

In Their Own Behalf: The Politicization of Mormon Women and the 1870 Franchise

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IMMEDIATELY UPON THE PASSAGE of territorial legislation enfranchising Utah's women in 1870, almost fifty years before the Nineteenth Amendment extended the vote to American women, arguments erupted between the Mormon and non-Mormon community over the reasons behind this legislation. Since that time, historians have continued to disagree about the motives of the Mormon-dominated legislature. Some dismiss this early woman suffrage in Utah as a fluke; others believe Mormon women were passive recipients of the vote or pawns of the male leadership. Still others are convinced the act was progressive, the result of a generally egalitarian ideology.¹

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¹ Eleanor Flexner notes a difference between Mormon and non-Mormon interpretations of this event. Mormon historians, she states, see the enfranchisement as the "logical extension of an egalitarian attitude toward women basic to the Mormon creed." But to Flexner, a non-Mormon, woman suffrage was an interplay of other forces, the most significant being the need of the hierarchy to "enlist the help of women" against the passage of anti-polygamy legislation (1959, 165). In contrast, non-Mormon historians Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle see woman suffrage in Utah as the act of a "progressive Mormon hierarchy" (1978, introduction); likewise Mormon historian Thomas Alexander states that woman suffrage was a reflection of "progressive sentiment in advance of the rest of the nation" (1970, 38), while another Mormon historian, Richard Van Wagoner, sees the activities of Mormon women as "orchestrated by the Mormon hierarchy" (1986, 109). Beverly Beeton concludes that Mormon women were "pawns" (1986, 37), and Anne F. Scott sees woman suffrage as "to some extent a gift from the male hierarchy" (1986-87, 10). Today, as in other

Amidst this array of opinions, it is somewhat surprising to find that what has been overlooked is the possibility that Mormon women themselves had a role in securing their suffrage. This oversight is no doubt due in part to the fact that Mormon women did not publicly draft petitions, nor did they hold public demonstrations to seek enfranchisement. As a result, many historians have concluded that they were not politically active until after suffrage, and then only in response to attempts to disfranchise them.² Had these scholars studied the actions of Mormon women within their church, a different view might have emerged.

There is ample evidence that Mormon women were not disinterested recipients of the vote. Their reaction to enfranchisement readily demonstrates their involvement. Moreover, they had *not* been politicized overnight: many were well prepared in 1870 to assume an active political role in their communities (Scott 1986–87). Both their religious and community activities politicized Mormon women and helped lead to the 1870 franchise. Although Mormon women did not openly seek suffrage, I believe they were activists in their own behalf, and their actions contributed to their enfranchisement. The record also shows that Mormon women were not totally isolated in far-away Utah. They engaged many of the same problems and sought similar solutions as did women's advocates in the States.

For Mormon women, 1870 signaled the end of a politicization that had begun in the 1840s and the beginning of a visible and aggressive political activism. This process occurred in three stages. The first began in Nauvoo, where some Mormon women were taught that all the doctrines of the restored gospel, including polygamy, signaled a new era for women. Promised equality and privileges greater than they had ever known, women participated in Church governance through the "religious franchise," the Church's method of voting (Cannon 1869; Gates n.d.; Gates and Widtsoe 1928, 7–9).

Clear evidence of a new era was most expressly manifest by the founding of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo in 1842. Sarah Kim-

aspects of Mormon history, the old line between Mormon and non-Mormon interpretations is becoming increasingly blurred.

² Several sources suggest but do not develop the idea of women's activism. See Arrington in *Brigham Young* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985, 364–5). Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Carol Cornwall Madsen, and Jill Mulvay Derr, "The Latter-day Saints and Women's Rights, 1870–1920: A Brief Survey," *Task Papers in LDS History*, No. 29 (Salt Lake City: Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979). Edward Tullidge, *Woman of Mormondom* (1877; Salt Lake City, 1975) states that women worked for passage but does not document the statement.

ball is credited with the original idea for the society, although the Prophet Joseph Smith blessed and sanctified the organization (Derr 1987; Crocheron 1884, 27; Derr 1976; Jenson 1901, 4:373). The Relief Society helped the sisters develop many of the same skills other American women were learning in similar benevolent associations (see Berg 1978). But in addition, Mormon women took their first united political action when they drafted—and delivered—a petition to the governor of Illinois seeking protection for the community of Nauvoo.³ Sarah Kimball later claimed that when the Relief Society was established, “the sure foundations of the suffrage cause were deeply and permanently laid” (1892). In the upheaval following the death of Joseph Smith, the Relief Society was temporarily disbanded by Brigham Young. The Mormon sisters, however, resented giving up their organization and were firm in their conviction that they had specific powers in relationship to it. Angered by these assertions, Brigham Young lashed out saying, “When I want Sisters or the Wives of the members of the church to get up Relief Society I will summon them to my aid but until that time let them stay at home & if you see Females huddling together veto the concern and if they say Joseph started it tell them it is a damned lie for I know he never encouraged it” (in Derr 1987, 163).

The women, however, were steadfast in their belief that the Society was rightfully their own organization. They frequently asserted their convictions by quoting Joseph Smith’s promise: “I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time” (Minutes, Nauvoo, 28 April 1842). The activism that Mormon women initiated in Nauvoo established a pattern of participation that defined the first critical stage of their process of politicization. By the time the Saints were forced to leave Nauvoo, an inchoate sisterhood had emerged, one that quickened on the Great Plains. Survival on the westward trek dictated cooperation among Mormon women, and many learned through that ordeal and what followed both leadership and independence.

The second stage of politicization dates from the Saints’ 1847 arrival in the Great Basin to the end of the Civil War. It was a time of severe stress for Mormon women. Plural marriage, combined with the frequent calling of males on Church missions, left many women alone to

³ Several hundred Mormon women signed the petition, which Emma Smith and other women then took to the governor. Joseph Smith attended a Relief Society meeting in August of 1842 and thanked the women for having taken “the most active part” in his defense (“Minutes,” Nauvoo, Aug. 1842; Crocheron 1884, 3; Newell and Avery 1984, 127).

provide materially and emotionally for the welfare of their families. In addition, Leonard Arrington has described this era as marked by "harsh hyperbole, offensive rhetoric and militant posturing" on the part of Brigham Young and federal officials. The passage of the 1862 Anti-bigamy Act reinforced the national attitudes toward Mormons and polygamy (1985, 300). When that rhetoric was directed toward Mormon women, it appears, at best, insensitive and at worst anti-female (Evans 1980, 13). These were difficult years for Sarah Kimball, who taught school for several years under "very trying circumstances" and, according to an early biography, became "even more than ever convinced" of the need to change working conditions for women who were in competition with men. She saw "no other method that could be so effectual as the elective franchise" (Jenson 1901, 4:190). It is not clear, however, how broadly her sentiments were shared.

In spite of these difficulties and constraints, Mormon women continued their organizational efforts. They established a Female Council of Health in 1851 to discuss personal health matters and were active participants in the Polysophical Society, a western version of the lyceum which sponsored lectures by visiting scholars or dignitaries. Finally, on women's initiative, between 1847 and 1856, various forms of the Relief Society made brief reappearances in a decentralized and ad hoc form (Jensen 1983; Naisbitt 1899; Beecher 1975, 1). Throughout this second stage, 1847-65, women participated in various public efforts to help their own poor as well as Native Americans in the territory and promoted the health and well-being of other women. In these efforts, they learned to move forward carefully enough to avoid problems, but forcefully enough to break new ground.

The third stage of politicization ran from 1865 to the end of the decade. Though benign, the Utah War had been expensive for the Saints, and anti-Mormon sentiment was on the rise. Realizing that he had to find a less combative way to deal with the national government, Brigham Young began reassessing past economic policies and renewed an emphasis on cooperative efforts, including home manufacturing. In this climate, Mormon women worked for the permanent reestablishment of the Relief Society. Eliza R. Snow, President Young's most trusted female counsel, was not officially set apart as president of the "sisterhood" until 1880 but was authorized to reorganize the Relief Society in 1867 (Derr 1987, 172). "The time had come," she stated, "for the sisters to act in a wider sphere" (Minutes 1867).

While each ward Relief Society was officially under the "guidance" of the bishop, programs and priorities reflected the counsel of Eliza R. Snow and the vision of individual ward presidents. In the Salt Lake City Fifteenth Ward, Sarah Kimball was determined to prove that

women could contribute economically to the community. She tenaciously promoted home manufacturing, which included a variety of homecrafts such as straw hats and handmade gloves as well as food items, and the construction of a storehouse financed, owned, and operated by women (Minutes 4 Jan., 15 Feb., 18 June, 16 July, 14 Aug. 1868). Her statement when the Salt Lake City Fifteenth Ward chapel's cornerstone was laid indicates her support for women's economic independence: "A woman's allotted sphere of labor is not sufficiently extensive and varied to enable her to exercise all [her] God-given powers . . . nor are her labors made sufficiently remunerative to afford her that independence compatible with true womanly dignity" (Minutes 12 Nov. 1868).

Whether Kimball, Snow, and others saw economic independence as a step toward political activity is unclear. However, Kimball thought it right for women to be independent, but she was careful not to appear *too* autonomous. Programs were always approved by local male authorities. Eliza Snow also promoted programs of self-improvement and instructed the sisters that the time would come "when we will have to be in large places and act in responsible situations" (Minutes 25 April 1868). At the same time, she consistently reminded women of their duty as wives and mothers and of the importance of obedience. Nevertheless, the practical experience in domestic commercial enterprises, the commitment to self-improvement, and the constant affirmation of their spiritual powers had produced a vibrant sense of sisterhood. The Relief Society provided a sanctioned setting in which to discuss women's rights and responsibilities.

By 1869, the success of various Relief Society efforts was gaining public attention in Zion—many men who had been skeptical began praising the women's accomplishments. Among the women, pride and growing self-esteem were palpable. Change was afoot in the community of Mormon women. As an example, in the past when they were portrayed in anti-polygamy attacks as degraded victims, Mormon women had chosen not to respond; now increasingly they came to their own defense.

Ironically, finding a way to end polygamy was the motivation behind the earliest proposal to enfranchise Utah's women. The underlying assumption among non-Mormons was that Mormon women would vote to end polygamy. This tactic was suggested by the *New York Times* in 1867 (reprint, *Deseret News*, 15 Jan. 1867; Beeton 1986, x)⁴ and was subsequently introduced as a bill in the United States Con-

⁴ Gary Bunker and Carol Bunker note that the first suggestion that woman suffrage could be an "antidote" to polygamy came from William Ray in 1856 (1991, 33).

gress. To the surprise of the bill's sponsors, both Utah's territorial representative and the press in Utah received the proposal favorably; as a result it was subsequently abandoned. But from this time forward, the issue of woman suffrage was increasingly discussed in the territory — by women as well as men.

January 1870 signaled a turning point in the politicization of Mormon women. They had strengthened the position of their most valuable activist organization, the Relief Society. Widening their sphere of activity, they had thoughtfully debated women's roles. Their gender consciousness appears clear. They had moved into a highly visible public arena that they energetically sustained for the rest of the century.

Two events mark 1870 as a watershed in the history of Mormon women and political activism. First, in early January three thousand women gathered in a "great indignation meeting" to protest anti-polygamy legislation introduced in the national Congress. Then in February, acting Governor S. A. Mann, a non-Mormon, signed the woman suffrage bill passed by the territorial legislature. The circumstances surrounding these events show Mormon women as outspoken public activists in their own behalf.

The arrival in the territory in December 1869 of a new anti-polygamy bill, the Cullom Act, propelled Mormon women into political activism. Among other things, the Cullom Bill stipulated that anyone believing in polygamy would be denied the right to vote or serve on a jury. Though the Saints no doubt knew the bill had been introduced in Congress, seeing it in print must have been a shock — both the substance and language were outrageous and insulting. In fact, a number of non-Mormons found the bill offensive and spoke against its passage (*Deseret News*, 9 March 1870).

Mormon women were especially outraged, which was nothing new, but now their response was boldly public. They called for a meeting 6 January to plan a women's public protest; in probability it was approved by Church leaders.⁵ Sarah Kimball opened the discussion stating, "Mormon women would be unworthy of the names we bear or of the blood in our veins, should we longer remain silent." Eliza Snow added that it was "high time" for Mormon women to "rise up in the dignity of our calling and speak for ourselves." The group voted unanimously to hold a protest, and a committee drafted resolutions. After the resolutions were read and approved, the meeting took an even more aggressive turn. Bathsheba Smith stated that she was pleased with the actions

⁵ The *Deseret News* 9 March 1870. Sixteen years later, in 1886, Mormon women requested permission from President John Taylor to hold a similar meeting (Kimball, Pratt, and Horne 1886).

thus far, then moved "that we demand of the Gov. the right of franchise." The women voted, and the "vote carried." Then Lucy W. Kimball, stating that "we had borne in silence as long as it was our duty to bear," moved that the women "be represented in Washington." Eliza Snow and Sarah Kimball were "elected as representatives" (Minutes, 19 Feb. 1870).

In response to such bold action, one might have expected newspaper headlines the next day to have read "Women to Seek Franchise from Utah Governor," or "Snow and Kimball Elected to Represent Mormon Women in Washington." Instead *five* days later, the *Deseret News* headline read, "Minutes of a Ladies Mass Meeting." The article, which included the comments by Sarah Kimball and Eliza Snow as well as a full copy of the protest resolution, blandly concluded: "Miss E. R. Snow, Mrs. L. W. Kimball and Mrs. B. Smith made a few very appropriate remarks expressing their hearty concurrence in the movement and in the measures adopted by the meeting." The article was signed by Sarah Kimball.⁶ It fails to mention both the motion to seek the franchise and Eliza Snow's and Sarah Kimball's election as representatives to Washington.

This represents a fascinating editorial decision. While the organizing meeting minutes show solid evidence of the quickening political behavior of Mormon women, excluding both motions from the public record obscured their efforts from immediate public (and eventual historical) scrutiny. There are several possible reasons for the omission. The sisters themselves may have worried about appearing too aggressive or about using the Relief Society for their own agenda—accusations that had been leveled at Emma Smith in Nauvoo—thereby endangering the position of the Relief Society; or the women may have wanted to discuss their resolutions with the Brethren before announcing them publically. The discrepancy may also show one reason why Mormon women's political activities are so difficult to trace: the women were more interested in being effective than visual. A low profile may have been critical to their success, and they knew it. Clearly, however,

⁶ Two different essays by historians report on this part of the meeting, but neither refers to a vote on the suffrage motion or to Lucy W. Kimball's motion. Beverly Beeton states: "A 'Sister Smith' even demanded of the governor that women be allowed to vote. At the close of the meeting Eliza Snow . . ." (1986, 31). Reported in this way, what happened becomes only one insignificant woman demanding the vote, rather than a motion made and passed by the whole Society. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Carol Cornwall Madsen, and Jill Mulvay Derr state: "Later in the meeting one Sister Smith rose to move that 'we demand of the governor the right of franchise.' Whether the motion carried or not, and whether or not the demand reached the legislature is not known" (1979, 10).

Mormon women had been talking privately about suffrage, and prior to their enfranchisement they were trying to do something about it.

Another possible reason for not publicizing their 6 January action on woman suffrage was the immediately upcoming mass protest meeting, which needed planning. This "Great Indignation Meeting" held 13 January 1870, brought three thousand women to the Salt Lake Tabernacle to hear the "leading sisters" of the Church speak from its pulpit for the first time. Though the meeting's stated agenda was to protest the Cullom anti-polygamy bill, proceedings indicate that some Mormon women had come to see polygamy as a women's rights issue. Although nine of the fourteen recorded speakers spoke directly to the defense of polygamy without raising the issue of women's rights or suffrage, five did broach the topic. In a surprising opening remark, Sarah Kimball stated, "We are not here to advocate woman's rights but man's rights" (*Deseret News*, 14 Jan. 1870). The 8 February *New York Times* picked right up on her statement: "One of the speakers declared they had not met to agitate for "women's rights" but "men's rights"; as did the *New York Herald*: "In these days when women threaten to become tyrants, it is refreshing to read such earnest pleadings in favor of the rights of men" (in *Deseret News*, 16 Feb. 1870). Those anxious about the danger of "strong-minded" women would undoubtedly be reassured by Kimball's comment. Most likely, that was her intent. She did not, however, overlook women's interests. She ended her speech, noting that not only would the legislation "deprive our fathers, husbands and brothers" of their constitutional privileges, but "would also deprive us, as women, of the privilege of selecting our husbands, and against *this* we most unqualifiedly protest" (*Deseret News*, 14 Jan. 1870, emphasis added).

Ultimately the protest served a number of purposes. Mormon women at last had a chance to show the outside world that they were articulate and willing to defend their beliefs. The newspaper coverage was perhaps the most positive account ever given of Mormon women, and that reflected well on the whole community. The *Ogden Junction* on 23 March commented, "If the Cragin and Cullom legislative burlesques have no other good effect, they have drawn out the ladies of Utah from silence and obscurity, exhibited them before the world as women of thought, force and ability, who are able to make strong resolutions and defend them with boldness and eloquence."

The anti-polygamy campaign had unintended consequences for Mormon women as well. The protest meeting proved to Mormon men that the women could organize a successful public demonstration and could be, in a "wider sphere" of action, a valuable asset "to the cause of Zion." Mormon men could only applaud the women's public defense

of polygamy. The women would not be accused of acting outside their appropriate sphere; defending polygamy became a sanctioned mechanism by which women increased their public participation.

Only four months before the meeting, Brigham Young had commented that he wished more women would assume their rights: "the right to stop all folly in [their] conversation" and "the right to ask their husbands to fix up the front yard" (JD 14:105; Evans 1980, 13). Obviously he was not grappling seriously with woman's rights or suffrage. However, almost immediately following the protest meeting, attitudes changed; male Church leaders moved in support of woman suffrage. Historian Leonard Arrington asserts that in the "aftermath" of the meeting, "Brigham and other Mormon leaders—both men and women—decided it would be helpful if the Utah legislature should pass an act granting woman suffrage" (1985, 364). By 12 February the territorial legislature had passed the woman suffrage legislation. Women actively lobbied acting governor S.A. Mann, and, a week later he signed the bill into law (Arrington 1985, 365).

At a subsequent meeting on 19 February at the Salt Lake City Fifteenth Ward, Eliza Snow suggested a committee draft an "expression of gratitude" to the acting governor (Minutes 19 Feb. 1870).⁷ That task completed, the meeting became a "feast of woman's anticipations" (Tullidge 1877, 502). If this group shared a single political perception, it was that they had entered a new phase in the "era of women." Several speakers expressed their pleasure in gaining the vote, which they referred to as the "reform." Prescenda Kimball said she was "glad to see our daughters elevated with man," while Bathsheba Smith "believed that woman was coming up in the world." Other women expressed words of caution. Margaret Smoot said that she "never had any desire for more rights," that she had considered "politics aside from the sphere of woman." But Wilmarth East disagreed. "I cannot agree with Sister Smoot in regard to woman's rights," she declared, adding that she had always wanted "a voice in the politics of the nation, as well as to rear a family." Phebe Woodruff said she had "looked for this day for years. . . . [The] yoke on woman is partly removed," she noted, adding "Let us lay it by, and wait till the time comes to use it, and not run headlong and abuse the privilege" (Minutes 19 Feb. 1870).

⁷ The 23 February *Deseret News* reported that after the meeting, a committee took the letter of thanks to the governor, who told the women "that the subject has been much agitated . . . [and] will be watched with profound interest." He hoped, he added, that "the women would act so as to prove the wisdom of the legislation." According to George A. Smith, "the ladies said they thought the Governor was about as much embarrassed as they were" (1870).

For Sarah Kimball, however, suffrage was a turning point. She told the women that she had "waited patiently a long time, and now that we were granted the right of suffrage, she would openly declare herself a woman's right's woman." She then "called upon those who would do so to back her up, whereupon many manifested their approval" (Minutes 19 Feb. 1870). These are not the words of a woman who had been recently politicized. Moreover, the rights she was referring to were not religious rights, but the secular rights of women: political, economic, and social. It is hardly surprising that some women at the meeting were unready to "manifest their approval" and "back up" Sarah Kimball on woman's rights. Declaring oneself a "woman's rights woman" was no doubt a bold move for any woman. The implication is that Kimball now allied herself with the more militant American suffragists. The statement was so daring, in fact, that Sarah Kimball waited until after suffrage was granted to declare herself publicly.

Woman suffrage refocused the political activity of Mormon women. No sooner were they enfranchised than the outside world moved to disfranchise them. For the rest of the century, they were defenders of their own suffrage and were joined in that defense by many woman suffrage activists from the States. In turn, Mormon women were activists for the passage of woman suffrage for all women and were outspoken defenders of woman's rights. The degree of help that Mormon women received in return was uneven. Anti-polygamy activists tried to dissuade national suffrage advocates from defending woman suffrage in Utah, claiming that it only reinforced the power of the Mormon church and the strength of polygamy. As a result, support for Mormon women waxed and waned at various times for twenty-five years, and it differed between woman suffrage organizations and among individual suffragists.

Despite the efforts of many national and local advocates of women suffrage, in 1887 all women in Utah were disfranchised by a federal law designed to destroy polygamy and to reduce the political and economic power of the Church. Three years later the Mormons officially discontinued plural marriage and began a vigorous campaign to secularize political life and to secure statehood. In 1895 woman suffrage was vigorously debated during the constitutional convention, and despite fears that its inclusion might damage the bid for statehood, its advocates prevailed.

A month later national suffrage leaders, including a vigorous but aging Susan B. Anthony, were on hand to celebrate the victory with their sister-suffragists in Utah. In a tribute to Anthony, Sarah Kimball discussed the difficulty of the early years of the woman suffrage movement in Utah. She said that when she first read Anthony's publication

the "Revolution" (1869), she would not have "dared to say the bold, grand things that Miss Anthony said. . . . That," she states, would have made her "so unpopular," she would have hardly "dared to shoulder it." She continued, "As time rolled on we were very careful" ("Conference" 1895).

If a single word could describe the operative mode for Mormon women, it would be "careful." They consistently guarded their words and actions to make sure the hierarchy never felt threatened or interpreted the women's goals as inconsistent with the goals of the church. But the women tenaciously defended their right to participate in the political process. They knew that success was essential, but it was equally critical to succeed in the right way. A year after they were enfranchised, the leading sisters wrote a circular stating that "God through His servants had conferred on us the right of franchise for a wise purpose. This privilege has been granted without our solicitation, and in this as well as in many other respects, we realize that women in Utah possess advantages greatly superior to women elsewhere" (Gates n.d.). The document is a good example of the careful way Mormon women operated. They bypass credit, express their gratitude, and yet secure their continuing activity, in this instance by claiming divine purpose for their enfranchisement. By deflecting credit for their achievements, however, Mormon women themselves contributed to the illusion that they were not agents in their own behalf. Hiding their agency was not uncommon for other nineteenth-century women, and it is not uncommon today. But is it one reason their political activism prior to 1870 has been overlooked.

Mormon women helped gain suffrage by being activists in their own behalf. Suffrage was not granted women in 1870 because of an overwhelming egalitarian impulse on the part of the Brethren; rather the usual pragmatic decision-making process was at work. Four months before women were enfranchised, the male leadership was still undecided about the wisdom of woman suffrage.⁸ The women of Utah appear to have been enfranchised only after they had proved their potential for political usefulness. And, in fact, Mormon women did much to buffer growing criticism of the Church and of polygamy by securing the support of many non-Mormon suffragists and by presenting to the American public an alternative vision of Mormon womanhood. Between 1870 and 1890, Mormon women defended plural marriage as a First Amendment right and woman's rights issue, but they also continued to agitate for woman suffrage after polygamy was no

⁸ For comments showing a lack of resolve on woman suffrage from both George Q. Cannon and Brigham Young, see *Deseret News*, 6 August 1869, and the *JD* 14:105.

longer a central issue. In 1895 when woman suffrage was restored, support for woman's political equality in Utah, while not unanimous, clearly was broadly based. Thus the advocacy of woman suffrage was more than just expedient.

By the time women in Utah were reenfranchised, Mormon suffragists had earned the respect and friendship of many of their sister-suffragists, even though they steadfastly maintained the divinity of their church and continued to sustain and obey its male leaders. But apart from religious issues, when it came to political, economic, and social rights of women, Mormon women were, as Sarah Kimball would have said, "heart and hand" with the female activists of the world.

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