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Bright Child of Oklahoma: Lotsee Patterson and the Development of America's Tribal Libraries

BONNIE BIGGS

Indian Peoples of the North American continent were, in the broadest sense, literate before books and other media came into their lives. Native Americans have always been gatherers of information, sharers of knowledge, skilled users of symbols, and transmitters of cultural heritage and experience. Like the Greeks, Indian People vested the world with elaborate meanings, told stories of courage and heroism, and passed the wisdom evolved from assimilated knowledge and experience to succeeding generations.

—Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Plan for the Improvement of Library/Media/Information Programs, 1977*

From the mid-1970s to mid-1980s a series of federal grants, born of one woman's vision and determination, set the groundwork for the establishment of tribal libraries across this nation. The fertile political environment of the late 1960s championed initiatives designed to reach underserved populations. While libraries in the dominant culture were establishing outreach departments and finding ways to build bridges to neglected populations, educators Charles Townley and Lotsee Patterson lobbied and applied for federal monies to establish libraries on tribal lands. Townley and Patterson were among the first to take meaningful action toward the development of tribal libraries as Native American communities began to emerge from a totally oral tradition into one

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that sought to find ways to preserve, transfer, and disseminate cultural traditions through print and new media formats. They had come to recognize, along with Jack Forbes and a handful of other scholars, that American Indians, in a post-Indian Self Determination and Educational Assistance Act era, were in need of information that would support and protect sovereignty initiatives.¹

This article focuses on the work of Lotsee Patterson (Comanche), which spans four decades and has directly or indirectly impacted nearly every tribal library in the United States. A “bright child” came into the world on her mother’s allotment near Apache, Oklahoma during the Depression in 1931. Lotsee was her Comanche great-grandmother’s name and is an Indian word for “bright child.” The derivation of the name is unknown, but one source attributes it to a Creek woman, who was in attendance at her great-grandmother’s birth. Although Lotsee’s father was an enrolled Chickasaw, the family did not identify with Chickasaw culture because they lived in Comanche country. Her grandfather, an interpreter for the Comanche tribe, attempted to teach her the language, but she was not interested at the time. This remains a regret that she holds to this day. Her childhood was spent in rural, prairie Oklahoma, riding horses and tending to farm animals. She recalls her mother receiving books from the state library by mail and learning to read. Lotsee loved to read at an early age. She grew up receiving mixed messages from her parents: her father encouraged her to deny her Indian heritage, while her mother fostered pride in her Native identity.

BIRTH OF THE CAUSE

In 1959 Lotsee found herself teaching children of Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache descent in a public school in the little town of Boone, six miles west of Apache, Oklahoma. She discovered that the children had neither a library in their school nor anything to read in their homes—no books, magazines, or even newspapers. “I became acutely aware of their history—magnificent history and background—yet it was not appreciated by the community or even by those kids.... I guess my interest has always been trying to build service where there is none, trying to develop serving the un-served.”² She identifies this as the turning point in her life in terms of advocacy for libraries in Indian Country.

It was while she was teaching at a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school in 1968 that a principal told her he wanted her to study library science during the summer. She was granted a Higher Education Act, Title IIB (HEA IIB) fellowship and received her master’s degree in library science (MLS) in 1969 from the University of Oklahoma, where she is now a full professor in the School of Library and Information Studies. As a graduate student, Patterson procured HEA IIB monies for institutes to train librarians to improve their interpersonal skills with Indian students and select quality Indian materials. Patterson’s career path between attending and teaching graduate school in Norman led her to, among other destinations, the University of New Mexico, where she initiated a series of proposals that would change the library and information landscape of Indian Country forever.

NATIONAL ADVOCACY

During the early 1970s, Patterson became involved in the American Library Association and was a founding member of the Office of Library Outreach Services Subcommittee on the American Indian, what later became the American Indian Library Association. It was here that her advocacy reached the national level. Her lobbying efforts on behalf of American Indians for library services caught the attention of commissioners on the United States National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS). Patterson testified in a number of regional hearings conducted by NCLIS, just as the commission was becoming aware of the problems that various institutions and organizations were having in trying to meet the growing information needs of Native communities. The NCLIS hearings coupled with growing self-determination initiatives led the commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to make a commitment in 1975 to support a long-range plan to improve library programs serving Indian schools and communities.

At the commissioner's request, responsibility for the development of a plan was assigned to the director of the Department of Interior's Office of Library and Information Services. In the fall of 1976, the director designated a planning group that consisted of interior and BIA personnel in Washington, D.C., and five resource persons with extensive experience in library programs in American Indian communities. This group of resource people included Patterson. The Department of Interior's draft report "Bureau of Indian Affairs Plan for the Improvement of Library/Media/Information Programs," produced by the planning group, was submitted in July 1977 and became the basis for the first White House Pre-conference on Indian Library and Information Services On or Near Reservations. This pre-conference, held in Denver in 1978, paved the way for the first White House Conference on Library and Information Services (WHCLIS) in 1979. Again, Patterson testified as a delegate and member of the advisory board at WHCLIS, which passed a total of sixty-four resolutions, including the National Indian Omnibus Library Bill, which called for legislation to assist in the development of library and information services to all Indian reservations, including librarian training. According to Townley, Patterson's savvy on Indian information needs contributed to the success and resulting national initiatives of this conference.³

In 1984 Patterson helped write the legislation that amended the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) to include Title IV: Library Services for Indian Tribes and Hawaiian Natives Program.⁴ NCLIS hearings held between 1985 and 1991 revealed that improvement as well as deterioration had occurred in the decade since the implementation of LSCA Title IV. In 1991 Patterson co-chaired the second White House Pre-Conference on Native American Library and Information Services.

INSTITUTE FOR TRAINING LIBRARY AIDES IN PUEBLO INDIAN SCHOOLS

The era of Patterson's hallmark federal grants began in 1973. The first Title II grant under the Department of Education's Library Programs, the Institute for Training Library Aides in Pueblo Indian Schools, provided for the training of teacher's aides in BIA day schools in eight of the New Mexico Pueblos. For two or three years, residents in Pueblo communities had verbalized the need for library services in the schools and communities at BIA hearings.

Patterson designed the institute to "take library education to the pueblos." As an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico, Patterson developed a special program that would allow BIA-designated candidates to work toward an associate of arts degree while being trained in the libraries of their own Pueblos. Students enrolled in a course of study in basic library and media competencies and developed leadership skills for setting up and maintaining community library services. Patterson was aware that the majority of the BIA schools did not have libraries. She systematically approached school principals to see if there was a need for teachers' aides to be trained in basic library skills and the response was overwhelming. The project's selection of participants was based on the fact that "a major tenet of the Director is that it is easier and wiser to train Indian people in library skills than it is to take an outsider [non-Indian] and try to train them in a specific culture." She goes on to say, "knowledge of the people, the culture, the language and community information needs is a more important prerequisite than knowing the Dewey Decimal System or other library skills."⁵ Her idea was to train people first and the libraries would come. Indeed, at the end of this flagship grant, eight BIA day schools had fully developed or developing libraries with trained aides, six of whom were retained by the schools the following year. A true measure of the project's success was the awareness of the value of libraries that developed over the year. At the end of the grant, a number of the Pueblo governors requested the institute's help in developing community libraries. As would be the case in subsequent federal grant projects initiated by Patterson, Charles Townley, in his evaluation of the institute, notes that the program "created a successful model for training Indian library aides which can be applied to virtually any Indian community throughout the United States."⁶

TRAINING LIBRARY AIDES

The success of the training program for teachers' aides inspired Patterson's second federal training grant. In 1974 she applied for and received a HEA IIB, Division of Libraries and Information Resources grant—"Library Aide Training Institute for American Indians." The project was designed to provide on-site library training for fourteen American Indians in New Mexico. The grant was administered under the University of New Mexico's College of

Education where participants would gain twenty-four hours of resident credit and some would be eligible for an associate of arts degree.

The instructors and students found the project overwhelmingly successful. Library facilities and services improved and Indian aides grew professionally. Ten of them remained employed in libraries after the grant ended and four went on to pursue further education at the university. Unique challenges were overcome as project staff faced a general lack of telephone access or overnight facilities and the great energy crisis of the mid-1970s combined with poor road conditions imposed unforeseen roadblocks. Still, the key objectives of the project were met, if not exceeded.

LIBRARY DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Following the successful training projects of 1973 and 1974, Patterson applied for two consecutive federal grants under the HEA IIB for library demonstration projects. Preceding her projects were three library demonstration projects, coordinated out of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) under the direction of Charles Townley at the University of Minnesota. Townley, who attended library school with Patterson, later told her that she had "done it the right way": she had trained the people first, then set up libraries.⁷

Townley's NIEA Library Project was a four-year research and demonstration project, which took place between 1971 and 1975 and had the specific objectives of (1) identifying the information needs of American Indian people; and (2) establishing library and information service demonstration centers on selected reservation sites (Rough Rock Indian School, on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona; Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota; and the Akwesasne Mohawk Reservation in New York). Among many other markers, circulation statistics from all three sites indicated that use of materials exceeded the national average and all three libraries continued operation after the project was complete.⁸ Final evaluative reports, authored by Patterson, considered the project to be a success and noted the key weaknesses to be lack of community input and involvement and inconsistent and inadequate funding, challenges that Patterson would face in her own demonstration projects.⁹

In 1975 Patterson submitted a proposal to the US Office of Education's HEA IIB for a library demonstration grant. The American Indian Community Library Demonstration Project was funded to establish libraries in the New Mexico Pueblos of Zuni, Acoma, Jemez, Cañoncito, Laguna, Santa Clara, Zia, and San Ildefonso. The Library Aide Training Institute for American Indians had already successfully trained staff on four of these Pueblos. The Pueblos selected for the project were chosen because the tribal government had a commitment to the development of a library or had a facility with space allocated for a library. The grant provided for coordinating and consulting project staff, stipends for indigenous library aides, audio-visual equipment, supplies, and collections.

The key premise of the grant was the recognition that of the total population of American Indians in New Mexico—78,000—nearly one-half resided on

reservations. Testimony given in Albuquerque hearings before the 1974 President's National Commission on Libraries and Information Science painted a grim picture of Indian people's access to school or public libraries. The objectives of the project were to identify information needs, select materials based on those needs, market the library to the community, train library staff, and assist communities in locating human and financial resources needed to continue the development of the library. At the time, there were less than twenty-five MLS-degreed American Indians in the United States. Field coordinators for the project were selected for their sensitivity to Indian culture and their ability to adapt to Indian ways. One of the field coordinators, Ben Wakashige, went on to become the current state librarian of New Mexico.

Among the objectives, beyond simply setting up community libraries, was to develop the libraries to the public library level prescribed by the State Library of New Mexico. Zuni and Laguna met those stringent criteria and were thereby eligible for annual state library funds. Outside evaluator Charles Townley, in his final evaluation of the project, called for the need to hold workshops for further training of aides.¹⁰ Patterson's development of the

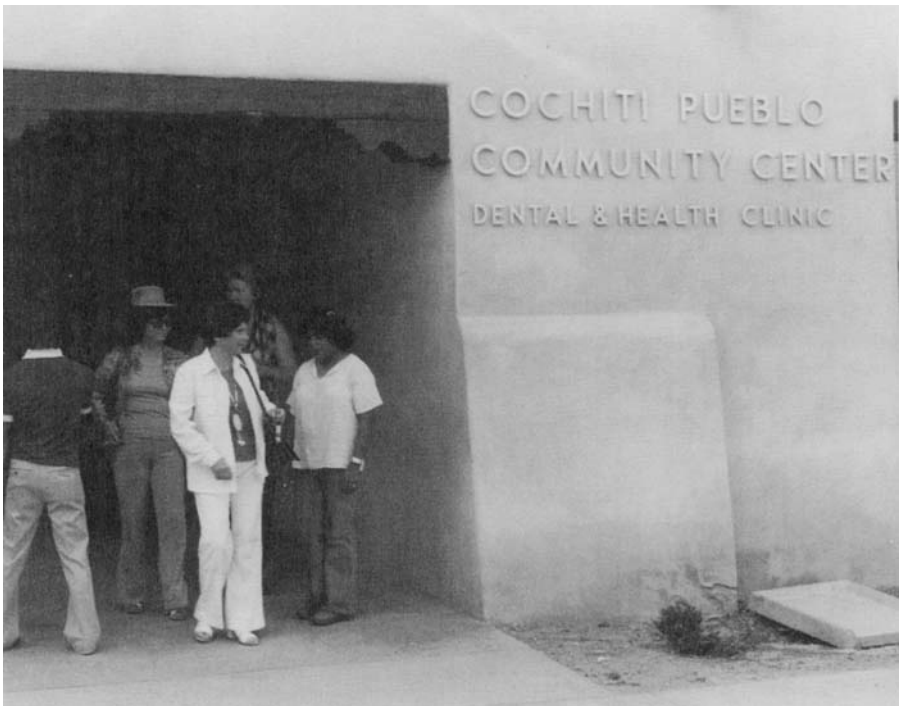


PHOTO 1. Lotsee Patterson touring Cochiti Pueblo in 1977 with members of the National Commission on Library and Information Science. Left to right: Ben Wakahinge (back turned), project instructor and current state librarian of New Mexico; unidentified member of the National Commission on Library and Information Science; Lotsee Patterson; Mary Huffer, Department of the Interior library director; and Ann Pecos, library aide trainee at Cochiti Pueblo (photo courtesy of Lotsee Patterson).

national TRAILS project (Training and Assistance for Indian Library Services), a decade later, would respond to this call.

In 1976 Patterson applied for a second federal Library Demonstration Project grant to set up new libraries in the Pueblos of Cochiti and Santa Domingo and to further implement programs and develop model tribal library initiatives at Acoma and Laguna, the two libraries considered most successful from the previous project.

Patterson spent hours with the Pueblo governors, key staff, and community people in developing a needs assessment profile. Six key areas of need were identified:

students who were bussed off the reservation needed resources available for them to study since they were taken home immediately after school; students needed a place to study; the high unemployment/underemployment rate created a greater need for adults to have something to do; there was a need for a source of comprehensive information; there was a need to support many existing reservation activities such as adult education classes, training courses, day care centers, head-start programs and tribal history projects; [and] there was a need to acquire information, past and present, about their pueblos.¹¹

Emphasis was placed on preparing tribes for the continuance of library services at the end of the project. The New Mexico State Library, in a letter of support, recognized Patterson's successes in the previous year's project and her high standing in the Indian community and pledged its support, which later took the form of on-site staff development initiatives and grant monies.¹² Patterson encouraged the tribal librarians to form a Native American Interest Group within the New Mexico Library Association. This group galvanized their strength and voice and continues to support Pueblo library initiatives twenty-five years later. New Mexico's State Library has done more than any other state's library to recognize, consider, and support the information needs of Native Americans. Some credit for this honorable distinction must be given to Patterson's relationship-building during her tenure at the University of New Mexico in the 1970s.

During the project, a new state senator, ex-astronaut Harrison Schmitt, was elected. Always the politician and lobbyist, Patterson offered her assistance in educating the senator in the areas of Indian education and libraries. She subsequently escorted his legislative aide and his Albuquerque office manager to several of the demonstration sites. Senator Schmitt later held a meeting with the Pueblo governors and selected Indian leaders to discuss mutual concerns. Patterson was invited to that meeting.

Highlights of this project included the completion, by Patterson, of *A Core Collection for an Indian Community Library*, an unpublished bibliography used in library circles. During the fourth quarter of the project, Patterson escorted six members of the National Commission on Library and Information Science and the director of the US Department of the Interior, Office of Library and Information Services to the project sites. In her final report to the

federal authorities, Patterson noted that the “termination of this grant will not mean an end to the Director’s association with these Pueblos, nor an end to her efforts to improve their libraries because this is a personal commitment.” Perhaps the greatest measure of Patterson’s success in these training and demonstration projects is the fact that all but two of the libraries are functioning today, with two staff members still employed from the 1970s at Zuni and Laguna. Patterson remains in contact. Every summer, she takes University of Oklahoma students to the Pueblos to visit the libraries as part of a course entitled “Information in Society: Native People in New Mexico.” This author audited one of these courses to witness firsthand how Patterson is met with enthusiasm and great affection in the Pueblo libraries that she helped to establish twenty-three years earlier.

TRAILS

The TRAILS project (Training and Assistance for Indian Library Services) is perhaps the most tangible, widespread evidence of Patterson’s legacy. Following the passage of LSCA Title IV legislation, which Patterson helped draft, grants were now available for Indian tribes to develop, improve, or expand tribal libraries.¹³ The 1984 LSCA revision and extension stimulated



PHOTO 2. *Laguna Pueblo during the time its library was being developed under Patterson’s grants (photo courtesy of Lotsee Patterson).*



PHOTO 3. *Acoma Pueblo, Sky City, during the time its library was being developed under Patterson's grants (photo courtesy of Lotsee Patterson).*

tribal library activity to such an extent that the Office of Library Programs, US Department of Education, recognized that they had neither the staff nor the expertise to meet the growing information needs and initiatives of Indian people. In 1984 a request for proposal was issued for an outside contractor to provide technical assistance to tribes and Alaskan Natives. Five institutions applied, and Patterson was the successful applicant. She left a tenured position at Texas Woman's University in Denton in her fifty-seventh year because she wanted to administer the grant out of the University of Oklahoma, which was interested in and supportive of the project. The TRAILS proposal was framed by Patterson's philosophy that trained American Indian staff is a prerequisite for successful tribal libraries. The TRAILS project gave her the opportunity to apply the lessons learned in the Pueblos of New Mexico at the national level.

The purpose of TRAILS was a grand and sweeping one. Patterson designed the project to provide training, guidance, and direction to all 506 federally recognized American Indian tribes and Alaskan Native communities. During the short fourteen-month period of the project, commencing in September 1985, Patterson directly and indirectly did just that.

The eleven tasks specified in the original RFP were met within the fourteen-month project timeline, and many of them continue to be fulfilled today. Program activities are well documented in the 1987 TRAILS Final Report. A

prestigious and culturally appropriate advisory group was formed, including a liaison from the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. A survey to determine short-term training needs was sent to all tribes. Training sessions were conducted in seven states with the largest number of tribes: Alaska, Arizona, California, Montana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Washington. In several cases, state libraries assisted in coordinating the workshops. Interviews with participants in the Southern California workshop, held at the Barona Reservation, indicate that TRAILS training came just in time. Seven new tribal libraries were in the process of forming using LSCA Basic Grants. San Diego County Library staff had been approached by tribal leaders for assistance in setting up reservation libraries.¹⁴ While workshop participants varied greatly from skilled, paraprofessional library staff to interested tribal leaders, TRAILS trainers were able to custom fit training as needed and found that the diverse mix of attendees begot positive results. Tribal leaders developed a better understanding of the need for and complexities involved in establishing and running a library.

The dissemination of program practices and procedures took on comprehensive dimensions. Patterson addressed the White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services Task Force, the National Congress of American Indians/National Tribal Chairman's Association, several state library annual conferences, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the Indian Women's Conference, the Alaskan Federation of Natives, and the Third Annual Tribal Symposium in Tulsa. She appeared on television programs and radio broadcasts, and press releases appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Library Journal*.

The hallmark product of TRAILS was the procedures manual that was developed, printed, and mailed to all tribes and Alaskan villages. Although the project ended in 1987, Patterson recently commented that during one particular year, she responded to fifty different requests for copies of TRAILS. By necessity, she updated the manual in 1992 and continues to provide free copies upon request. One-on-one assistance, guidance, and consultation took place on a massive scale, as indicated by compelling statistics in the final report. Fifteen years after the TRAILS grant ended, Patterson continues to offer that assistance.

At the second White House Pre-Conference on Native American Library and Information Services in 1991, TRAILS was a topic of great discussion under the second of ten findings reported in the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science final report in December 1992. "An enormous amount of testimony from a variety of sources singled-out the no longer funded project TRAILS as one of the most valuable programs conceived, since it provided the tribes with the technical assistance that most of them desperately needed as a result of the enactment of LSCA Title IV." The commission concluded in its report to the president that "the U.S. Congress, with the full support of the Administration, should replace the previously funded project TRAILS with a National Native American Technical Assistance Center."¹⁵ This call for the federal government to take the lead echoes Patterson's concluding sentence in the executive summary of her final report on TRAILS five years earlier: "This report concludes that Indian tribes and Alaskan Natives

need technical assistance and training on a continuing basis. It is therefore recommended that a permanent National Indian Library Center be established." Regrettably, none of the findings of the second White House conference resulted in legislation and training of tribal library staff has not been formalized or supported at the state or national level.

PATTERSON TODAY

Patterson remains active on a number of fronts. She is the only standing member on the executive board of the American Indian Library Association, and serves on the American Library Association's Office of Library and Outreach Services Subcommittee on Native Americans. One of the goals of this subcommittee is to coordinate and host a national conference for tribal librarians in 2001. In 1996 Patterson was one of twenty-five individuals awarded the United States National Commission on Libraries and Information Science Silver Award, presented for noteworthy and sustained contributions to libraries and information services. Among many other awards, she received the American Library Association's Equality Award in 1994, presented for outstanding contributions promoting equality in the library profession.

She is currently working with a minimum of eleven tribes on a variety of levels. She is assisting the seven tribal colleges of Montana in developing and updating a core collection of twentieth-century Indian materials and is co-authoring a discography of Southwest Indian music. Her scholarly work includes the only existing *Directory of Native American Tribal Libraries*. She has contributed several book chapters and encyclopedia entries and has written numerous scholarly articles that focus on Native American librarianship and collections, as well as writings on Comanche culture. Patterson's papers and conference presentations have taken her to New Zealand, the Ukraine, Canada, and nearly every US state.

At the University of Oklahoma, Patterson focuses on recruiting American Indian students for the library graduate program. She notes that it takes, on average, three years to successfully recruit Indian students. Although the University of Oklahoma has approximately 1,400 Indian students, most of them are undergraduates. She cites several recent examples of Indian students who come to the university directly from their reservation or Pueblo. Patterson helps to guide students through a difficult cultural and emotional transition. She has recruited and mentored several master's students and one doctoral student who now teaches at the University of Oklahoma in the library school.

LEGACY

Perhaps Patterson's most significant current and continuing work is her dogged determination to stay in the face of the right people in the state libraries, the National Commission on Library Services, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and any elected officer with whom she can get in contact: "I have continued to try to keep tribal libraries in the national awareness, speaking, reminding, provoking, not letting them be forgotten."¹⁶

Charles Townley characterizes Patterson as a “very effective lobbyist” and “[a] determined person with grit.” “When she sets her sights, she goes from there and doesn’t turn back. Several people have done work in the area of Indian librarianship and libraries, but they come and go. Lotsee stuck with it.”¹⁷

The ten findings and challenges reported from the second White House conference never resulted in legislation. It is Patterson’s dream that work resulting from the 1991 findings still needs to be done by a new generation of library professionals who have gained inspiration from her work. She talks about the need for TRAILS to be updated and for a similar project to be reestablished and federally funded. She has made some overtures in that direction within the last month.¹⁸ In 1973 the National Indian Education Association and the American Library Association came out with a joint policy statement that outlined six goals for Indian library and information service. The final goal states that library service, as a function of education, is a treaty right of American Indians. This simple yet significant statement has framed the work and focus of Patterson’s life for over forty years.

Lotsee Patterson’s impact on the tribal libraries of this nation is immeasurable in its depth and breadth. She has arguably done more than any single person to assist America’s first people in the preservation, revivification, and dissemination of their cultural riches and traditions. Her training of Indian people and development of tribal libraries set a foundation for people of sovereign nations to acquire, assess, and utilize information that will enhance tribal self-determination and improve individual lives for generations to come. As Librarian of Congress James Billington, at the recent inaugural program for the University of California at Los Angeles’ California Center for the Book, said, “whether or not libraries or we librarians are able to help people in our time understand other people, other parts of the world, other parts of the human past, we will ennoble and enrich our lives by the very effort.”¹⁹ So it is for Lotsee Patterson, bright child of Oklahoma.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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