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The Atlantic Finns; A Forgotten Ethnic Minority

The 91 000 Finns in Canada in 1986 represent only 0.3 % of the entire multi-ethnic population of the country. Of this number, less than 1 000 Finns have settled in the Atlantic provinces. The early permanent settlement of Finns along with migrant workers to the area and their attempt to retain their identity and cultural values were examined. The findings suggest that the Finnish heritage and cultural retention is in decline among a younger generation resident, and due to the small concentration of Finns, the Finns will undoubtedly continue losing their identity and assimilate into the Canadian society.

Introduction

Sources dealing with the Finnish people of Canada rarely provide information about Finns in Atlantic Canada. The Atlantic region has a very small number of Finns, which does not encourage detailed study. Areas such as Ontario and B.C. are easier to examine, sources are readily available and the Finnish population is much larger. Yet, Halifax was the port of entry for many Finnish immigrants according to Kero (1974), Williams (1976) and Eklund (1983). However, as the migrants arrived

on shore in Halifax, the "actual destination was almost without exception located somewhere in Minnesota, Michigan or Ontario" (Kero 1974).

While this is the extent of literature found dealing with the Atlantic region, there is a more significant contribution dealing with Finns found in the Quebec region and Western Canada.

Methodology

The National Archives of Canada deals with collection of primary information for the Finnish Organization of Canada (Laine, 1987). The Archives of the FOC in Ottawa lists the Maritimes and Quebec as a District in its vast organizational hierarchy, yet, this material produced no information outside of the province of Quebec which would be relevant to the Maritimes (National Archives of Canada).

A mail-in questionnaire as well as follow-up interviews were conducted over a period of months in the winter of 1990-91 along with statistical information from the Census of Canada which were instrumental in establishing the research.

Names and addresses were found in local telephone directories, dating from 1986-90. Thus, some respondents contacted were not Finnish. Further names were obtained from respondent questionnaires which reached numerous Finns

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whom otherwise would have been impossible to find. Out of 138 questionnaires sent to prospective Finnish households, a total of 79 households responded. Thus the survey represents a total of 228 single and multiple origin Finns, which accounts for 23 % of the entire Finnish population found in Atlantic Canada. A sample of 18 Finnish families were contacted for personal interviews, and visits to these families further helped in constructing a picture of the early settlement and cultural activities of the Atlantic Finns. Photographic evidence was collected from several respondents.

Geographical distribution

According to the 1986 Census, both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick have similar concentrations of Finns. These two provinces account for 85 % of all Atlantic Finns, with the smallest concentrations in Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island (Table 1). More specifically, the sample survey reached only two families in Newfoundland, while contact was made to a total of 12 families in P.E.I. (Map 1).

Table 1. Settlement of Finns in Atlantic Canada

Year:	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1986
Province:										
Newfoundland	-	-	-	-	-	31	36	45	70	100(10)
Prince Edward Islands	-	-	1	1	1	7	16	-	10	45 (10)
Nova Scotia	-	43	45	99	96	159	254	235	260	430 (95)
New Brunswick	-	24	35	135	109	149	165	145	95	495 (90)

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada 1901-1986.

Note: Beginning in 1986, the Census includes single origin and multiple origins for ethnicity. Total of both s.o. and m.o. appears first, with single origins indicated in brackets.

According to the 1986 Census, of the 435 Finnish people encountered in the province of Nova Scotia, a total of 225 or 52 % of all Finns reside in this area (Map 2). Outside Halifax, the Finns appear to be sporadically distributed. In comparison New Brunswick seems to have a small number of Finnish concentrations. Saint John, according to the 1986 Census, had a total of 35 Finns, while the study established a present settlement of at least 15 people in the area. Similarly, Moncton, Shediac, Sackville, and the Fredericton area had small numbers of Finns. Finally,

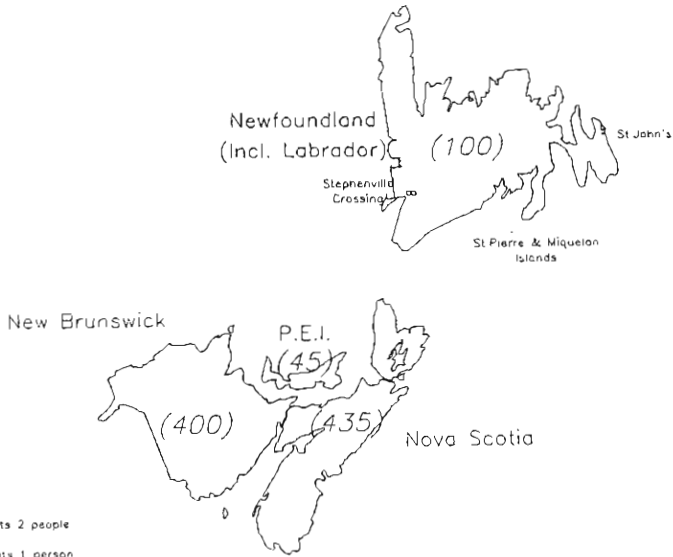
an interesting area of Finnish distribution is found in northern New Brunswick, which was found to have an old history of settlement (Map 2). It is from these population distributions, that some historical background as to the settlement in the area is considered next.

Settlement history — New Brunswick

The earliest immigrants to the Atlantic region were undoubtedly sailors who visited the shores of this country. A number of scholars indicate that with the onset of the

Map 1

FINNS IN ATLANTIC CANADA, 1986



LEGEND:

One large dot represents 2 people

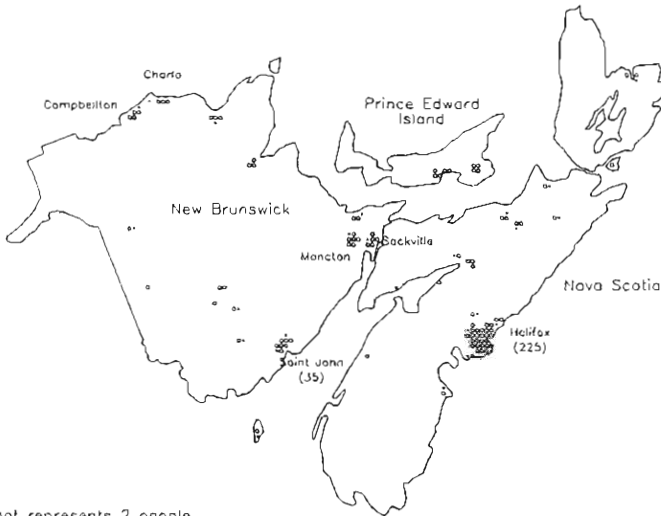
One small dot represents 1 person

Numbers indicate total Finns in each province

Source: Statistics Canada, 1986 Census, Mh01

Map 2

SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION OF MARITIME FINNS, 1990



LEGEND:

One large dot represents 2 people

One small dot represents 1 person

California Gold Rush in the 1850's, many Finnish sailors occasionally deserted ships that sailed in American coastal waters. A number of these sailors remained, and by the beginning of the 1860's, it is estimated that several hundred Finns had thus settled in the United States (Kero 1974; Niitemaa 1976). According to various Finnish settlers Finns occasionally abandoned ships that entered harbours like Campbellton in Northern New Brunswick. Sailors from many countries apart from Finland "jumped ship" and hid in the nearby woods until the ships left port, after which the sailors came out of hiding and began their lives in Canada. Even today, a small number of Finns can be encountered in these northern towns, who arrived during this era of easy landing.

One of the first sailors to arrive in New Brunswick was Karl Evert Magnusson, who landed in Saint John in about 1891. Magnusson was from the Åland Islands, and it is believed he arrived as a crew member of his brother's ship. He sailed out of Saint John for several years and eventually went into business for himself, operating a men's clothing store. Magnusson also was employed by the Provincial Government as the Assistant Superintendent of Immigration, and acted as the Finnish Consul in Saint John between the years 1942 and 1952¹. Descendents of this early arrival still reside in the Saint John area.

An example of sailors jumping ship is found in the settlement background of Yrjö (George) Laakso, born in Bommar-sund, also in the Åland Islands in 1899, and who arrived in the Campbellton area in the early summer of 1915 with the schooner "Vidyylia", registered in the Åland Is-

lands. This ship sailed between Liverpool, England and the Canadian East Coast, carrying a cargo of salt that was unloaded at Campbellton, and loaded in turn with lumber. With the ambition of many Finns to immigrate to the new world at the turn of the century, Yrjö Laakso at the age of 15 also decided to try his luck. Upon meeting another Finnish sailor in Campbellton who had also jumped ship two years earlier, in 1913, Yrjö Laakso left his ship, hid in the woods for a few days until his ship left the port, and made his way to a "safe house" further east along the railroad tracks to Charlo. While he later was left to fend for himself, as the other Finn returned to the sea, he eventually gained a hold of the English language, settled in the Charlo area and was married to a English-Canadian woman. From this point on, Yrjö Laakso has remained isolated from any Finnish connections, and as a result, his five children, 16 grandchildren, and 4 great-grand-children do not understand or speak the Finnish language. Yrjö Laakso is possibly one of the oldest settlers in the Maritimes, and his story of jumping ship is an interesting addition to the ways in which early immigrants found their way to the country².

As has been previously mentioned, various Quebec towns and cities were settled by Finnish immigrants, most notable of these communities were Montreal, Val D'Or, Kenogami, and Royan-Noranda. In the early 1900's, a Finnish workers organization was formed named the Finnish Organization of Canada. This organization supported Finnish workmen who were employed in the lumber camps, mines and steel mills. According to the history of the FOC, the greatest period of

1) Correspondence with Mr. Everett Magnusson, June 5, 1991.

2) Interview with Mr. George Laakso, March 4, 1991.



Finnish men at a New Brunswick picnic. Most were employed by Ahlstrom-Canada Ltd. Photo by Mr. Veikko Kuronen.

growth for the organizations Montreal branch occurred during 1930–31. Over a hundred new members joined the organization as Finns wanted to join the FOC. Following this single year, economic recession hit the country, which led to the out-migration of many Montreal residents (Eklund 1983). This then, was a factor that led many Finns to leave and move to other areas looking for work. It was in this period that an increase occurred in the number of Finns in the Maritime region, and New Brunswick in particular. These early migrants were seasonal workers or migrant workers, made up of young, single males, who were able to move to areas across Canada that had a promise of jobs.

While most of the Finnish immigrants arriving in Canada were headed to the west, there was an immigration of Finns to New Brunswick between WWI and WWII.

Statistics indicate that during this time, the number of Finns increased dramatically from a mere 35 Finns in 1935 to 145 in 1945. The reason for this increase was migration from the Montreal area, as lumbering drew many Finns away from Quebec. According to some respondents, hundreds of Finns moved into the area. Jobs were available and badly needed during this time and led to a migration of Finnish lumberjacks into the forests of New Brunswick, where felling and debarking trees was the main trade. Most of these jobs were seasonal, however, and the majority of Finns returned to Montreal for the winter months. An example of such an area is Sussex, N.B., where in the early 1900's, some 20 Finnish lumberjacks came to work, but later returned to Quebec³.

In June, 1931, a major fire in the port of Saint John which destroyed the port facili-

3) Correspondence with Mr. Veikko Kuronen, April 22, 1991.

ties on the western side of the harbour, brought thousands of workers to reconstruct the harbour during the fall of 1931 and during 1932. Some 25–30 Finnish carpenters from Montreal also came to work on the construction of the new port facilities. Along with these Finns was Mr. Albert Vuorinen, who had moved to Canada in 1926. Along with his wife, he remained in the area, and moved to Hoyt, N.B. in 1936 where he bought a dairy farm. Mr. Vuorinen states that during this time there were numerous Finns working in the Saint John area as carpenters, construction workers, painters, as well as handymen⁴. Following this large reconstruction project, the large number of Finns that had arrived left once more, heading back west. Today, it is noted that many Finns who have moved to the Atlantic region have arrived from the Montreal and Royun-Noranda areas in Quebec.

A minor increase occurred during the early 1970's, when a Finnish entrepreneur established a glass bottling factory in the Shediac area. This enterprise was established by Ahlstrom-Canada Ltd., with the help of federal and provincial government funding, in an effort to bring employment opportunities to an economically depressed area in New Brunswick. Technical staff, which included some 35 Finnish families immigrated directly from Finland to the area to work in this venture over a three year period. Additional recruiting and training of local personnel was carried out, and some 100 positions were created by the firm. At the time, Ahlstrom-Canada Ltd. produced glass bottles, jars and containers to serve breweries and distillers, the wine industry, soft drink, food and cosmetic industries throughout the four

Atlantic provinces. According to media accounts, one of the basic reasons for the establishment of the factory in the Shediac Industrial Park and the cooperation between the Finns and the New Brunswickers was found on climatic grounds. At this time, the operations of the factory were at the forefront of development in the glass industry, and the much publicized glass furnace was the only one of its kind in North America⁵.

Although the statistics indicate a decline in the total Finnish population of the province, it was during 1969–1980 that the area near Moncton had a good concentration of Finns, who established some cultural activities. Mid-summer festival was celebrated by organizing family picnics, and many area Finns were invited who participated in this and other similar events. However, following a three-year work visa, many Finns employed as technical support staff returned to Finland in 1972, and later in 1980 when the Finn owned operation was sold, the majority of remaining Finns who were employed in the venture returned to Finland, with some moving to Ontario and Quebec.

Since this time, and following the departure of many Finns from the area, the activities have declined and presently only minor family picnics involving a few Finnish families in the Moncton area remains. According to numerous Finns throughout New Brunswick who have had some connection to the cultural activities which were present during this time, two people were responsible for organizing and being in charge of maintaining a sense of Finnish identity and heritage. These two men were Mr. Veikko Kuronen and Mr. Reijo Pelto. Kuronen, through correspondence

4) Interview with Mr. Albert Vuorinen, March 3, 1991.

5) Moncton Daily News, August 23, 1969, pp. 3, 13, 14–16.

with numerous Finns within the region, organized Mid-Summer Festival Picnics and Christmas gatherings for dinner and dance parties that were held in various locations in the province. Starting in 1974 and lasting until 1984, these events were held in areas such as Moncton, Shediac and Saint John, and attracted some 25–50 Finnish people from all three Maritime provinces, who all helped in running the events by providing traditional Finnish foods such as 'pulla', 'sima', 'piirakka', and 'kalja'. Some brought along guitars for sing-alongs, and some also had saunas which were used often. However, the majority of people involved were connected to the Ahlstrom glass factory⁶. Mr. Reijo Peltola, on the other hand, organized more local picnics in the Moncton and Shediac region, celebrating 'Pikku Joulukuu', Mid-Summers eve, and as the only remaining Finn from the original Ahlstrom operation, has continued having picnics at his residence once a year to the present. However, with the departure of many Finns from the area following the sale of the Finnish glass factory to Canadian interests, these yearly events have drawn less and less Finns. While events are still held during the summer, more English speaking neighbours rather than local Finns take part in the festivities⁷.

Nova Scotia

While the settlement history of New Brunswick seems to have some specific waves of influx, the remaining Atlantic provinces are somewhat harder to characterize. In

Nova Scotia, with the coming of the immigrants from Finland, it is conceivable that some of these settlers remained in the Halifax area. However, as is pointed out by numerous respondents, reasons for the lack of settlement in this, as well as other Maritime areas was based on the lack of employment opportunities and the fact that all of the land had already been settled by the English. Land offered by the federal government was available for a minimal fee in the interior, and this then is where most Finns were destined. As with northern New Brunswick, some respondents also mentioned knowing an old Finnish settler who resided in a Halifax resthome and had settled into the province after jumping ship in Halifax.

Respondents in the Halifax area agreed that no organized activities within the Finnish community had ever occurred. However, due to a large Norwegian population in the area, a Norwegian society was established by this ethnic group in the mid-1970's. Attracting other Scandinavian groups, this organization was formed into the Scandinavian Society of Nova Scotia. Most members in this group are Norwegian, Swedish and Danish, and the Finns have rarely taken part extensively in the activities provided. Activities include Christmas parties, multicultural festival celebrations in July, Easter parties, Midsummer festivities and Siesta celebrations. According to the Society president, out of 100 member families, only three are Finnish, with 75 % Norwegian, 10 % Swedish, 6 % Danish and 6 % Icelandic⁸. Reasons cited for a low

6) Interview with Mrs. Raija O'Brien, March 4, 1991, and correspondence with Mr. Veikko Kuronen, April 22, 1991.

7) Interview with Mr. Reijo Peltola, April 11, 1991.

8) Interview with Mrs. Monica Hayden, President, Scandinavian Society of Nova Scotia. April 8, 1991.

membership of Finns includes the languages spoken which are predominantly Norwegian and Swedish⁹.

Prince Edward Island

Prince Edward Island has a more recent settlement history. The first Finnish settler found his way to the Island by 1921, and was the lone Finnish farmer in the province until 1961. With the agricultural life-style of the province, very few Finns seem to have opted for settlement here. It is interesting to note, however, that numerous respondents who have settled in the province, have done so as an escape from another part of the country. Seasonal summer residences and cottages on the Island is a common element discovered among the respondents.

Newfoundland

Newfoundland offers the least information about Finnish settlement. Prior to joining Canada as a province in 1949, very little statistical information can be established. However, in 1951 there appeared 31 Finns in the province. According to Raivio, the main settlement area during the period of his study revolved around St. John's and Goose Bay, Labrador where a military base is located. In the present study, while a total of 100 Finns "should" be in Newfoundland, only 2 Finnish families that live in the region were located in all the telephone directories that were examined. These two families are located in St. John's and Stephenville Crossing respectively. However, from information gathered from respondent interviews, it

was learned that there is also a Finn living in Goose Bay, Labrador¹⁰.

Findings

It is believed that this distribution of Finns in Atlantic accounts for a large proportion of all Finns in each region. However, it must be remembered that as most names that were encountered in the telephone directories were Finnish surnames, it is obviously impossible to locate Finnish women who have married into another "foreign" surname. Thus, the majority of respondents were men.

The average age of the respondent was 43 years of age and the largest portion of respondents fall under the 31-40 age category. This in effect means that a large concentration of a younger generation is present in the sample in question. The youngest respondent was 22 years of age, while the oldest 91 years of age respectively. The male/female ratio encountered through the administration of the questionnaire was 49/30 which represents 62 % males and 38 % females. This breakdown in sex is attributed to the establishment of Finnish surnames, which usually remain with the males.

It was interesting to note that not a single 2nd, 3rd or 4th generation Finn is married to a Finnish spouse, and in these homes Finnish is the common language spoken at home (15 %). Intermarriage is very common, and included spouses from Barbados, far-east Asia as well as various European countries. As is the case in most of these intermarriages, the language spoken at home is English (83 %), although in some homes valiant efforts have been

9) Interviews with Mrs. Laila Lainio and Mrs. Soili deSouza, April 7, 1991.

10) Interview with Mr. Reijo Peltola, April 11, 1991.

made in order to retain at least some of the Finnish tongue. By and large, however, this has not been very successful.

The year of immigration to the region seems to indicate that prior to the 1960's, not many Finns arrived in the Atlantic provinces. What is interesting, is the fact that during the last three decades, similar numbers are encountered. Twenty-five of the respondent families arrived in the 1960's, followed by 22 in the 70's and 21 in the 80's. This pattern further supports the observation of a younger generation that resides in the region.

Of the Finns contacted in this research, 23 % reported having their roots in the province of Uusimaa, and 22 % in the province of Turku and Pori. Prominent in these provinces is first of all the Helsinki capital region, where many Finns are from. Also, many Finns have come from the city of Turku, Laitila and Pori. Next, we have the provinces of Kymi, with many people from Kotka, Karhula and Hamina (16 %), followed by the province of Vaasa with people from Vaasa, Kokkola and Kauhava (12 %). It is found that over 60 % of the respondents have their roots in southern Finland and along the coastal areas.

The majority of the Finns questioned arrived from Ontario (38 %), and Quebec (14 %). These two provinces thus contributed 52 % of all respondents in the Atlantic provinces. Meanwhile, direct immigration from Finland is in third place, with a 12 % share of the total.

The strongest identity to being Finnish appears among the 1st generation respondents. The Finnish identity seems to fade somewhat in the second as well as the third generation, which follows the assimilation trend so common with Northern European immigrants. While only one fourth generation Finn was encountered through the survey, a number of other fourth generation Finns spoke with the author, who sim-

ilarly identified themselves as being Canadian, rather than Finnish or Finnish-Canadian. Therefore, it seems that with the 4th generation, identifying oneself as completely Finnish is highly unlikely. (Table 2.)

From analyzing aspects of employment, it was noted that the largest number (44 %) of respondents are employed in the quinary service sector positions which include consumer services, health, education, government, research, tourism and recreational facilities. Seventy-eight percent of all Atlantic Finns are employed in the three service sector industries; tertiary, quaternary and quinary sectors. Education has a role to play in this distribution, and it is noted that 49 % of the respondents have university level education. Thus, it appears that a large proportion of Atlantic Finns are highly educated, well employed and to a large extent, well established financially.

In examining the attempt of local Finns to maintain their cultural ties and values to the Finnish heritage, various questions were asked which cover this area. Maintenance of the Finnish heritage through baking and cooking traditional Finnish foods appeals to 73 % of the respondents, while 27 % did not practice this form of cultural retention. The presence of a sauna amongst Finnish people has also become a strong tradition, some 65 % of the respondents indicated that they either had a sauna of their own or used a sauna, while a total of 33 % have no sauna or never use it. Some respondents indicated that they had in the past used a sauna, or were planning on building one in the future. However, as an indicator of cultural retention, the presence and use of a sauna appears to rank below the opportunity to bake traditional Finnish foods. Finally, a small proportion of respondents are aware of Finnish-Canadian literature which is

Table 2. Self-Identity vs. Generation

Self-identity:	Finnish	Finnish-Canadian	Cdn of Finnish Origin	Canadian	<i>Total</i>
Generation:					
1st	11	11	4	0	26
2nd	2	4	14	6	26
3rd	0	3	11	5	19
4th	0	0	0	1	1
<i>Total</i>	13	18	29	12	72

available from various large Finnish centres. A mere 44 % of the Atlantic Finns subscribe to various newspapers and magazines, while 56 % have never read, and in some cases, have never heard of such material being available. The upkeep of language suffers from the lack of reading material, while the language spoken at home also reflects the maintenance of culture. Thus, a great majority of respondents indicated that Finnish was not spoken at home (83 %) while only 15 % indicated that Finnish was spoken at home. From these four indicators of cultural maintenance, the preparation of traditional Finnish foods appears most widespread, followed by the presence and use of a sauna, the readership of Finnish literature and lastly the upkeep of a Finnish language at home.

The largest proportion of Finnish respondents felt that Finns did not settle in the Atlantic provinces but moved west due to reasons such as the availability of jobs, the presence of more Finns, and the climatic and vegetational similarities to Finland (41 %). The second most significant reason cited involves the lack of employment and the poor Atlantic economy (26 %) which has had the greatest impact on the sparse settlement of Finns in the area. Still, a good proportion of the respondents

have very little or no idea as to the cause of this sparse settlement pattern (20 %). The lack of immigration to the region as a result of government policy in the early 1900's and the lack of knowledge about the Atlantic provinces in general among the Finns in either Finland or Canada was cited as a fourth major reason for the lack of settlement in the region (6 %). Other reasons were also cited and were more personal in nature involving family ties, a love for the ocean, and so on were also listed by respondents (6 %).

Conclusions

The Finnish ethnic group found in the Atlantic provinces appears to have a settlement history that as of yet has not received any scholarly examination. The arrival of sailors in the early 1900's follows similar documentation that exists in the American west coast from the 1850's California Gold Rush period. Migrant workers in lumber camps and construction projects were common in the 1920-40 period, but a more recently arrived population is the basis of the present Finnish population.

As can be seen from the data analysis in this paper, some interesting findings and correlations appear. For example, the majority of Finnish settlers in the Atlantic

provinces appear to be among the younger demographic category, are usually very well educated and are well employed in service oriented positions with highly respectable salaries. English is the dominant language and intermarriage to other ethnic groups is common. Retention of cultural values such as the sauna and traditional Finnish food is practised by many.

Cultural activities have been present in the past, but due to the minute concentra-

tions of Atlantic Finns, no major organized effort has ever taken place. It is of great historical significance to examine the early settlement of the Finns to the east coast of Canada. With the poor knowledge and understanding that most Canadians have of the East Coast, it is time that the Finns try to examine and discover some of the heritage that they have in the forgotten Atlantic provinces of Canada.

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