

INTERVIEWEE: Sim Gideon

INTERVIEWER: David G. McComb

DATE: October 3, 1968

Lower River Colorado Authority, Austin, Texas

M: Can you tell me something about your background?

G: I was born in Coleman, Texas.

M: Where is that?

G: Out in central West Texas near Abilene and San Angelo and Brownwood in 1906. I lived there and went through high school there and then came to the University of Texas. I received my law degree at the University of Texas in 1929.

M: Did you get a B.A. degree before then?

G: No. At that time I took what is known as the five-year course in law and graduated with high honors in law school. Right in the midst of the depression I went to work for seventy-five dollars a month in San Antonio and stayed there one year. Then I moved to Seguin and went to work for the law firm of Wirtz and Weinert.

M: In Seguin.

G: In Seguin. It was A. J. Wirtz who was a state Senator and also a big friend of Lyndon Johnson and Rudolph Weinert, who at that time was district attorney and who later became state Senator after Wirtz had moved to Austin and after Welly Hopkins, who succeeded Wirtz as Senator, became General Counsel of United Mine Workers in Washington. Then Wirtz moved to Austin in 1934 and I moved with him and became a member of the law firm in Austin. [I] stayed in that law firm until 1948, when I came over

to the LCRA fold.

M: What was the name of your law firm?

G: It was Powell, Wirtz, Rauhut and Gideon. It so happened that John Rauhut and myself had been in the same law class at the University. He was from Comanche, Texas, which is not very far from Coleman, Texas.

M: Who was Powell?

G: Ben H. Powell had been on the [State] Supreme Court. He was from Huntsville, Texas and had been a classmate with--know him so well--big lawyer and financier in Houston--Jim Elkins--Judge Elkins in Houston. Then Elkins went to Houston and Powell came to Austin and had been on the Supreme Court and practiced law here in Austin.

M: I understand that Wirtz and you were experts on water rights, is that correct?

G: Wirtz was, I think, one of the first lawyers in Texas who made a particular study of the water laws of Texas. At that time there never had been much water law practiced in Texas, and he had been associated with the development of a small dam on the Guadalupe River and also was with the company--represented the company--that was starting the building of the what's now Buchanan Dam and was then called Hamilton Dam. And then, of course, I worked under him and therefore, was a recipient of his knowledge of water law and we did a lot of water law practice.

M: Wirtz was one of the men in on the formation of the Lower Colorado River Authority, is that right?

G: Yes. What happened was that the Insull interests were building a dam on the Colorado River; it was called Hamilton Dam after the engineer for Insull. The Insulls had this holding company. There were two brothers, I believe, out of Chicago. They were going to build this dam on the

Colorado and sell the power to private utilities here. Then they went broke and Wirtz was representing them. In an endeavor to get the development started again and get jobs for people here in Central Texas, he conceived the idea of creating a district--a water district--because during the depression the only place you could borrow money was the federal government; and in order to borrow money from the federal government you had to be a public agency. So that was the reason why it was created so it could go to the Public Works Administration of the federal government and borrow money and get the dam.

The dam was half built when the Insulls went broke and just stayed there from about 1930 to 1936 until the LCRA was created in 1934. Wirtz wrote the act and conceived the idea of it and fought it through.

M: You say he fought it through. Was there opposition to this?

G: Oh, yes. There was considerable opposition from two sources: one, the private utilities--they still had those contracts and were afraid they might be enforced against them. They didn't want to buy the power and build big transmission lines down to get it, because it didn't fit into their plans. As long as Insull owned the holding company that told the companies what to do, they had to. They wanted to get out of that and, also, didn't like the government getting involved in selling electricity.

Then there was Ralph Morrison over in San Antonio, a big contributor to the Roosevelt Administration, and he had put up some money to keep the project sort of alive and if the LCRA was able to borrow money, he was going to get his money back plus a fee. Some of the people who didn't like Roosevelt--they were just against anything and anybody that had anything to do with Roosevelt, so that was in the case.

Then the people out in West Texas thought that if we built dams down here that might some way keep them, if they needed water for municipal purposes--it might keep them from getting water.

There were about three things involved. It was a considerable fight. It took four special sessions of the legislature to pass it.

M: But it was required that it would be a public--

G: If you are going to borrow money from the federal government, you had to be a public agency.

M: And you had to have the federal money to complete the project?

G: Because nobody else had any money. And the reason you had to--Well, of course, there was some other money but what I mean is--the reason we had to have federal money is you could get a loan and a grant. The grant you didn't have to pay back. The reason for that was you had to pay the federal loan--you agreed to pay higher wages than you would ordinarily have to pay because people just lined up to get jobs. The federal government wanted them to be paid a reasonable wage. At that time--of course, we'd think it was pretty low now. That was the purpose of the grant not to put people, so to speak, on starvation wages and give them jobs.

M: Well, then, when Wirtz was putting this together, did he have cooperation in Washington, D. C.?

G: From the standpoint of putting it together, yes, I would say that he did. At that time Buchanan was the Congressman for this district, and the people on the Colorado River had been working on getting dams on the Colorado River for flood control and for water since about 1900. So although Congressman Buchanan was from Brenham which is on the Brazos River Watershed, nevertheless he represented a lot of people on the Colorado

River Watershed. He was interested in getting something done down here, and primarily I guess he wanted the work started because it would give jobs to people. People were just desperate for jobs in his district and if you could get this work started on the river, a thousand to two thousand people would get jobs. So he was vitally interested in it.

M: Was President Roosevelt interested in this--do you know?

G: I don't know. I'm not in the position to say that President Roosevelt was interested other than I'm sure that the people who were interested talked to him about it and I'm sure that if he opposed it, we wouldn't have gotten the LCRA off the ground. He was interested, I'm sure, in jobs anywhere. As long as the jobs resulted in something tangible that would benefit the people which this did.

M: Well, your connection with the authority then came through Alvin Wirtz? The legal aspect of it?

G: Yes. I started working for him, as I say, down in Seguin and at that time he represented the people who were building the dam on the Colorado River. Then when he moved to Austin I moved with him, and I sort of worked under him like Rauhut worked under Judge Powell. So whatever Wirtz was interested in I did sort of a lot of the book work and library work and other kind of work connected with it.

M: When did you come with the Lower Colorado River Authority?

G: Well, Wirtz was appointed Under Secretary of the Interior under Harold Ickes in 1940 and at that time the authority asked me to become what they call the General Counsel or lawyer, and while I had been doing the work for them through Wirtz ever since it was organized in 1934, I went on the payroll in 1940. But I stayed in the law firm until 1948 and then I moved

over to the authority altogether.

M: And then you became the general manager in--

G: In 1956. In 1948 I became assistant general manager and in 1956 became the general manager.

M: Well, now to tie Lyndon Johnson into the story. Where did you meet him?

G: I first met him when I was living in Seguin. He was secretary to Congressman Kleberg in Corpus Christi. And Kleberg's district at that time came up to--included Guadalupe County, of which Seguin was the county seat. Of course, I was working for a man who had been a state senator, A. J. Wirtz, and also a man who was district attorney and therefore, the Congressman wanted--I mean, he naturally was going to know them because they were in local politics. So his secretary, Lyndon Johnson, would come by the office there and visit with both Wirtz and Weinert and also other people there in Seguin. He became a very close friend of Alvin Wirtz and by virtue of that, I knew him through that.

M: Do you have any early impressions of Lyndon Johnson at that time? Do you remember what he looked like; how he acted; and--

G: Well, he was--I had an early impression that he sure did work and covered lots of territory. He wasn't one of these that walked into the office and sat down and wasted a lot of time. He covered not only the area around the office but all of Seguin in a whirlwind fashion, and yet he saw everybody and talked to everybody. I gathered he was going somewhere at that time because he was very capable and people liked him. He did his job.

M: Then he became connected with Alvin Wirtz about that point?

G: That was when they got to know each other. I guess even before that because Wirtz as a state senator represented Blanco County. At that time the

state senatorial district went around San Antonio and went up to Blanco County and I'm sure Wirtz knew Johnson's father, who was in the House of Representatives at one time. Wirtz would go up to Blanco County and the leaders up there politically and I imagine had known each other for some time.

M: Would it seem to you then sort of a natural choice for Lyndon Johnson to replace Buchanan at Buchanan's death?

G: Well, no. I mean, I wouldn't word it that way. After we came to Austin Johnson became the head of the NYA, I believe in Texas and had his offices here in Austin. And when Buchanan died, of course, it was quite a scramble to replace him--Austin had grown so. But the feeling was that probably the replacement would come from Austin rather than some other part of the district. So there were several men that ran and it was quite a race. In those days, you know, you had local political rallies all over the county and people would blow their horns and try to make more noise for their candidate. Then they'd have a big final rally down here at Wooldridge Park in Austin. You'd have several thousand people come down to the rallies then, but you don't have it anymore. But it was a spirited race and high man won. He won because he just got out and met people and convinced them he could do something for them.

M: Did you help him campaign in that election?

G: Well, by helping campaign we went--my family and friends and all of us-- we did what we could. I never was much of a political man, I guess. But we were interested and wanted to do what we could. He lived next door to us and at that time he lived at #2 Happy Hollow Lane and we lived at #1. The man who owned both houses--that man's brother was running against

Johnson for Congress. But we did everything we could.

M: Then he went to Washington and worked with Alvin Wirtz to promote this--

G: Wirtz advised him and then, of course, sought his help insofar as furthering the Lower Colorado River Authority. Primarily what Congressman Johnson was interested in at the time was two things: the Authority had already been created and the dams were started, two of them, three of them, and what Johnson was interested in, I think, were two things. Number one, primarily he wanted to get the Rural Electric Cooperatives established in his district and make them a reality where they could serve everybody in the rural and ranching area that wanted electric service and then he wanted to get flood control on the Colorado River because the Buchanan Dam was not a flood control dam and would not stop a flood originating above Austin. You had some real bad floods every four or five years and it always did millions of dollars of damage in Austin and below, and he wanted to see a flood control dam built and worked very intensively on those two programs.

M: Then the LCRA fit in with his ideas of rural electrification?

G: Yes, because the LCRA negotiated with the Texas Power and Light Company and Central Power and Light Company to buy the electric transmission and distribution facilities in about twenty some odd counties here in Central Texas. Wirtz did the main negotiating-

M: When was this?

G: It started about 1937 and it ended in--well, the TP&L (Texas Power and Light) trade, I believe, was either 1938 or 1939, and the Central Power and Light trade about one year later. I know that Wirtz talked with Congressman Johnson about it many times and I believe, I don't know, but

I think that probably Congressman Johnson felt like that if the trade could go through, it would be very beneficial to the establishments of these rural electric cooperatives because the Authority, LCRA, agreed it would sell the distribution lines in the rural areas to the cooperatives and would sell the distribution systems in the cities to the cities and the Authority would be in the transmission and generation business primarily. And that was the way it worked out. We had to borrow--he helped us-- Congressman Johnson helped in presenting the LCRA case to the Public Works Administration and the LCRA was able to borrow money and build the dams and with the Department of the Interior, to put flood control in-- Marshall Ford, what was then Marshall Ford Dam (it was later named after Congressman Mansfield from Columbus, Texas)

M: Didn't Johnson suggest the change of that name?

G: Yes, he was the one that recommended that it be changed and I have a picture of the dedication--Congressman Mansfield was in a wheel chair and was up at the dam when we dedicated it and Johnson was there. He thought that it was a fitting tribute to Congressman Mansfield because Mansfield lived at Columbus which is on the Colorado River, and he, too, had been in Congress a long time. He had worked on the flood control problems of the Colorado River and also tried to get dams built so that during droughts his area could get water for rice irrigation. There was a big rice irrigation area in Colorado County, and right below there. So his people suffered from the floods and then they would suffer from the droughts. Mansfield was very interested in helping materially and helped Congressman Johnson in getting these federal appropriations. Johnson felt like it would be a fitting tribute while Mansfield was still alive to name the

dam for him, because it was the flood control dam.

M: Then Johnson was particularly interested, apparently, in the Pedernales Rural Electrification System?

G: He was interested in two of them. One of them was called the Pedernales Electric Cooperative and covered what we call the Hill Country. Then the other part of his district was--they had what they called the Lower Colorado Electric Cooperative; the people got it confused with the Lower Colorado River Authority although they were different organizations, so they changed their name to Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative. Their headquarters are at Giddings, Texas, but he was just as interested in it because it was part of his district and he wanted to bring the benefits of electricity to--. And he wanted to keep the cost low so that people could use it and enjoy it. He felt like that it had to be brought out to the farms and ranches; otherwise the farms and ranches were going to disappear. People weren't going to live on them unless they could have the benefits of electricity.

M: Apparently Congressman Johnson, and I suppose later when he was Senator, attended board meetings of the LCRA and--

G: No, I don't think he ever attended a board meeting. He may have dropped by at a board meeting just to say hello to everybody, but he didn't try to run the business of the Authority. He was just interested in the program of the Authority. But he was interested as one who would be-- who would help them rather than--. He wasn't trying to tell the Authority what to do.

M: He wasn't interested then in the management?

G: Oh, no. No, other than as it turned out, the management were friends of

his, personal friends, and he was interested in his friends. But he was not interested in trying to tell them what to do, or how to run it, or anything like that. That was their business.

M: Or tell them who to hire or anything like that?

G: No. If they had a good program, he would try to help them; if they didn't, why that was up to them.

M: Was he interested in soil conservation?

G: Yes, he did get the Authority--he discussed with the Authority the matter of soil conservation and the Authority went into a program because they felt like it was a good thing, one that he to some extent had recommended; and they stayed with the program until the Soil Conservation Service and other federal programs sort of got strong enough in the area to where we were sort of duplicating, and so we then got out of it and concentrated on the water and electric end of it.

M: Where does Brown & Root fit into your story? Were they contractors for the dams?

G: Brown & Root were joint contractors on the Mansfield (Marshall Ford) Dam. They bid it in--the Bureau of Reclamation took bids--and Brown & Root and a contracting firm out of San Antonio bid it together. At that time that was a pretty big contracting job, during the depression. That was where they got--I mean that was as far as I know their first connection with anything done by the LCRA.

M: My understanding is that George and Herman Brown were friends of Lyndon Johnson also.

G: Yes, I think they were friends of his, and thereafter Brown & Root has done work for the LCRA, but it has always been on a competitive-bid basis.

They had to be the low bidder in order to get the work. And if they weren't the low bidder, they didn't get it. They've bid several times and have not been the low bidder, so they didn't get it.

M: You've been acquainted with Mr. Johnson for a long time. Have you ever had occasion to meet him on a social level, social events, such as a dinner party or--

G: Oh, yes, yes. I mean his wife and my wife belonged to a little bridge group when they started out--when they first moved to Austin. As I say, we lived next door and naturally you're going to--. We were both young and both trying to get started, and we both gave out of certain things at times like sugar and butter and go across the street and borrow it. Then I've just known him ever since, yes. We've been in his home while he was a congressman and as a senator. We were up at the party that they had at the White House the other night, so I've known him socially, politically, and I guess about every way you could know a man for thirty-four years.

M: Based on that knowledge, can you give an evaluation of his character, personality, or ideals?

G: I imagine it would be a biased evaluation naturally, because I'm--when I say biased, it's just based on the fact that having known him for thirty-four years--

M: You admire him?

G: I admire him greatly and appreciate what he has done, not only for me personally--I haven't had too many problems personally, but whenever I did, if I asked him to help me he did. And I also have asked him to help some friends of mine by getting information which was available in Washington

and he would always do that. But mainly he has been helpful to the organization that I represented by--when I say helpful, I mean that we needed--we, I mean the LCRA--had to get help out of Washington. Just like all other public agencies in the United States during the depression had to, and he was certainly a good advocate of our cause. I think the results have proved that we deserved that help, because without--we don't have any power to tax and we don't get any tax remissions. We live off of our revenues and we started out with nothing. We have properties now worth over a hundred million--a hundred and fifty million dollars. We've built dams that will stop all the floods that originate above Austin, and we also catch water and take care of people during the drought. If it hadn't been for the LCRA, the city of Austin would have been without water during the last drought, because they get their water from the river. The river stopped running above our dam. The only water they had was water we had caught several years before and stored in our dams and let out so they'd have water to drink.

M: But without the federal program the Lower Colorado River Authority could not exist, is that right?

G: I think that's probably right. The federal program of helping local agencies, you know at that time they loaned money to counties to build courthouses; cities to build municipal buildings, so people would get jobs. And if it hadn't been for that program, it would have been difficult for the Authority to get money. They couldn't afford--I mean they just couldn't have gotten money at that time.

M: Why do you think Lyndon Johnson in Washington, especially as a young Congressman--why was he successful in getting help for you?

G: I think he was successful for the reason that he has been successful all his life. He just worked at it harder than anybody else. He felt like that--in the first place he was very knowledgeable. It didn't take him long to find what the rules of the game were and who was running the game or business or politics or whatever it was. Also, he just believed in working harder than anybody else; he just stayed with it and if he had something that he believed in, he just stayed working on it until he got it.

M: So he must have had a lot of personal energy?

G: He had a tremendous amount of personal energy. I don't know how he did everything that he did do. And then of course, he had the ability to attract very capable help who would also work as hard as he did. That was, I think, a very valuable thing.

M: Does he have a curious mind? Is he always questioning--questing [for] information?

G: I think he had a mind that--. I don't know whether it would be curious. He has a very, I'd say, unusual ability to extract vital information from whomever he's talking to, and then the ability to discard that which is not vital and come up with the answer. He can talk to you a very short time and then know everything you know plus a little bit more.

M: In your personal relationship with him, has he always been friendly and gregarious and--

G: In my personal relationship with him, as I say, while he was Congressman, of course and while he lived right across the street from us, it was a little bit more often than--. But it has always been very pleasant and I've always enjoyed it.

M: He does have a reputation of having a strong temper.

G: He has that reputation and I've heard about it from many sources. I'm sure that from some of the sources I heard that he probably had used the temper, but as far as I know or can recall, I guess maybe whatever relationship I had with him wasn't large enough or important enough or something--. Anyway, we just never did that I know of. Any occasion where I saw any explosion of his temper--I've seen him get pretty forceful, but I think he was doing it with--trying to achieve what he had in mind. He felt like it was the best thing to do.

M: Do you recall his role in a settlement of rates between the LCRA and the electric co-ops, the Pedernales--

G: Well, it wasn't a rate. What he did--he felt like that in order to get the benefits of electricity to these farms and ranches (and he felt like they had to have it--electricity--because you couldn't get people to go to work on them like you used to and electric energy would perform the work, as well as give the comforts and get people to stay out on the farm)--he felt like, therefore, since the area was sparsely settled that it was going to be difficult to keep the rate down. So he wanted to be sure that there weren't two sets of management, two sets of overhead, two sets of everything; so he worked toward getting an agreement between the Authority and the Pedernales Cooperative and also what's now the Bluebonnet Cooperative, whereby the Authority would manage them, and so in that way they were able to keep the rates down and they have the lowest electric rates in the State of Texas of any rural cooperative.

M: Is this an unusual management arrangement?

G: Yes, it is. As far as I know, it's the only one in the United States.

- M: The Lower Colorado River Authority does the management work of the Cooperatives?
- G: Yes, we manage each cooperative we run; they have a board of directors and they select what lines they're going to build; they fix their rates; but after we build the lines--a lot of them, they've gotten so big now that some if it is done by private contractors--we do a lot of their engineering work and we do all the management--the running of it.
- M: You mean the billing and that sort of thing?
- G: All the billing, so therefore their overhead is--and we do it at cost. We do not make a profit off of running them. Any profit we make is by selling them power and we sell them at the same cost we sell to everybody else.
- M: So their management costs--you charge them a fee at costs--
- G: Their management cost is just whatever it costs us, which is much less than it would be if they had to do it themselves, because the men who manage their co-op are also doing other work and therefore, they're only charged with part-time.
- M: And this was Lyndon Johnson's idea to set up like this?
- G: Yes, he felt like it would bring electricity at a cheaper rate to the people and he was right. It sure has, because they have the cheapest rate in Texas.
- M: This would seem to indicate that Lyndon Johnson has a fine understanding of management technique.
- G: Oh, I think he has. He understands the fundamentals of not only management but also operations. He knows if your thoughts are out of line in anything. It doesn't take him long to find out, because he'll bring in the people

that know what they ought to be, and he'll extract from them whether they're exaggerated or not; whether their ideas are sound and it doesn't take him long.

M: I ran across some information that in 1945 he helped the revision of contracts and rates between the electric co-ops and the LCRA. Do you recall anything about that specific incident?

G: I mean this contract we're talking. At that particular time that contract of management had been going on, he had been off in the military service. When he came back, some of the directors sort of felt like--well, maybe they'd like to run it themselves. He felt like that if that was done-- Oh I say he felt like, I don't know. I assume he felt like that if that was done, it would result in higher costs to the people who bought the electricity. And he didn't think that was a good thing--so he did talk to our board and to the other boards and I think as a result of recommendations and suggestions and all of them working together, they came out with a--. And I believe that's the contract you're talking about. Contract that's still, with few revisions, still in existence.

M: It would seem that President Johnson is rather proud of this development-- of the Lower Colorado River Authority.

G: Well, we certainly hope he is, because we tried to make it a development of which anybody would be proud. He has had a major influence on it in many, many ways. He was a personal friend of not only the management, but he knew personally many of the directors. Naturally they, I'm sure, would be influenced by his ideas, his suggestions. As I say, we hope he's proud of it, because having made a major contribution to it, we'd want him to feel like he had really done something that he thought was good.

M: Was he surprised and pleased with the change in the name of Granite Shoals

Lake to Lake Lyndon B. Johnson?

G: Well, of course, I don't know whether he was pleased. I'm sure he was surprised. That was sort of a natural thing when you go into the background. He had suggested after Wirtz died that we name the dam after Wirtz. And the Authority had done that, and on many different occasions they named Hamilton Dam--changed it to Buchanan, while Congressman Buchanan was still alive and because he had been helpful and they admired him, the Authority did. And then they changed Marshall Ford to Mansfield. Wirtz had created, so to speak, the Authority and when he died (he had been a close friend of Congressman Johnson--he was then Senator)--and Congressman Thornberry who had taken Johnson's place had worked in our law firm, Wirtz, Rauhut and Gideon. So Johnson suggested to the board that they name the dam for him, which they did. They were glad to do it, and he [Johnson] was at the dedication and made one of the speeches.

After he became Vice-President he had the President of Mexico down here; he had Adenauer from Germany; and he had the Premier from Pakistan. In each instance he stated how much the LCRA and the lake country--the lakes and rural electrification--meant to him and how proud he was of it.

M: He had these visiting dignitaries to his ranch?

G: He would take these people out to the Ranch and he would show them--and he would invite us, and he would show them the LCRA development and prepare a little story on it. We just thought that after all he had suggested naming the Mansfield Dam and had suggested naming the Wirtz Dam, why didn't we just name this lake after him and then if he didn't like it, we could always unname it, I guess. There again, I'm talking about the LCRA, the board of directors--discussed it, and they said that's what

they wanted to do.

So they passed a resolution naming the lake and then sent it to him. As far as I know that's the first time he had any indication of it. I think he was pleased because he wrote a very nice letter to the board and to me as manager, saying that he was pleased. I don't think he would have written it if he hadn't been.

M: Did anybody give you any objection to this?

G: Oh, very, few, but yes, a few. I mean, you have objections to--we had objections when Marshall Ford was changed to Mansfield because they said Marshall Ford was an old historical name--that's where the Marshall family lived at a ford on the river. And the Granite Shoals Lake was a pretty name, and then there were few that of course disliked Johnson. There were very, very few. I'd say it was insignificant. In fact I think people as a whole--most of the people knew what he had done in the development and felt like it was a deserved tribute. We hope it was a tribute. I mean by that, it was a tribute, and we hope it is one that he appreciated because certainly it was deserving.

M: One last miscellaneous question about your relationship with Lyndon Johnson? Have you ever had occasion to campaign for him in any area throughout his career other than this first--1936--?

G: No, as I stated, I'm just not suited, I guess, to be a campaigner.

M: You would attend the rallies and things like that?

G: But we would attend rallies, I'd write letters, and my name always appeared in newspaper endorsements and "Lawyers for Johnson," and I would attend all those meetings. I would go visit people that I knew. I never did by campaigning go out and make speeches, because I just somehow or other

never did fit into that type of activity.

M: So you would work behind the scenes so to speak, rather than from on the platform?

G: I'd work through the newspapers and through letters and through attending meetings and going to rallies and calling my friends and giving money to help to pay for advertising.

M: Well, I believe that's all the questions I have. And I wish to thank you very much for the interview.

G: Oh, fine. I hope it has been helpful.

M: I think it will be.

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By Sim Gideon

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