

# THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

Newsletter of the Flint River Astronomy Club  
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**Officers:** President/Treasurer, **Steve Knight**, [sdknight@bellsouth.net](mailto:sdknight@bellsouth.net); Vice President, **Larry Fallin**: [lbj@mindspring.com](mailto:lbj@mindspring.com); Secretary, **Dawn Knight** (see above); Board of Directors: **David Ward**: [dward@flintriverastronomy.org](mailto:dward@flintriverastronomy.org); **Steven (Smitty) Smith**; **Doug Maxwell**: [dougmax1@bellsouth.net](mailto:dougmax1@bellsouth.net); and **Felix Luciano**: [Montbo2@yahoo.com](mailto:Montbo2@yahoo.com). Newsletter editor/ observing chairman, **Bill Warren**: [warren1212@mindspring.com](mailto:warren1212@mindspring.com); Webmaster, **David Ward** (see above); Alcor/Librarian, **Tom Moore**: [tmoore@dfiequipment.com](mailto:tmoore@dfiequipment.com); Event Photographer, **Doug Maxwell** (see above). Public Observing Liaison, **Felix Luciano** (see above). Club mailing address: 1212 Everee Inn Road, Griffin, GA 30224. Web page: [www.flintriverastronomy.org](http://www.flintriverastronomy.org), discussion group at [FRAC@yahoogroups.com](mailto:FRAC@yahoogroups.com). Please notify **Bill Warren** if you have a change of address, telephone no. or e-mail provider.

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**Club Calendar. Fri.-Sat., Dec. 26-27:** Cox Field observings (at dark); **Thurs., Jan. 8:** FRAC meeting (Beaverbrook, 7:30); **Fri.-Sat., Jan. 16-17** and **Fri.-Sat., Jan. 23-24:** Cox Field observings (at dark).

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**President's Message.** "If I have seen farther than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."  
-**Sir Isaac Newton** (1642-1727), in a letter to rival **Robert Hooke** dated Feb. 5, 1675. Although Newton was taking a not-so-gentle dig at Mr. Hooke (who was a hunchback), his words are valid, and very true in my case.

At this year's FRAC Christmas party, **Bill Warren** was telling everyone about the dew system I installed on his telescope, and someone asked me how I came up with such a system, saying how good an idea it was. While it wasn't my idea, that question got me to thinking about where I came from.

I have had many mentors in astronomy, and guys like **Smitty**, **Bill** and **Tom Clark** head the list. They have guided me, pointed me in the right directions and given me endless advice; I've simply expanded on what they have given me.

Another valuable source of information for me has been *reading*. I receive both of the big astronomy monthlies, but my best source of tech material has been *Amateur Astronomy* magazine – ten years of hands-on, real-world info from amateurs just like us. The entire run is still available, and I recommend it. It's worth every dime.

Last, but certainly not least, has been just walking the fields at star parties. That's where the idea for heat rope came from. I saw a few on some Telrads, and when I looked closely at Tom Clark's Yard Scope I saw he had the same stuff on his secondary mirror. I asked him what it was and where to get it, and the rest is dew-free history.

That's why I think star parties are so important: getting to see what other people are doing and how.

I started out just like most of you. I had no idea what I was doing, and was afraid to ask questions. Eventually, I got comfortable enough to ask the questions I thought were stupid. They weren't dumb questions, though, they were just part of the learning process. I learned from those who came before me (just as they learned from those who came before them), and I am simply passing on what I have learned. I'd rather teach you to collimate your 'scope than just do it for you. By doing it yourself, you become closer with your 'scope, you can use it better through understanding how it works, and you can teach the next group that comes along.

Many of you think I have done a lot, and maybe so. But Smitty has a lot of experience on me and is very well-rounded in more areas than I can count. Bill has more observing pins than anyone I know, and remembers where more objects are than I have even observed. Tom Clark has been to star parties across

the country, and he has a greater overall knowledge of how things work and how to make them better than a roomful of engineers. They and others constitute a wealth of information just waiting to be asked the right questions.

All this being said, if I have seen farther than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants. Those same giants are there for you too. Use them.

**-Steve Knight**

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**Membership Renewals Due in January: Curt & Irene Cole; and Roman Mierbeth.** Please send your \$15 check payable to FRAC c/o Steve Knight at his address on p. 1.

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**Last Month's Meeting/Activities.** A splendid crowd of 19 FRACsters, their spouses and children attended our Christmas dinner meeting at Hong Kong II restaurant in Griffin: **Irene & Curt Cole; Veronica & Larry Fallin; Dawn & Steve Knight; Anna & Felix Luciano; Richard Schmude; Chuck Sims; Delores, Smitty, Steven Jr. & Josh Smith; John Wallace; Roxanne & David Ward; and Louise & Bill Warren.** The food was exquisite, the camaraderie superb and the evening all too short. Door prizes were won by David Ward (Astronomy Monopoly) and Dawn Knight (*SkyMap Pro 9* software, supplied by David). Smitty presented Steve with a set of NASCAR coffee mugs; Steve gave yr. editor a complimentary copy of *Amateur Astronomy* #40 with Steve's article in it and an astronomy pen by way of thanks for having edited the article and prepared it for submission; and yr. editor gave Steve a bound & laminated field copy of *Sky Atlas 2000.0, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, for reasons that are explained on p. 7.

We had seven at our Dec. 19<sup>th</sup> Cox Field observing: **Steve & Dawn Knight, John Wallace, Smitty, Chuck Sims, yr. editor** and visitor **Jim Hamilton** of Fayetteville. John completed his Double Star observations, and he's only three objects away from finishing his Deep Sky Binocular program.

On the following night, **Felix Luciano, Chuck Sims, David & Brendon O'Keeffe, David Ward** and **Smitty** enjoyed "steady and dark" skies (Felix) under temperatures that plummeted from a chilly 36 degrees to a frigid 18 degrees during the evening. Said David Ward, "At one point after midnight, I took a soda out of the ice chest (as if I needed an ice chest). Awhile later I mentioned to Smitty that I had ice crystals in my drink. Just before we left, it was frozen solid."

Ah, life in the Great Outdoors!

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**Upcoming Meetings/Activities.** We'll have Cox Field observations on **Fri.-Sat., Dec. 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup>.** The new moon will be on the **23<sup>rd</sup>,** and, as **David Ward** pointed out, that weekend will give you a chance to try out your new astronomy-related Christmas presents.

Our club meeting will be on **Thursday, Jan. 8<sup>th</sup>,** at 7:30 at Beaverbrook. **Yr. editor** will talk about his latest venture into nonsense, WACKY FRACs.

We will NOT conduct a Beaverbrook observing in January.

We will, however, close out the month with Cox Field observations on **Fri.-Sat., Jan. 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>** and **Fri.-Sat., Jan. 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup>.** The new moon will be on **Jan. 21<sup>st</sup>.**

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**This 'n That.** We've mentioned many times that the heart and soul of FRAC lies in the friendships that exist among its members. We honestly *do* like each other.

**Case in Point #1. Doug Maxwell** e-mailed FRACgroups that he had the flu and would be unable to attend the Dec. meeting. Doug is a genuinely nice person who we enjoy being around, but it speaks well for FRAC as well as Doug that several members responded immediately with regrets that he couldn't be there and wishes for his speedy recovery. Those responses are all the evidence that Doug should ever need to know that his absence and wellbeing was a matter of concern to his friends.

**Case in Point #2.** When **Curt Cole** e-mailed FRACgroups that he was interested in upgrading to *Sky Atlas 2000.0* and wondered which version he should purchase, he received more than half a dozen responses from fellow members with thoughtful tips and suggestions for him to consider before making his final decision as to how to proceed. None of the respondents cared which version Curt chose, of course; they just wanted him to be able to make an informed decision that would not disappoint him later.

That same level of genuine concern extends throughout FRAC, and even to non-members as well. Whenever anyone e-mails questions to FRACgroups, he or she normally receives anywhere from 3-8 responses from various members with expertise or experience in that area.

If you haven't experienced the sense of camaraderie and caring in FRAC that we're talking about here, it's probably because you haven't given us the opportunity to help you. Hey, we aren't going to your home and drag you to a meeting or observing (although, if memory serves correctly, **Steve K.** has considered out loud doing just that at Cox Field a couple of times in the cases of **Larry Fallin and David Ward**), and we *aren't* going to chip in our nickels, dimes and dollars to help you buy that Nagler eyepiece or h-alpha solar filter you've always wanted. But we **will**, as we promised you before you joined FRAC, do everything in our power to ensure that your time with us is enjoyable and well spent, if you'll just let us know how we can help you.

\*If you haven't yet seen examples of **Scott Hammonds's** remarkable astrophotography, do yourself a favor and visit his web site at <http://www.creatorsview.com> and check out his work. Among many other things, he has photos of the recent aurora and Orion nebula that will take your breath away.

\*On a sadder note, **Phil Sacco's** father passed away in mid-December. Although Phil (the Southeast Regional Astronomical League director) is not presently a FRAC member, his impact on our club has been considerable and his many friends in FRAC wish him the very best in this trying time.

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## **HORROR FLICKS FOR ASTRONOMY BUFFS**

**humor by Bill Warren**

The year 1963 produced an English sci-fi/horror movie entitled *Day of the Triffids*. Its plot was based on the somewhat shaky premise that a meteor shower whose radiant was **Trifid Nebula (M20)** in *Sagittarius* rained down seeds upon Earth that grew into man-eating plants. The movie itself was scary enough, if you overlooked the fact that Trifid has only one **f**.

Still, while outer space has been the locale of horror flicks such as the *Alien* series, so far at least astronomy itself has managed to avoid the attention of the slice-and-dice filmmakers. To alleviate that oversight, I offer four astronomy-specific horror movie plots to delight anyone who might enjoy an evening at Cox Field with **Freddy Kreuger** or **Jason Voorhees**.

**1. THIRTEEN GHOSTS OF JUPITER.** **Bruce Willis** stars in this terrifying tale of a backyard stargazer who, not knowing that his secondary mirror is farther out of collimation than **Tom Moore's** checkbook, sees thirteen Ghosts of Jupiter (NGC 3242) where one ought to be. Thinking the culprit to be his new telescope, an enraged Willis sets out on a cross-country rampage to kill, in the goriest manner possible, everyone in the U. S. whose last name is TeleVue.

**2. THE CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON NEBULA.** **Leo/Leo Minor**, a two-headed lion with an endless appetite for warm flesh and cold beer, prowls the night skies searching for tasty young innocents such as the **Pleiades** (the Seven Sisters), **Virgo** (the Maiden) or **Andromeda** (the Princess). At the movie's climax, having mistaken mother for daughter, one of the two leonine heads tells a cornered **Cassiopeia**, "Hey, you aren't Andromeda!" whereupon Cassiopeia replies, "Well,

you ain't exactly the Lion King yourself, Snagglepuss!"

**3. THE TEXAS MECHAINSAW MASSACRE.** Pierre "Pete" Mechain, a transplanted French astronomer living and working at an observatory in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area with his live-in partner and boss **Chuck** (a.k.a. "**Messy A**", no last name given), goes berserk when, for the 43<sup>rd</sup> consecutive month, city council members refuse to act on his petition to reduce light pollution in that metropolitan area. Regarding the movie's many graphically bloody scenes, an astronomer commented, "A messier movie you'll never see." With bad puns like that, we hope not.

**4. COUNT DRACO AND THE FRANKENSCOPE.** Sleeping inside the tube of his telescope during the daylight hours, the vampire **Count Draco**, a leaner version of **Steve Knight**, spends his nights searching for unsuspecting victims, draining their resistance to his evil advances with an endless supply of knock-knock jokes. ("Knock-knock." "Who's there?" "Armageddon." "Armageddon who?" "Armageddon tired of all these cloudy evenings.") The resulting groans from such stale humor would wake the dead, if they were not already awake and planning the Count's demise, which involves pointing the Frankenscope toward the east to catch the rising sun's rays before the Count awakens.

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### THE TENNESSEE STAR PARTY

#### report by Steve Knight

When you're trying to decide on a star party to attend, you should look at features such as price, location, driving time, field quality and amenities. The bottom line is value for your dollar. Was the drive worth it at the end of the weekend? Did you have fun? Will you come back? Often, you don't know what you're getting into even if you know

someone who has been there before, because their perceptions may be different.

When I look at a party to attend, I look for \$20 a day or less, within a day's drive, good facilities, daytime activities such as speakers and workshops, and a town within an hour's drive for restaurants and supplies. **Dawn** and I found these things and more when we attended the 2-day-long **Tennessee Star Party (TNSP)** earlier this summer.

The price -- \$15 per person for registration and \$5 per night for camping -- was very reasonable. The drive up took a little over five hours, the facilities were amazing, there was a full schedule of speakers on both days, and the town of Crossville was only 20 min. away. Even including a tee shirt, the cost was within my \$20 per day limit. Cabin lodgings and meals were available at \$10 per day and \$7 per meal, respectively. There was also a commissary on site; it had chips, snacks, BBQ sandwiches and soft drinks, all at reasonable prices.

The drive was a bit hairy at times -- a serious uphill grade near Chattanooga was the worst part -- but for the most part it was a nice ride with good roads, scenic mountain vistas, and quaint old towns and farms. The site, Camp Nakanawa, was incredible: 1,200 acres of privately-owned land with tennis courts, a big lake, canoes, paddleboats, buildings dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a great 5-acre observing field with horses running loose in an adjacent field. All of the facilities were at our disposal, free of charge, including the boats. A reasonable walk was required to get from the field to the meeting hall/dining room, but a trail through the woods cut down the distance considerably. I'd rate the facility as excellent.

The only problem we encountered was that, after a day and a half of steady rain, the entrance to the field turned into a mudhole -- but even then the problem was easily resolved by swinging off the road and driving around the mud.

After drenching us on Fri. afternoon, the skies cleared for an evening of good observing.

On Saturday, we rested, checked out the vendors and took in a few lectures, including **Rod Mollise's** "Care and Feeding of a Cat(adioptric)" and **Dr.**

**Richard Schmude's** lectures on the latest research regarding **Mars**. Both of his talks were excellent.

Regarding the vendors, Burgess Optical and Ken's Rings were selling their wares; both offered great deals. Burgess had some incredible prices on binoculars that were damaged but optically fine. Seems that I never have enough money on hand when bargains like that appear. Burgess also had the new 127mm refractor on display: the machine work is excellent, as is the overall finish. I didn't get to try it out that night, but I've been told that it has excellent optics.

Ken's Rings had its customary quality products on display. Next to them was a Spacelab – a portable planetarium that puts on a great show and can be set up anywhere. Running through mythology, space lore and the locations of several naked-eye objects was a treat.

When the skies cleared, we walked the field and saw the equipment and people of TNSP. A variety of 'scopes were up, along with several styles of equipment from poncet platforms to web cam observing, truss Dobs to SCTs. Several solar scopes were in place, and numerous homebuilt 'scopes including a very nice 8" super lightweight truss whose framework weighed less than the primary mirror. Alongside it were factory models (Discovery was well represented, including mine) that had been tweaked and accessorized to suit their owners' delights. There was an older Obsession 16" in attendance; it was in great shape despite its years, its new owner a college student who got the chance to buy it at a steal. It was a good move and looks like a lifetime investment, considering how well he's taking care of it.

Talking to the people reminds you why you travel to these events, hearing the stories of how they got to where they are. Discussions of favorite objects, equipment and techniques is always interesting. Making new friends and sharing interests is the real reason why star parties are a part of stargazing.

As the skies finally cleared out shortly after dark, we were rewarded with mag. 6.5 skies with great seeing. Objects such as the **Helix**, the **Veil** and **North American Nebula** all came in exceptionally well, with detail rarely seen at Cox Field. I was awestruck.

Running from one object to another, just hitting the ones I knew from memory, became both exciting and frustrating. It was exciting because I was seeing more detail in them than ever before, and frustrating because I knew I had a long drive ahead of me the next day. As it turned out, I drove home kinda tired.

There were Boy Scouts in attendance, part of the sponsoring club's outreach program; they went from 'scope to 'scope in a very orderly fashion, and appeared to thoroughly enjoy the view at the web cam setup.

I also strolled the observing grounds and tried a few new things – for example, the first Portaball 'scope I had ever seen in person. I must say, it was fantastic. Its revolutionary design makes you wonder about function, but five minutes of use will make a believer out of you.

I also got to try the Deinkmeyer binoviewer, which worked very well. All I have to do now is stretch my wallet around the viewer and another set of eyepieces. I'm open for suggestions.

I observed through a 12.5" Discovery truss dob on a poncet platform, and found not having to guide the 'scope full time a surreal experience that I could get used to in a hurry.

There also was a fully homemade Dob, optics and all, that had probably the sharpest focus I've ever seen. It was very impressive; its owner is currently grinding the mirror for a 24" truss Dob for his local club. I hope to see that one someday.

Moisture-laden air during the late evening hours gave me many opportunities to advise passersby regarding techniques and tips for making home-built dew zappers.

Sunday morning brought the usual trading of e-mail addresses and invitations to web groups, saying goodbyes and the start of looking forward to next year's event. I'll be there, hopefully with an extra day added on. I'd like to thank the Nashville-based **Barnard-Seyfert Astronomical Society** for putting on so excellent an event, its fifth so far. No complaints, just good memories, despite the rain.

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**REDEMPTION**

## a confession by Bill Warren

Although you wouldn't know it from my observing results over the past 18 months, I'm a pretty good observer of the night sky, as attested to by the 13 A.L. observing pins I've earned during the past decade. I was the fourth person ever to earn a **Master Observer** award, and in the two years since then only eleven additional Master awards have been presented. So it's not like I just started observing yesterday, or that I don't possess the skills to find things in the night sky.

Why, then, did I decide on Wed., Nov. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003, to sell my telescope and give up observational astronomy?

Because it wasn't fun for me anymore.  
And because of Chiefland.

On the evening of Nov. 19<sup>th</sup>, the Chiefland skies finally lived up to their reputation: dark, clear as a Waterford crystal goblet and absolutely humidity-free. I ran a hand across my telescope tube at 1:30 a.m. after about six hours of observing, and the tube was dry as a bone. It was, I had thought at 7 p.m., a dream come true – but it turned out to be a nightmare for me.

Having earned all of the easier A.L. pins I was interested in pursuing, for the last 16 months I had been laboriously tracking down Galaxy Groups and Clusters. In that span, I had netted only 39 of the required 120 groups/clusters necessary to earn a GG&C pin. I'm an overachiever who was grossly underachieving, but Chiefland was going to cure all that. I fully expected those remarkable skies to produce at least two dozen additional finds.

After staying up till 4 a.m. under the best observing conditions I'd ever seen, I had found a total of *zero* additional galaxy groups and clusters.

*Maybe they're just too faint for me to see*, I thought. (I was, after all, looking for galaxies that I hadn't been able to find last year at Cox Field.) So I decided to look for galaxy groups that I'd already found, observed and logged.

I couldn't find them, either.

In fact, I couldn't find *any* galaxies of mag. 11 or fainter. And without dew to obscure my view, that

meant the culprit had to be either my nearly 62-years-old eyes, or...

Or my eyepieces.

For now we see through a glass, darkly.

-the Apostle Paul

I Corinthians 12:12

To make a very long story slightly shorter, I gradually came to realize that, in using a handkerchief to wipe away the dew from my eyepieces over several years, I probably had managed to wipe away their protective coatings. And while I'd always used Meade Super Plossl eyepieces exclusively – they are excellent, and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend them for any beginner – there are, in fact, reasons why they cost only \$80 apiece vs. the \$250 to upwards of \$800 price tags of the top-of-the-line eyepieces. How that simple concept eluded me for *ten years* is a mystery beyond comprehension.

**Back to Chiefland.** The next 3 nights were relentlessly humid, producing enough dew nightly that I could have bathed from the collected moisture on my Dob's tube. And that settled it. Without a means to combat the dew, I gave up on the Galaxy Groups and Clusters and spent those nights searching for FRAC 50 objects, finding and observing 39 of them. Even then, though, I wasn't seeing all that should have been observable of those objects, most of which I'd seen before. On my last night at Chiefland, I went to bed around midnight, having already decided to call it quits where future observing was concerned. As far as I was concerned, my observing days were over.

Enter **Steve Knight**, bless his soul.

Knowing my complete inability to handle anything more technically demanding than changing a light bulb, Steve offered to equip my 'scope with a heat rope system to eliminate the dew, and he practically forced me to use his Pentax eyepieces to see for myself what he and so many of the rest of you already knew, i.e., that I was using little-boy eyepieces to do the work of adult male eyepieces. I was trying to reach the Moon in a Model T Ford.

It took about 5 min. with Steve's eyepieces to show me the error of my ways. I took him up on his kind offer to dew zap my Dob; I paid for the parts he bought and, since he wouldn't accept money for the labor involved, I bought him a bound and laminated field version of *Sky Atlas 2000.0*. And I ordered *three* Pentax eyepieces.

So now, in a very real sense, I feel reborn, and I owe it all to Steve (with an additional tip of the hat to **Felix Luciano**, who also talked with me at length about dew systems). I may not be able to complete the GG&C quest anyway, but at least now I have a fighting chance of doing so, whereas before I was running on empty on a dead-end street.

The *bad* news is, there won't be another clear night at Cox Field before the year 2010, and it's all my fault.

The moral of all this, if any moral there be, is that I've been guilty of doing exactly what I tell the rest of you not to do, i.e., trying to go it alone and not asking for help when I needed it.

*Pride goeth before a fall*, the Bible says, and I was well into free fall when Steve reached out and grabbed me. Instead of heading out to Cox Field at every opportunity as I had done for most of the past seven years, I was looking for reasons *not* to go.

Steve said, "I've wanted for so long to tell you that your eyepieces just weren't getting the job done, but..." But how do you tell a friend with 13 observing pins that he's making things unnecessarily hard on himself by not making the kinds of changes that everyone else but him sees are necessary?

The answer is, *You don't*. You just wait and hope that, for his own sake, he comes to his senses. And I have, at long last. Redemption is here.

From now on, the only times when I plan to "see through a glass, darkly" are when I use my filters.

(Note: If you're new to astronomy, please don't take all this to mean that you need a larger telescope, top-quality, high-priced eyepieces and/or a dew removal system in order to accomplish your personal observing goals or enjoy your time spent under the stars. A world of difference exists between observing the Moon, planets, and hundreds of relatively bright or

prominent deep-sky objects that are observable in binoculars or small telescopes with standard eyepieces, vs. searching for mag.14 or fainter galaxy clusters with a 12-1/2" Dob.

If you stay in astronomy long enough, you'll probably want to upgrade in certain ways that will make it easier for you to find and observe progressively more difficult objects. Until then, though, you should adopt a simple, economical plan for finding objects that don't require massive equipment or resource upgrades.

That plan, whatever it may be, should include asking your friends for help when you need it. It's a lesson that took me ten years to learn.)

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I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing at the seashore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

-Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727)

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Though my soul shall set in darkness,

It shall rise in perfect light;

I have loved the stars too fondly

To be fearful of the night.

-Sarah Williams

*The Old Astronomer to His Pupil*

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