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Stellar Pistols From The Lone Star State

By Dave Anderson
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STI leads the way in high-capacity competition 1911s as well as Texas-tough carry guns.

STI is one of the most innovative and respected companies in the tough, highly competitive 1911 autopistol industry. The company (and the modular pistol which was its first product) has an interesting history.



to devote his full time to his business: making and distributing a line of high quality parts and accessories for 1911-style pistols under his "CMC" trademark. Some of these parts were designed and made by engineers Virgil and Fred Tripp. McCormick and the brothers formed a working relationship, with Tripp Research, Inc. (TRI) doing the development and production, and CMC doing the promotion and marketing.

At the 1990 nationals McCormick saw that high-cap Springfield P-9 pistols had a definite advantage in the elaborate, high round-count field courses that were becoming the norm at IPSC matches. Early in 1991 McCormick pulled together a design team made up of Virgil and Fred Tripp and manufacturing engineers Sandy Strayer and Ed Minshew to design a high-cap, 1911-compatible frame.

Truly Original Design

Using sophisticated computer-assisted design programs they created a modular concept, with a steel upper section fitted to a synthetic grip assembly. In an impressive feat of engineering they got it designed, built, debugged and into production in a year and were able to display the first models at the 1992 SHOT Show. Top IPSC shooters immediately realized the impact the design would have on their sport. I well remember seeing top competitor's handling and carefully examining the display models, then solemnly shaking McCormick's hand.

The new design didn't take long to fulfill its promise. In the fall of 1992 Jerry Barnhart used a gun built by Wilson on the modular frame to win the USPSA nationals. The modular design has been a dominant force in competition ever since those first pistols were marked "CMC" on the right side of the grip, "TRI" on the left. When they first appeared we all called them

"McCormick" frames. There have been changes in ownership of the design over the years. For a time the frames were marked TRI, then STI (for Strayer-Tripp International). In 1994 the Strayer-Tripp partnership broke up, with Virgil Tripp retaining the STI trademark while Sandy Strayer formed SV ("V" for Mike Voigt, pistolsmith, competitor, and current USPSA president).

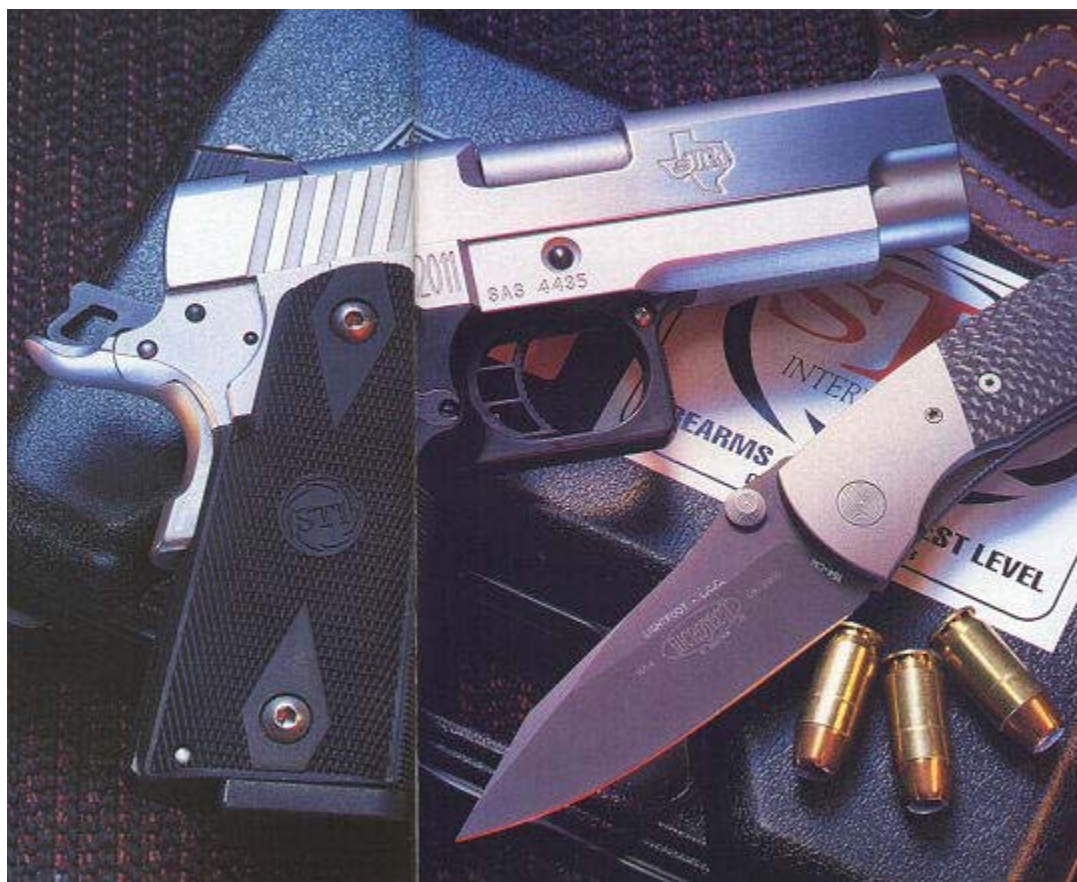
STI needed additional capital to grow. Enter Dave Skinner, recently retired after selling a very successful electronics business which he and his wife Shirley had built into a seven-plant, 430-employee operation. An IPSC shooter and firearms enthusiast, Skinner had met fellow Texan Virgil Tripp at IPSC matches and the two had become friends. Like many an entrepreneur, Skinner found retirement a bore and was ready for another challenge. He purchased STI, and with Skinner and Tripp working together the company has prospered.

The Competitor's Choice

At the 2001 USPSA limited nationals, 41 percent of the competitors were using an STI pistol or frame; at the open nationals, STI pistols or frames were used by 57 percent of the field. There is no better testament to the basic correctness of the design or the quality of workmanship and materials. Top competitors fire more rounds in six months than most shooters will in a lifetime. They demand the highest level of performance, reliability and durability, and simply will not tolerate anything less.

The 1994 Crime Bill limiting new magazines to a capacity of 10 rounds was a serious blow to manufacturers of high capacity handguns. Since STI's only product and the reason for its existence was the high capacity frame, many in the industry didn't see how the company could survive. But where others saw only problems, Dave Skinner saw opportunities.

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What he saw was dramatic increase in demand for compact defensive pistols, as state after state passed "Shall issue" concealed carry laws. He also saw that the technology that made possible 16 and 18-shot full-size pistols could also make for extremely compact 10-shot pistols. Far from being wiped out by adversity,

STI has prospered, selling every gun it can produce and expanding its product line.

I was able to assemble a selection of STI pistols, some of which were regularly-used competition models already owned by myself or shooting friends, others on loan from STI to offer you an overview of what the company currently has available.



Double Stack Pistols

The original modular frame was built around double-column/single feed magazines. Some double stack mags (for submachine guns, for example) stack the cartridges in two rows and feed rounds into the chamber alternately from the left and right. Most high-capacity magazines for handguns stack the cartridges in two rows but are tapered at the top so that all rounds are fed into the chamber from the center.

Magazines have to be well designed and carefully manufactured to ensure that rounds will move smoothly and properly from the sides to the middle without jamming. Many shooters tend to take magazines for granted and don't appreciate the difficulty in designing reliable mags and building them to the correct tolerances. One of the major reasons for STI's success was that they got the magazines right from the beginning.

Although new magazines capacity greater than 10 rounds cannot manufactured or sold (except for military and law enforcement purchasers), high-caps made prior to the 1994 Crime Bill taking affect can be owned and used. STI was able to make quite a few high-caps before the law took effect and though they aren't cheap, they are available on the used market.

Competitors often use the less expensive and readily available 10-round mags from practice and some match stages, and reserve one or two high-capacity magazines for stages in which they are an advantage. It's not uncommon to see competitors pooling their resources, with the same set of high-cap mags being used by two or more shooters. As we've seen, STI's high-capacity 1911s continue to dominate IPSC competition. If you purchase a full-size STI for IPSC competition, I'd suggest you organize the mag situation first just to ensure you have a couple high-caps. At this time at least, it's not that difficult.



The Competitor

The Competitor is STI's race-ready pistol. It comes with everything (including compensator and red-dot sight) needed for IPSC Open-class competition. It could literally be taken from the factory box, sighted in, and be capable of winning any match. This pistol I used for this article is a competitor I purchased some years ago and which has fired many thousands of rounds. The Competitor is built on a standard frame with black grip and the Classic 5-inch slide with front and rear cocking serrations. It is fitted with an STI 5.5-inch bull barrel, with a very well designed and effective multi-chamber compensator and a one-piece steel guide rod. STI parts the frame: stainless steel high grip beavertail safety, ambidextrous safety, slotted lightweight hammer carbon-fiber trigger.

The cavernous magazine chute is the STI aluminum model. Scope base is an Allchin design, also made of aluminum thing by STI. Sight options are the C-More (shown) or the OKO red dot. Empty, Competitor weighs 44 oz. and is 11 inches overall.

Current list price is \$2499, including your choice of dot sights. If you've ever purchased or had built a full-house race gun you'll understand that this is a reasonable price for the features and workmanship provided. One reason why the price is kept down is that there are few options. All Competitors are built in .38 Super caliber. About the only options offered are a hard chrome finish and extended magazine release.

The pistol is set up for IPSC "major" loads which are hotter than most factory .38 Super ammunition. If lighter loads are used, say for steel speed shooting or to go with IPSC's reduced power factor, it is simply a matter of changing the recoil spring. As it came from the box the Competitor has been totally reliable with TPSC major handloads. The trigger pull was also very good - clean and a bit over three pounds. It has since been reduced somewhat in weight to suit personal preference but was certainly useable right out of the box. With reloads using quality jacketed bullets it will shoot into 1 inch at 25 yards all day long.

STI offers two variations of the basic model. The TruBor Competitor is identical but uses the "TruBor" barrel in which the entire barrel/compensator assembly is machined in one piece. Price is the same as for the basic Competitor.

Grandmaster is functionally similar to the Competitor but is fancier in appearance and can be customized more for the individual. The trigger, for example, is the STI "gunsmith blank" which can be fitted with straight or curved inserts of different lengths. The slide has been flat-topped and lightened, with rear serrations only. The Grandmaster uses the TruBor barrel/comp unit. The mag chute is stainless steel instead of aluminum. A blue grip frame is standard, as is a hard chrome finish. Customers can request a special serial number provided it hasn't already been used (their name, for example, or their USPSA membership number). The Grandmaster lists at \$3,295.

The Edge

Like the Competitor, the Edge is built to be race-ready from the box, but for USPSA Limited class rather than Open class. Currently it is offered in 9mm, 40 S&W, 10mm Auto, and .45 ACP. For USPSA

competition .40 S&W is the cartridge of choice as it is the smallest caliber that is scored major, with greater magazine capacity than .45 ACP.

The Edge is built on STI's long frame, in which the front extension of the frame extends right to the end of the slide. The purpose is to put more weight forward to reduce muzzle jump. The 5-inch slide lacks the normal scalloped lightening cuts at the forward end of the slide, again with the purpose of putting weight out front. Even the one piece guide rod is made of heavy tungsten rather than steel. Overall weight is 39 ounces.

The frame components (hammer, trigger, safeties, mag chute, mag button) are the same as for the Competitor. Of course the Edge has no compensator or optical sight. Sights are a vertical post front sight and fully adjustable STI rear sight. The Edge currently lists at \$1,776 in blue finish with black grip.



The Edge pistol used for this article belongs to a friend and like the Competitor has fired many thousands of rounds with complete reliability. Hand-held groups run a bit larger, averaging around 2 inches at 25 yards. The difference in performance reflects the fact that iron sights are harder to shoot with great accuracy than are the electronic sights.

An increasingly popular variation of the Edge is the more recent Executive model. It came about this way: Dave Skinner wanted an Edge to use in USPSA Limited class competition. Not having a lot of time to spend in maintaining a blued finish, he had a new Edge hard chromed, and to make it a bit more distinctive he used a gray grip and trigger and stainless steel mag chute. Finding the plain black front sight a bit hard for middle-aged eyes to pick up he had his gun fitted with a Dawson fiber optic front sight with a bright red insert.

The result proved to be a handsome, distinctive pistol. Skinner found that whenever he went to a match shooters would ask him to "make me one just like that." Eventually he decided simply to add it to the product line. The Executive is offered in AO S&W only and lists at \$2,262. The sample shown has the optional extended magazine release.

The Executive on consignment has proven equally as reliable as the Edge, and seems to be a shade more accurate. This could be simply normal variation from one pistol to another, although both shooters testing the accuracy felt that the fiber optic front sight was an aid to their middle-aged vision.

The VIP

The VIP uses a shortened grip frame barrel, and slide. With a 10-shot, double stack magazine it puts 11 rounds of .45 ACP in a compact package that has proven very popular for concealed carry.



The "frame" on STI modular pistols is actually the upper portion of the lower unit, the metal part that carries the serial number. The synthetic grip - the part you actually hold - is a separate component. The VIP frame is made of high grade structural aircraft aluminum. The shortened slide is made of stainless steel and carries a 3.9-inch bull barrel and a one-piece steel guide rod.

Sights are a ramped, non-snagging front sight and a Novak-style fixed rear sight neatly buried in the slide. Frame components (trigger, hammer, and safeties) are similar to those of the Edge, except there is no mag chute and the

thumb safety is on the left-side only (an ambi safety is optional).

The September/October issue of American Handgunner carried an evaluation of one of the early VIP's by Massad Ayoob. Ayoob reported outstanding accuracy and generally good reliability, but felt the trigger pull at under 3 pounds was too light for a defensive pistol. He also found that the gun shot several inches high at 25 yards with the fixed sights, and the slide would sometimes lock back on the last round in the magazine.

I also had an early VIP on hand and my experience was much the same as Ayoob's. As it happens I actually prefer light triggers, but Ayoob has argued convincingly that light triggers are not a good idea on defensive pistols, either in a tense situation or in the legal aftermath. The recoil spring on my sample was also rather heavy and with standard .45 ACP loads the slide sometimes wouldn't go back far enough to engage the slide stop on the last round. Instead, the slide would lock on the rear edge of the magazine follower making the magazine difficult to remove.

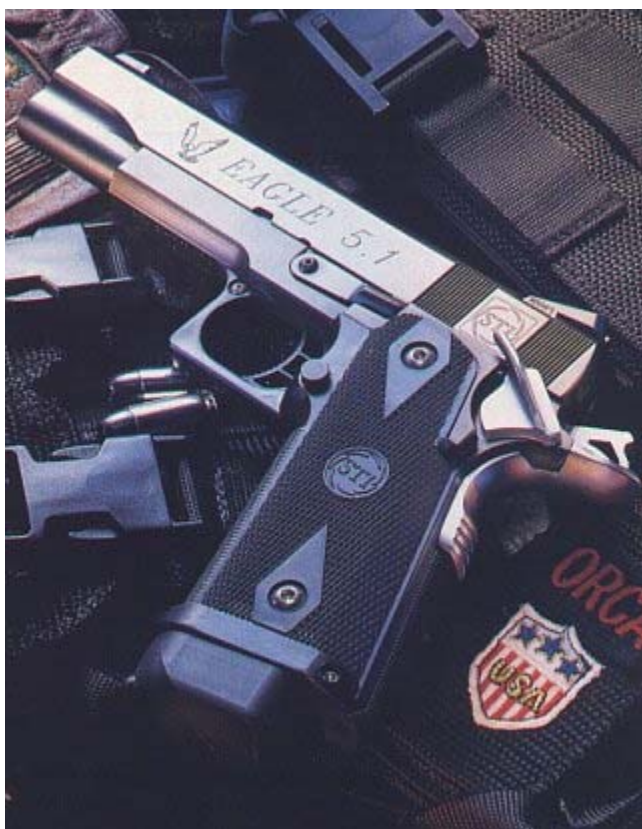
STI is a very responsible company and immediately took action in response to Ayoob's concerns. I was able to compare the old model to a new VIP on loan for testing. The new model has a slightly higher front sight. For my eyes at least the fixed sights now shoot to point of aim at 25 yards. The new front sight is also narrower, which I much prefer. Most factory front sights are too wide, nearly filling the rear-sight notch and hence are rather slow.

The new VIP proved reliable, locking the slide back only when the magazine ran dry. On one single occasion the slide didn't go all the way to slidelock on an empty magazine, but that was with a light target load that was incompatible with the recoil spring, which was set up for full-power loads. Otherwise the new VIP was completely reliable in the course of firing some 200 rounds. Accuracy was the same as the older model, with five-shot groups running from 2 to 3-inches at 25 yards - out-standing accuracy for such a compact gun. The trigger pull is still clean and consistent, but now weighs a bit over five pounds.

The single criticism I have of the VIP is a sharp edge on the top right side of the frame, at the front of the notch where the thumb lever of an ambi safety would be. A friend who shoots an Edge in competition tried some weak-hand shots with the VIP. When he brought his thumb down to grip the pistol, as he would on his Edge with its ambi safety, the sharp corner cut the thumb. If it were my gun I'd take a high speed hand grinder or a file and just round this corner off - it would take about two minutes.

The VIP weighs just 25 ounces. empty, but the hand-filling grip made it one of the most pleasant shooting light .45s I've come across. It puts 11 powerful rounds in a very neat package, and yes, if you have them available, it will accept high-cap mags. The VIP currently lists at \$1,699.

The Eagle 5.0 and 6.0



The Eagle 5.0 is STI's most popular model. Essentially it is a modern 1911 with the STI modular frame. It has the standard frame and slide with 5-inch bull barrel and steel guide rod. Empty weight is 34.5 ounces. It is offered in standard calibers 9mm, 9x23, .38 Super, .40 S&W, 10mm Auto and .45 ACP. The Eagle 5.0 lists at \$1,699. I didn't ask for the loan of an Eagle as it is very similar to the Edge except that it uses a standard frame and slide instead of the longer, heavier ones of the Edge. The Eagle 6.0 is identical except that as its name implies it uses a 6-inch bull barrel and slide to match. It lists at \$1,795.

The Single Stack Models

Recently STI has begun manufacturing more traditional 1911s, utilizing the standard single-stack magazine. There are a lot of good modern 1911s out there, but the voracious demand seems to be unappeasable. There's always room for a quality 1911, and quality describes these STI offerings.

The STI 1911 is incorporate the features of the modern 1911; good sights, extended triggers, slotted hammers, high-ride beavertail grip safeties, extended thumb safeties. They also have a Couple of unusual touches. Grip panels are made of thin rosewood, making for a flatter profile

and slimmer grip that will suit some hands better. The frontstrap of the frame has a different and quite attractive scalloping which the company calls "STIplling". Checkering of frontstraps has long been a favorite custom feature but some shooters feel checkering has its faults, It can be painful on the hand during long practice sessions and can snag on clothes. Well done it can be quite expensive, and badly done it looks terrible, "STIplling" looks good, doesn't snag and provides a secure grip.

The Trojan 5.0

This is STI's basis full-size 1911 offered in 9mm, .40 S&W, .40 Super, and .45 ACP. In appearance it is a conventional "modern" 1911, and I mean that as a compliment. I think a well done modern 1911 is about the best looking and most useful handgun available. The .40 Super is a bottlenecked case, currently loaded by Triton to some impressive velocities.

The Trojan uses a standard 1911-style barrel with barrel bushing, making it legal for IDPA competition as well as IPSC production class. A one-piece steel guide rod is used. Sights are a post front and the excellent STI adjustable rear.



The sample pistol was in .40 S&W. Overall fit and finish was excellent. There is very little play in the fit of slide to frame, yet the slide cycles smoothly and constantly. Barrel fit at both the barrel hood and the bushing was likewise very good. There were no tool marks visible; the blue finish was smooth and even. Overall it gave the impression of being a quality piece of equipment.

Functional reliability was perfect. Five-shot groups at 25 yards were in the 2.5 to 3-inch range, not quite as good as with the Edge and Executive, but certainly more than adequate. Operating controls - thumb safety, grip safety, magazine release, slide stop - all worked smoothly and properly. Thumb safety is on the left side only. Empty magazines dropped freely from the gun whether the slide was forward or locked back.



Although the thin grip panels look nice and do make for a more slender grip, I personally am so used to standard 1911s that for the shooting tests I fitted a set of synthetic Pearce grip panels, which required the use of longer grip screws. However I think most shooters will like the slimmer panels.

The Trojan is 8.5 inches long overall and weighs 36 ounces, empty.

Current list price is \$970. This is a fine quality 1911 and I certainly consider it a fair value. The Trojan 6.0 is identical in most respects but has a 6-inch barrel and longer slide, and is offered in 9mm, .40 S&W, .40 Super and .45 ACP. It lists at \$1,074.

The LS

Count on STI to do things differently. While the Trojan is a very well made conventional, full-size 1911, the LS stands out - or rather it doesn't stand out. This is the slimmest, flattest autopistol chambering full-power service cartridges of which I'm aware. One thing I've noticed about so many of our current autopistols is that they tend to be a bit wide across the beam. None seem to be as flat and slim as some of the old Colt and FN pocket autos.

The LS is a refreshing change. Across the slide and frame (which are the same width) it measures just .765 inch. Across the slim rosewood grip panels it measures 1.065 inches. Here is how it compares to a standard 1911 (which is one of the most slender full size autos made) and two of the best pocket autos from the first half of the 20th Century, the 1910 Browning and the Walther PPK.

<p>Pistol Width: across slide, across grips STI LS: 0.765", 1.065" 1911: 0.900", 1.260" 1910 Browning: 0.800", 1.070" Walther PPK: 0.880, 0.920"</p>

The LS is offered in 9mm and .40 S&W. Barrel length is 3.4 inches. Barrels have fully supported chambers. The recoil spring is a two-piece design, and there is an unusual cam block held in place by the slide stop pin that controls barrel locking and unlocking. The extractor is a large external design similar to that of most modern autos, and an improvement over the internal extractor of the standard 1911.

Thumb and grip safety of the LS are conventional 1911, except that engaging the thumb safety does not lock the slide closed. That means that unlike a standard 1911, the slide can be cycled for loading or unloading with the thumb safety engaged. Front sight on the LS is a small ramp that is integral with the slide, and the rear sight is a compact, snag-resistant Heinie design. Sight picture was adequate though I found the front sight a bit small. The advantage is that the sights are small and resistant to snagging.

The long trigger on the LS was reasonably good, with some takeup and overtravel, breaking at about 5.5 pounds. The only minor change I would make to the operating controls would be to use a heavier spring in the magazine release button. For a carry gun I found it a bit easy to depress.

The test gun was a 9mm, holding seven rounds in the magazine plus one in the chamber. Between cold weather and the small sights I found it hard to shoot good groups, most running around 4 to 5 inches for five shots at 25 yards. Certainly this is adequate for defensive use, though I'd like to try again when the weather is warmer.

When I first unpacked the little gun I disassembled it to examine the design, wiping off all traces of preservative oil with which it had been covered. I tried a few shots without lubing the gun and immediately had several failures to feed. Not really a fair test; I then lubed the gun properly and from then on it ran like a champ with both standard and +P 9mm ammunition. Functioning was reliable, the slide locked back on an empty magazine and the magazine would drop freely from the gun whether the slide was forward or locked back.

Despite its compact size, the LS with its steel frame is not a really light gun, weighing 28 ounces empty. Recoil of standard and +P ammunition was easily manageable, even though with my rather large hands I could just barely manage to get three fingers on the grip frame. It was actually more comfortable to have two fingers gripping the frame and the little finger beneath the magazine.

The LS is a bit heavy for pocket carry so I tried it in a Milt Sparks belt scabbard made for an Officer's ACP. It made for a slim, comfortable, easily concealable package. Height and length of a gun affect concealability, but thickness does as well and the flat LS is a leader in that category. The LS lists at \$746.

The BLS and Ranger

The BLS combines the short (3.4") barrel of the LS model with the full-size grip frame of the Trojan. Features are the same as for those two models. Offered in 9mm



and .40 S&W, it weighs 30 ounces and lists at \$843.

Some shooters prefer a shorter grip and longer slide. The Ranger uses the compact LS frame with the 3.9-inch bull barrel and stainless steel slide of the VIP. It is offered in .45 ACP only with a magazine capacity of six plus one. Weight is 28 ounces. and it lists at \$976.

The selection of standard STI offerings is ample to meet almost any defensive or competitive need, but for those who want something a little different STI can accommodate. Recently the company opened a custom shop. Options can be ordered from an extensive list and a pistol built to your order. Prices are only slightly greater than standard models, and STI is currently able to deliver your complete custom pistol in 8-12 weeks.



STI - Designed to Perform

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