by Theron (my dad) and it works flawlessly for what it does. It has huge windows and range 'til tomorrow and operates throughout the spectrum. The people that put it together are just a phenomenal group. Things like the power lever quadrant that Herman built, all the knobs and handles – everything you touch in this airplane was all hand built and designed ergonomically correct from a human factor

standpoint. By the time you get out to the end of the runway, it seems like you have 100 hours in it! Everything is in the right place.

Jim: There was that element and the Fish and Wildlife needs, both on land and at sea. Another element that Theron understood thoroughly was that he and the shop crew succeeded in taking a lot of the maintenance problems out of this one that other Grummans had.

Terry: There is no question – it has so many changes that you could literally go on for hours – there's the stretched haul on the windows, the Garrett turbines, the re-routed controls to keep the water tight compartments completely sealed. They are actually airtight. The list just goes on and on. They built it in the shop with the designers having to respond to the maintenance people's needs and requests as much as the structural design criteria. There's just no question that the airplane is easy to maintain and was built by people who were going to have to maintain it.

--end of side 1, tape 1—
--start of side 2, tape 1—

Jim: (continuing with interview with Terry Smith) -- We just took a break and Terry took me for a nice ride up to Wasilla and we had supper and tested out the beach ability of the Goose. It works fine.

I wanted to ask you, Terry, if could describe a little the events that led you to be an owner of this airplane which your dad put his heart and soul into and what your intentions are with it.

Terry: It was for sale and we bid on it. The Office of Aircraft Services decided they didn't have enough work for it so they were going to let it go. It was put up on the auction block, sealed bid. We, of course, knew we wanted to get our hands on it. The best we could make was $287,000. I figured it would go for over $300,000 just because it had turbines on it. Basically the parts were worth that. We wanted to bid $333,000 but couldn't put that together.

It sold, unfortunately, to the Kohler(??) family for $305,000. They took it to Chili and Argentina. They were going to work it down there into a high lake lodge. They tried to make it all work but they couldn't get into the Country. The Chilean FAA department of transportation was kind of stuffy and they had a real fight. Finally, they brought it back to the states. When it left here, it had a US registry of 92 Mike Tangle. It then had a Chilean registry and then a Canadian registry and then it came to us as 86 MT.

The Kohler(??) family brought it back and it was for sale at Osh Kosh. They wanted over a million dollars for it and we couldn't make the numbers work. We were dealing with them when another buyer showed up on the scene and bought the thing. We thought it was going to be gone forever.

The new buyer turned out to be just an outstanding guy that lives in Dallas. He was looking to utilize the airplane throughout its spectrum here in Alaska and all over the world. We became partners in it a year ago. We brought it home two years ago in the fall. My dad came home with us. We picked him up and he brought the airplane home. It is virtually unchanged with the

exception of a few avionic upgrades. Other than that, we are now partners in the airplane with a fellow in Dallas.

We plan to use it throughout Alaska. I would love to see it back to work doing what it was meant to do. It is meant for long-range survey work, marine mammal work, and any situation where you are going a long distance and need to see out. The whole state of Alaska is kind of spread out with a carpet underneath it. When we go on these treks doing eco-tourism, sky trekking, flight seeing around the State, it works great. That is pretty much what we plan to do. It certainly makes a high speed hunting and fishing airplane. That is kind of our program with it.

Jim: That is neat. I assume you plan to keep it here in Anchorage indefinitely.

Terry: It will be out of here. We have trips to the high Arctic planned. People have been trying to get to St. Matthew Island for a number of years. It was kind of funny because one of the people that has just been chomping at the bit to try to get to St. Matthew Island saw a photograph of a map with all multi-colored transect lines on it over in the Gulf of _____, below Providenia, west side of the Bering Sea.

We used St. Matthew many times as a check point as a nav calibration point from the south tip to the north tip of the lake or something. When we went across it, we would get a nav fix and make sure that everything to validate our nav systems was a go before we headed west. That person looked at this picture with these multiple lines going across and asked, “have you been to

St. Matthew Island?" I said, "well, yes, multiple times." She asked if I could get to St. Matthew Island. I said, "yes, that's just a piece of cake, it is only 350 miles out of Bethel and this goes out and back without even breathing hard."

So, needless to say, we have a trip planned to St. Matthew Island. Then the Canadian high Arctic up hill from Resolute in virtually unexplored country. People get up there once in awhile on some specific expedition. Our plan is to go up there and spend the better part of a month, working out of Resolute and possibly taking a helicopter with us. The Goose can fuel the helicopter.

We have cam lock dump valves underneath the wing. We just hook the valve up to it and we have a hose that is long enough for the rotor on the helicopter to land next to the Goose. It is a gravity feed with a nozzle and it just fills up the helicopter in a matter of minutes. We figure we can go 1,000 miles, the pair of us. I can go 1,000 and still give enough fuel away that the helicopter can go 1,000 miles.

Jim: That's a neat story, Terry, about your father and his efforts with this thing and now you got it back and are continuing to do really what he envisioned for it. It sounds like it has a good future.

Terry: I don't think there is any question, it is home again. The only thing that we keep trying to do is not put a mark on it and keep it like new. It will run forever if it is taken care of.

Jim: It certainly looks good. I didn't recognize it right off without the Fish and Wildlife colors and numbers but I did when I looked at the windows. Nobody else has windows like these.

I really appreciate having a chance to visit with you about the plane and about what you are doing. This will be a nice tape to put together with the one you and your dad made last winter. The videotapes of that gathering are in Anchorage. Something will be done with them in due time but I'm not sure what.

Terry: This is the kind of thing that went on at Fish and Wildlife years ago. We ran the first few trips and we didn't have a nav table. We were stretching out a Loran chart on our lap. Herman went back into the shop and he made us a table.

Jim: Oh, good, a table is just what we need. You need to fill out this release so they can put these transcriptions in a library.

Thank you very much, Terry.

--end of side 2, tape 1—

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