

Harold Booker and the Struggle against Racism in Federal Way, 1962-1970



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Introduction

“Get out of my house, get off my property and get back in the car with your bigoted friends!”

That is what Harold Booker remembers saying to one of the three white men who visited his Federal Way home one evening in October 1969. Booker, an African American father of two and a chemical engineer with the Boeing Company, had just been told by the three men that his application for membership in the newly chartered Federal Way Elks Lodge had been rejected. It was rejected because the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks organization (hereinafter referred to as “the Elks”) allowed only white males to be members. Two of the men left Booker’s home in a hurry, satisfied they had completed their business of returning to Booker the check he wrote for the Elks’ membership fee. However one of the men lingered with Booker and made apologetic remarks for the racist nature of the

encounter. That's when Booker says he made the statement to the man quoted at the beginning of this paragraph.¹

The subsequent struggle in Federal Way against the racism of the Elks was a major component of Harold Booker's civil rights activism in Federal Way in the 1960s. Booker's activism helped significantly erode racist practices in Federal Way and open the way for a more racially diverse demographic in the community.

Harold Booker's Early Life and Federal Way Race Relations in the Early 1960s

In 1933, Harold Booker was born in Spring, Texas, a "tiny town about 25 miles north of Houston." He received his undergraduate education at Wiley College of Marshall, Texas, an all black institution endowed by the Methodist Church; he moved to Washington State and received his master's degree in organic chemistry at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1955. He spent 7.5 years in the US Army Reserves. In 1956, the same year he first settled in south King County, he married Verda, who eventually became a first grade teacher in the Highline School District. His son, Harold Jr. was born in June 1958 and another, Brad, came along in January 1960. He obtained employment as a chemist at Boeing's Auburn facility and, by the early 1960s, began to explore the possibility of buying a home in Federal Way in order to be closer to his workplace.²

Federal Way real estate agents in the early 1960s had a general policy of not selling houses to African Americans. Booker's fellow civil rights activist and Federal Way resident, John Metcalf, remembered that this policy was usually not overtly expressed. Black persons inquiring about homes were usually met with such tactics as being told that the house was already sold (even though it was still

¹ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013.

² Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23 & June 25, 2013.

for sale). Metcalf suggested that there were some Federal Way real estate agents willing to sell to black people. However, these agents did not wish to stir up fear among Federal Way whites that an increased black presence in their neighborhoods would cause lower property values.³

Faced with the obstructive tactics of real estate agents, the Booker family was initially unable to buy a house in Federal Way. Booker's close white friend and Boeing company colleague, Vic Weber, provided a solution. Weber deeded the Booker family land he owned overlooking Steel Lake and convinced a builder to agree to construct a house. The Booker family moved into this house (at the 30200 block of 20th Avenue South) in December 1962. At that time, Booker remembers that there was one other black family in Federal Way living "somewhere near Military Road." He does not remember their names or much about them, except that they kept to themselves and did not join the civil rights endeavors that Booker threw himself into as a Federal Way resident.⁴

According to Booker, Weber was soon swamped with inquiries from local racist real estate agents demanding to know if he realized that he was helping an African American family settle in Federal Way. Weber told them that he was well aware of what he was doing.⁵

Metcalf later remembered that "I think a cross was even burned on" the Bookers' front lawn after they moved to Federal Way. However, Booker says he remembers no cross burning incident. The act of overt racism that most stuck with him, he says, was that directed at his kindergarten-age son, Harold Jr. Classmates chased Harold Jr. around the playground of his school—Booker believes it may have been Woodmont Elementary School, but isn't completely sure—screaming "nigger" at him. Fleeing

³ John Metcalf. Untitled document, June 21, 2005. John Metcalf folder, file O1. Historical Society of Federal Way (HSFW).

⁴ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013. Harold and Verda tell of the December 1962 date as the beginning of their residency in Federal Way in Harold & Verda Booker's "Letter to the Editor: An Open Letter to the Members of the Marine Hills Community Club and the People of the Federal Way area." *Federal Way & Midway Beacon*. July 24, 1963. Sec 1, 2. The address of their home is listed at the end of the letter.

⁵ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013.

his attackers, Harold Jr. fell and received an enormous cut on his head. According to Booker, when hearing about the incident, he immediately approached the school's principal. The principal implied that he was reluctant to deal with the racism and said "Mr. Booker, we already have enough problems here." However the next day, Booker accompanied his son to school and asked that Harold Jr. point out his tormentors so that school authorities could punish them. Booker's pressure worked: the school authorities mobilized to take corrective action. Within a few months, the school's faculty was undergoing sensitivity training to help deal with black (and possibly other non-white) students. The teachers were well intentioned, Booker remembers; they simply needed help in dealing with a situation they hadn't experienced before. Booker remembers that many of the parents of the white students were sympathetic towards his family. The sympathetic ones included the parents of the perpetrators of the racism towards Harold Jr. "They were as shocked as we were" that their children expressed such vile hatred.⁶

As far as a general assessment of the treatment of his family by the white residents of Federal Way, Booker has a substantially positive memory. The number of sympathetic people was such that Federal Way's white racists generally felt uncomfortable expressing their views about the Bookers to other white Federal Way residents. Booker remembers hearing about one incident at a cocktail party in the Marine Hills neighborhood. One white patron at the party referred to Booker and his wife Verda as "niggers." Another white attendee objected saying "Do not say that; Harold and Verda are friends of mine." The argument escalated into a physical altercation which required police intervention.⁷

⁶ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013. John Metcalf. Untitled document, 2.

⁷ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013.

“The Pool Incident”

Months after arriving in Federal Way, the Booker family found themselves in the middle of a race-based controversy. In July 1963, Vic Weber brought his wife and children, along with Booker, his wife and children, to the recently constructed Marine Hills Swimming Pool for an afternoon of fun. However, certain white patrons of the pool and other white Federal Way residents created a racist uproar. A large portion of this uproar appeared to be directed against Weber and his family for daring to bring a black family to the pool.⁸

In a letter to the editor of the *Federal Way & Midway Beacon* (dated July 24, 1963), Harold and his wife Verda recounted some of the comments made to the Webers by white members of the Marine Hills Community Club and other Federal Way residents:

‘So you really like black people?’—‘Would you like your child to marry a Negro?’—‘You are the people who are “nigger” lovers.’—‘If you bring them to the pool again everyone else will leave.’—‘It’s a matter of money, if they keep coming [to the pool] all of our members will leave.’⁹

The Bookers declared in the letter that they were not sorry for having been part of the “pool incident”:

...for just as each case of a rare physical disease makes doctors and medical science more intelligible about it and hastens them towards its cure, so should each case of this moral disease, racial bigotry, which plagues every section of our nation, make us, who are true products of a Christian Democracy, more intelligible about it and hasten us towards its cure.¹⁰

The Bookers urged that persons who reacted with racism to their afternoon spent with the Webers should ask themselves “what causes this instability in my life that an afternoon of friendliness

⁸ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 29, 2013.

⁹ Harold & Verda Booker. “Letter to the Editor.” *Federal Way & Midway Beacon*, 2.

¹⁰ Harold & Verda Booker. “Letter to the Editor.” *Federal Way & Midway Beacon*, 2

between families of different races can disturb me so?" They noted that some white children appeared to be taking part in the backlash. They denounced the teaching of racism to children.¹¹

The Federal Way Human Rights Committee

The backlash from the visit to the Marine Hills pool and the continued racist policies of Federal Way real estate agents spurred the creation of the Federal Way Committee for Human Rights. It is not clear specifically when the Committee began its operations, though it was possibly at some point in the last 4 months of 1963. Booker threw himself into helping organize the group. Booker remembers some of the white citizens of the community who joined the group: Vic Weber and his wife; Dr. Bertold Bruell and his wife Edith who had established Federal Way's first permanent family physician practice in 1951; dentist Jim Burbidge and his wife Jeanne (a future Federal Way mayor); and Hank Fenbert. Thomas Jefferson High School (TJHS) teacher John Metcalf joined in the late 1960s as did (according to Metcalf) his TJHS colleague Gayle Ingraham. Other persons who joined the group by the late 1960s included Federal Way school board member James Kenny, Carl and Alice Schwartz, Barbara Nylund (the group's president), Ray and Alice Lawrence, Helen Burr Varo, and Vance and Kathleen Carrell. The group concerned itself with attempting to eliminate racial discrimination in housing and lobbied the King County Board of Commissioners to take action against it. The group took part in a program run by the NAACP which sent white and black persons to inquire about homes for sale and documented the different treatment accorded the two races. The group also held open houses to make black people in surrounding communities aware of the potential benefits of living in Federal Way.¹²

¹¹ Harold & Verda Booker. "Letter to the Editor." *Federal Way & Midway Beacon*, 2

¹² John Metcalf. Untitled document, 3. Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013. The earliest documentation I have found of the activities of the Federal Way Committee for Human Rights is an article in the *Federal Way/Fife Advertiser* of March 1964. The article reported on the Committee's lobbying of the King County Board of Commissioners in favor legislation outlawing racial discrimination in housing. "FW Rights Committee Represented at Hearing." *Federal Way/Fife Advertiser*, March 11, 1964, Sec 1, 4.

Booker in the 1960s

Booker did not confine himself to civil rights activism after he moved to Federal Way. He became president of the Federal Way School District committee which named many of the schools that were constructed to accommodate the population influx the community experienced in the 1960s. He remembers that he developed some of his warmest friendships with members of the Federal Way chapter of the United States Junior Chamber (hereinafter referred to as the “Jaycees”), with whom he served as a state director. He was appointed as a commissioner on the King County Housing Authority and to the board of directors for the Seattle King County Office of Economic Opportunity. He was elected to the board of directors of Project Concern, an organization providing medical services in the third world and whose board of directors or endorsers included the 1960 Republican vice-presidential nominee Henry Cabot Lodge, the then Speaker of the US House of Representatives John McCormack and the cartoonist Charles Schultz. His wife Verda joined him in these and other activities, such as the hosting of foreign exchange students. Harold joined the Marine Hills Methodist Church while Verda attended the Saint Vincent de Paul Catholic Church. According to Booker, both he and his wife each attended the services of the other’s church and joined in the various activities offered by each church.¹³

As he engaged in these community services, civil rights issues were never far from his mind. For example, after Martin Luther King was assassinated in April 1968, Booker published a commentary in the *Federal Way News* paying tribute to the slain civil rights icon. He wrote that while it

¹³ “Harold Booker Honored as One of State’s Outstanding Young Men.” *Federal Way News*, January 25, 1967, Sec 1, 7. “Harold Booker Receives Jaycee Distinguished Service Award” *Federal Way News*, January 31, 1968, (page number not found). Booker was included in the 1968 edition of a book profiling the “outstanding young men” of the United States. The introduction to the book was written by the pioneering astronaut John Glenn; a previous edition of the book had been endorsed by President Lyndon Johnson. See “Booker Selected for Outstanding Young Men.” *Federal Way News*, February 28, 1968. Sec 2, 1. “Booker Named to National Group.” *Federal Way News*, September 3, 1969. Sec 1, 3. “Mrs. Booker Welcomes Students from Afar.” *Federal Way News*. October 1, 1969. Sec 1, 2. “Who is Harold Booker?” *Seattle Times*, November 2, 1969, 5. Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013.

was probable that King's assassin would eventually be brought to justice, "I'm not so sure that the racism and divisiveness which pervades our society will be arrested. " He referred to President Lyndon Johnson's Kerner Commission which had pointed to the cause of the recent riots in black ghettos as the existence in the United States of (in Booker's words) "two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal." Booker noted that some white persons scoffed at the Kerner Commission or even denied that racism existed in the United States. Booker countered that "racism does exist" and "that perhaps our real problem is that we don't recognize it."¹⁴



Figure 1. Booker receiving an award from the Washington State Jaycees, January 1967, accompanied by his wife Verda, sons Harold Jr. and Brad and foster daughter Lori. (Courtesy *Federal Way News*.)

Booker Tries to Join the Elks

Booker's most momentous battle against racism in Federal Way and American society as a whole occurred against the Fraternal Order of Elks. Prior to 1969, Booker remembers occasionally

¹⁴ Harold Booker. "What Manner of Man." *Federal Way News*, April 10, 1968. Sec 1, 3.

entering the buildings of the Elks Lodge in Auburn, one of Federal Way's neighboring cities. On one occasion he was a guest at the Auburn Elks of fellow King County Housing Authority commissioner Roy Gustavies (a white man). Gustavies attempted to introduce Booker to one of the senior officials of the Auburn Elks. Booker remembered:

Roy calls out to him 'Hey Bill'—or whatever the guy's name was—' I want you to come over here and meet a friend of mine.' The guy ignored us; he was obviously horrified that a black man was on the premises of the Elks. So Roy raises his voice and calls out 'Hey you son-of-a-bitch, I want you to come over here and meet a friend of mine.' And so the guy finally came over and let Roy introduce me [laughs].¹⁵

The Elks, like most other fraternal organizations at the time, excluded those who were not white males from its membership. Federal Way had no Elks organization of its own, but in 1969 Elks officials began to organize members to charter a Federal Way affiliate. "All my friends in the Jaycees were joining and asking me if I was going to join," Booker remembers. Booker's friends were apparently unaware that Booker was excluded from Elks membership because of his race. When filling out the Elks' membership application, Booker noticed that it asked the applicant to confirm that he was of the Anglo-Saxon race, male gender and Christian religion. Booker crossed out "Anglo Saxon" and "Christian" and wrote "black Christian." Federal Way Elks organizers processed Booker's application without incident but the national organization put a red flag on it. After filling out the application, Booker began to feel an inkling that his application would be rejected on racist grounds and that he would have to take a public stand against the rejection. "I wanted my friends in the Jaycees to see what kind of organization they were joining," he remembers.¹⁶

Still, he was not completely prepared for the anger he felt when the three men—one each from the adjoining cities of Puyallup, Auburn, and Enumclaw--visited his home to return his membership fee and explain to him that he was excluded from their organization because of his race. Booker

¹⁵ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013.

¹⁶ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013.

remembers that towards the end of the visit with the men, he announced to them that he was going to awaken his two young sons from their sleep and bring them downstairs so the men could explain to them the policies of the Elks. "I want the next generation to understand what kind of organization you are running," he declared. Booker remembers that he did bring his two sons down to face the flustered Elks members, though he imagined the two boys were too young to fully comprehend the situation.¹⁷

After the incident ended with the exclamation described in the Introduction above, Booker wrote an impassioned open letter to the three men, whose names were Walt, Ed and Jerry. It was entitled "Three Men on a Mission" and excerpts from it were published in the *Seattle Times* and apparently the *Federal Way News* (though I have not yet found a copy of the latter publication). The letter told the men that "people like you and the organization you represent have contaminated the very essence of life in America and fouled the very air we breathe." He wrote that the encounter produced in him feelings of guilt: "Guilt because although you represent America, I also represent America, and perhaps I have not been as conscientious in opposing that racism that would tend to destroy America as you have been in reinforcing it."¹⁸

He wrote further that he also felt hope:

Hope that you did not truly represent America, or perhaps not even Federal Way. Hope that there are many good Americans in Federal Way that will reject your organization and the immoral, unchristian, and un-American principles for which it stands. Hope that other organizations, churches, community leaders, political parties, etc., will stand up and be counted and let it be known that Federal Way does not need, nor does America need, any additional forms of institutionalized racism.¹⁹

When Booker's story broke into the news media, many Federal Way voices arose in protest. One letter writer to the *Federal Way News* attacked hypocrisy of the Elks for preaching human brotherhood

¹⁷ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23 & 24, 2013.

¹⁸ Harold Booker. "Three Men on a Mission." October 1969. Typed copy in possession of Harold Booker. Michael J. Parks. "Negro's Effort to Join Elks Sets Off Ripples." *Seattle Times*. November 2, 1969, 4.

¹⁹ Booker. "Three Men on a Mission." Parks, "Negros effort to Join Elks sets off Ripples," 4.

while embracing racial exclusion. Another letter writer to the *News*, describing himself as a conservative and white, suggested that the Federal Way Elks disaffiliate itself from its parent body until it abandoned its “antiquated” race-based membership policy. Booker’s fellow Federal Way Jaycees, many of whom were set to join the Elks, passed a resolution calling on the organization to oppose organizations practicing racism. However, the *Seattle Times* reported that a large minority of Federal Way Jaycees opposed the resolution, arguing that it was better to not try to isolate the Elks in their community, but to join the organization and work from within to change the national organization’s racism. The Federal Way Elks organizing committee chairman Mike Westgard told the *Times* that he was in favor of having Booker as a member but that changing the membership guidelines was an extremely difficult procedure. Meanwhile, the Federal Way Ecumenical Parish, a coalition of ten Protestant and Catholic Federal Way churches, joined the Jaycees in pledging to oppose the Elks’ racism. Also, The Federal Way Committee for Human Rights fully supported the campaign against the Elks.²⁰

As a protest against the treatment of Booker, Dr. James Turpin, the white president of Operation Concern, on whose board of directors Booker sat, returned to the Elks a \$25 war bond which that organization had awarded him as a youth in 1941 for writing a patriotic essay. Turpin, a resident of Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, wrote a letter to the Elks explaining his return of the bond that Booker was a personal friend of his, and that Booker was an important activist for Operation Concern.²¹

When the Federal Way Elks organization, in conjunction with their national parent body, held a ceremony officially inaugurating its formation at the Seattle Center Arena in March 1970, over a

²⁰ Parks. “Negro’s Efforts to Join Elks Sets Off Ripples,” 4. William C Weed. “Letters to the Editor: Regarding the Proposed Federal Way Elks Lodge.” *Federal Way News*. October 1, 1969. Sec 1, 2. Sam Stocking. “Letters to the Editor: An Open Letter to the Federal Way Elks Lodge.” *Federal Way News*, November 12, 1969, Sec 1, 8.

²¹ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23, 2013. The handwriting on my copy of a newspaper article about Booker and Turpin entitled “Negro’s White Friend Returns Elks Prize” states that it is from the *Seattle Times* of November 18 1969. However I’m not certain that this sourcing is correct.

hundred people, mostly from Federal Way and surrounding areas, protested outside. Not long thereafter, and spurred by the campaign started by the rejection of Booker's membership, the Washington State Liquor Control Board denied (for one year) a class H liquor license to the state Elks organization because of their racist membership policies. In 1973 the Elks national parent body officially dropped its requirement that members be white. Despite the change, Booker never joined the Federal Way Elks.²²



Figure 2. Picketers protest the “whites only” membership policy of the Elks at the inauguration ceremony of the Federal Way Elks at the Seattle Center Arena, March 1970. (Courtesy, *Seattle Times*.)

²² “Marchers Protest ‘Clause.’ *Federal Way News*, March 4, 1970. Sec 1, 1. “2,341 Initiated into Federal Way Elks Lodge; Largest Class of Candidates in State’s History of Elkdom.” *Federal Way News*, March 4, 1970, Sec 1, 1. Stephen H. Dunphy. “Federal Way Elks Denied Liquor License for Year.” *Seattle Times*, September 27, 1970. Sec F, 11.

Booker's Home Burns: Arson?

On March 19, 1970, in the midst of Booker's struggle against the Elks, his Federal Way home suffered an estimated \$20,000 in damages as the result of a fire. The next month, the *Seattle Times* quoted Federal Way Fire Marshall Robert Hash as stating that "all available evidence" pointed to an electrical source of the fire, either from an electric blanket in an upstairs bedroom or an extension cord under a bed. The implication was that the fire was not foul play, but Booker states today that he believes the fire was "probably arson" committed in retaliation for his activism against the Elks. Booker remembers that shortly after the fire at his own home, one of the organizers of the Federal Way Elks suffered a fire at a Laundromat that he owned. This business was located, Booker believes, at "the junction of South 348th Street" and another street he doesn't remember. Sometime later, Booker remembers conducting business at a Federal Way bank. The bank's white manager came up to him, mentioned the fire at the Elks organizer's Laundromat and said "Mr. Booker, I just want you to know you have more friends in this community than you may realize." The manager refused to say anymore and walked away.²³

Booker's Legacy in Federal Way

Whatever the true cause of the fire at Booker's home, it is clear that Harold Booker played an important role in the history of Federal Way and helped make the community more hospitable to

²³ "Fire in Home Was Caused Electrically." *Seattle Times*, April 24, 1970, 8. Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23 & 24, 2013.

people of color. In January 1969, *Seattle Times* columnist Walt Woodward reported that “there are only about a dozen Negro families in the entire Federal Way area,” the total population of which approached 50,000. However, Booker told Woodward that “attitudes are changing out here [in Federal Way]. I think now there is general acceptance of blacks in the community.” Booker said that as late as two years earlier there had been “considerable discrimination among real estate people and residents”; black families faced “some difficulty and harassment” when moving to the community. Booker implied that race relations in Federal Way had improved substantially in a relatively short time.²⁴

Booker’s activism, of course, by no means eliminated white racism from Federal Way. Undoubtedly anti-discrimination legislation passed by local and state government bodies played a role in helping make Federal Way housing more accessible to blacks and other people of color. However, it cannot be denied that Booker played a major role in making Federal Way a more racially diverse city. As Federal Way’s overall population grew, so did its number of African American residents. In 1980, 723 blacks lived in Federal Way; by 1990 the number rose to 2,709. From 1980 to 1990, the proportion of Federal Way’s white population compared to its overall total population fell from 93 percent to 87 percent. In 2010, the black percentage of Federal Way’s overall total population was 9.3 (out of a total of 89,306 residents).²⁵

While Booker compiled an impressive record in the fight against racism in Federal Way during the 1960s and helped pave the way to make the community a more diverse place, his life in the 1970s underwent significant changes. In 1975, Verda died of progressive emphysema—she was not a smoker but had suffered from lung infections since childhood, according to Booker. His sons moved out of the

²⁴ Walt Woodward. “Federal Way’s Present Compounds the Future.” *Seattle Times Magazine*, January 5, 1969, 6 (p.144 in overall Sunday paper).

²⁵ Keri Murakami. “Being Black in Federal Way—From Shampoo to Books, Some Not Comfortable in Growing Community.” *Seattle Times*, May 13, 1993.
<http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19930513&slug=1701030>. (Accessed June 12, 2013)
United States Census Bureau: State & County Quickfacts: Federal Way (city) Washington.
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/5323515.html>. (Accessed June 12, 2013)

house—Harold Jr. graduated from Thomas Jefferson High school and is now employed as a manager in the computer industry; Brad graduated from Decatur High school and currently works as a cameraman for KING5 TV, Seattle’s NBC affiliate. In the 1970s Booker furthered his education, receiving a Master’s degree in Systems Management from the University of Southern California in 1973 and a law degree from the University of Puget Sound in the late 1970s. Booker spent a big part of his Boeing career employed in research & development but after receiving his law degree, he moved onto legal work involving aspects of Boeing’s aircraft market in the Middle East and Africa. He moved from Federal Way to Seattle in the early 1980s. Since his retirement from Boeing in 1996—the year he also retired as Chairman of the Board of Commissioners on the King County Housing Authority--and while living in Seattle he has provided pro bono legal services to senior citizens and lower income residents in general.²⁶

Looking back over the decades, Booker has fond memories of Federal Way: “I’ll always have a place in my heart for Federal Way. We made so many friends there.” He believes that the civil rights situation in Federal Way “wasn’t that bad in the first place” before he moved his family there in 1962. It was merely that some race-based problems “needed to be fixed” and white people needed to be made conscious of those problems. In the end, Booker says, many of Federal Way’s white population proved willing to see those problems fixed.²⁷

²⁶ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23 & June 25, 2013. “Local Man Earn USC MS Degrees at McChord.” *Federal Way News*, June 27, 1973, Sec 2, 15.

²⁷ Harold Booker, telephone interview with author, May 23 & June 25, 2013.



Figure 3. Harold Booker, circa 1992.
(Courtesy *Tacoma News Tribune*.)

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