

2-14-2013

Wilson, Alexander Gordon, 1888-1970 (MSS 445)

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Descriptive Inventory

MSS 445 WILSON, Alexander Gordon, 1888-1970

42 boxes. 97 folders. 1,004 items. 1905-1984. Originals, photocopies, photographs, audiotapes, compact discs.

1965.29.1

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Alexander Gordon Wilson (known as Gordon Wilson or Gordon Wilson, Sr.) was born on 14 October 1888 to Dr. Marquis Pillow Wilson (1847-1915) and Malinda Jane Robertson (1848-1929) in New Concord (Calloway County), Kentucky. Wilson attended New Concord Rural School (1895-1905) and Clinton College (1907), and taught in the rural schools of Hickman County. He entered the Western Kentucky State Normal School, now Western Kentucky University (WKU), Bowling Green, Kentucky, in January 1908 and received a life teaching certificate in June 1913. On 9 September 1913, Wilson married Avis Hines (1892-1983) and they departed for Indiana University in Bloomington, where Wilson earned a bachelor's degree in 1915. He subsequently earned a master's degree (1924) and a Ph.D. (1930) from Indiana.

Wilson began teaching at the Western Kentucky State Normal School as a student in 1912, then became an instructor in 1915. After serving as acting head of the school's English department, he was formally appointed head in 1928 and held the position until his retirement on 7 August 1959. In 1968, the former library building on the campus of Western Kentucky University was named Gordon Wilson Hall in his honor.

In addition to his teaching, Wilson was known for his lifelong studies of folklore and folkways. In 1935, he began publishing a weekly column, "Tidbits of Kentucky Folklore." The column appeared in local newspapers for the next 35 years and became the basis for two books, *Passing Institutions* (1943) and *Fidelity Folks* (1946). Wilson joined the Kentucky Folklore Society in 1922 and served as its president and publications editor. After his retirement, Wilson conducted interviews of residents and collected extensive data on the folkways—speech, plant, animal and weather lore, superstitions, folk beliefs and remedies, etc.—of the Mammoth Cave region of south central Kentucky. He published numerous articles on his studies as well as a booklet, *Folkways of the Mammoth Cave Region* (1962, 1967). He shared his linguistic research with editor Frederic G. Cassidy of the University of Wisconsin for Cassidy's *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

Wilson was also an accomplished amateur ornithologist. Drawn first to botany, he began to observe birds about 1909, and while studying at Indiana he began to keep records of his nature walks and sightings. When he returned to Bowling Green, he contracted "ornithological

fever” and published his first major article on birds in *The Auk* in 1921. For decades afterward, Wilson conducted extensive fieldwork on the birds of south central Kentucky, including Mammoth Cave National Park. Among his numerous publications were *Birds of Bowling Green, Kentucky* (1922), *Birds of South-Central Kentucky* (1962), a pamphlet, *Birds of the Mammoth Cave National Park* (1946, 1953), which became a popular park souvenir, and *Birds and Their Habitats in Mammoth Cave National Park* (1968). Wilson was one of the founders of the Kentucky Ornithological Society in 1923 and edited its publication, *The Kentucky Warbler*. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Scottish-born ornithologist Alexander Wilson (1766-1813).

After ten busy retirement years of research, writing and lecturing, Gordon Wilson died on 12 April 1970. He and his wife were the parents of two children, Winifred (b. 1918), who married Harold E. Hughes in 1939, and Charles Gordon Wilson (1925-2007), who was known as Gordon Wilson, Jr.

COLLECTION NOTE

This collection consists of Gordon Wilson’s correspondence, published and unpublished writing, and research data on ornithology, regional folklore and speech.

Box 1 contains mostly biographical and bibliographical data on Wilson as well as some of his speeches and writings. Folder 1 contains the collection inventory and correspondence regarding Wilson’s donation of the collection, including the lifting of restrictions on access to his “Diary to Kelly” (Boxes 5-6). Folder 2 contains biographical articles and clippings on Wilson, and Folder 3 contains correspondence and data relating to Wilson family genealogy. Folder 4 contains various lists of Wilson’s publications, addresses, trips and other professional activities. Folder 5 contains various certificates, diplomas and cards. Speeches and addresses include those given by Wilson at numerous schools and colleges in Kentucky (Folders 6-7); to WKU’s Leiper English Club (Folder 8); and at the presentation of the English department’s annual Gordon Wilson Award (Folder 9). Miscellaneous speeches and writings are in Folders 10-12.

Boxes 2-4 contain Wilson’s diaries, kept from 1905 to 1919. Much of the diaries are taken up with effusive observations of the weather and of nature, but Wilson records some of his activities as a student, including his participation in the move of the Western Kentucky State Normal School from downtown Bowling Green to its new campus on “the Hill” in February 1911 (Box 3, Folder 5) and a school excursion to Mammoth Cave on 14 May 1909 (Box 3, Folders 1, 2).

Boxes 5-6 contain Wilson’s “Diary to Kelly.” Begun upon his retirement from Western Kentucky University in 1959, the diaries take the form of letters “about Western and its problems,” intended solely for the eyes of WKU President Kelly Thompson. Although the entries may be prompted by a particular event, they contain a great deal of autobiographical information, reminiscences, and musings of Wilson, as well as candid impressions of faculty, students and the state of the university in general.

Box 7 contains drafts of an autobiographical manuscript by Wilson, arranged roughly by chapters corresponding to particular aspects of his life. A chronology of Wilson’s life appears in Folder 3, pp. 10-13, and a brief chronology of his ornithological studies is in Folder 8, pp. 12-13.

Box 8 contains Wilson’s general correspondence, almost all of it created at or after his retirement in 1959. Included in Folder 1 is correspondence with publishers regarding *Passing Institutions* and *Fidelity Folks* and a small amount of genealogical correspondence, but most of

this folder contains exchanges with friends and colleagues upon Wilson's retirement. Folder 2 includes many letters of appreciation from students, friends and colleagues to whom Wilson sent copies of his publications; also included is a summary of sales of *Folkways of the Mammoth Cave Region* and some genealogical correspondence. Folder 3 includes correspondence relating primarily to Wilson's research; he details the progress of his work in the Mammoth Cave region and corresponds with editors of scholarly journals about publishing articles. Folder 4 also relates primarily to his Mammoth Cave region research and publications; included is a letter from Jesse Stuart thanking him for a complimentary review. Folder 5 includes correspondence relating to Wilson's publications, including new editions of *Folkways of the Mammoth Cave Region* and *Birds of the Mammoth Cave National Park*, and updates on his post-retirement activities. Folder 6 includes further correspondence with colleagues and editors relating to Wilson's activities, research and publications, as well as his sale of the rights to *Folkways of the Mammoth Cave Region* to National Park Concessions, Inc., his compilation of 1,800 "Tidbits of Kentucky Folklore" columns for deposit in WKU's Special Collections Library, and his gift of his folklore and ornithology research materials to WKU. Folder 7 includes further correspondence with colleagues and other professionals regarding Wilson's research and publications and the compilation and indexing of his "Tidbits" columns, as well as letters from former students and letters of thanks from recipients of recent publications. In letters to familiar correspondents, Wilson continues to provide detailed updates of his activities, and in May and July 1969 he describes the severe hailstorm that occurred in Bowling Green in April of that year. Folder 8 includes further correspondence relating to Wilson's research and publications, including an update on the *Dictionary of American Regional English* to which he had contributed. Folder 9 contains a letter to Wilson's widow from Jesse Stuart regarding their friendship.

Box 9 contains material relating to Wilson's studies at Indiana University, and to his doctoral thesis on ornithologist Alexander Wilson. Folder 1 contains miscellaneous materials relating to Wilson's teachers at Indiana and the defense of his dissertation. Folder 2 contains the abstract of Wilson's dissertation and miscellaneous clippings and information on Alexander Wilson. Folders 3-4 contain the typescript of Wilson's dissertation, and Folders 5 and 6 contain typescripted compilations of Alexander Wilson's writings.

Box 10 contains materials relating to Wilson's ornithological studies in south central Kentucky. Included (Folders 1-3) are research data, notes, and published and unpublished materials relating to *Birds of South-Central Kentucky* and *Birds of Bowling Green, Kentucky*; also included (Folders 4-7) are data and publications relating to Wilson's studies of the transient bird habitats on the C. U. McElroy and Chaney farms near Woodburn, Kentucky (the "Woodburn Lakes"). Folder 2 includes addresses on his studies delivered at various clubs and ornithological society meetings, and a review of the first forty years of the Kentucky Ornithological Society.

Box 11 contains collected articles and addresses by Wilson on ornithology, including the subject of his dissertation, Alexander Wilson (Folders 1-3). Also included (Folder 4) are miscellaneous materials relating to the Kentucky Ornithological Society, including its first (1924) annual meeting minutes and fortieth anniversary (1963) materials. Other miscellaneous ornithological notes, data and checklists are in Folder 5.

Box 12 contains research data and notes relating to Wilson's studies of the ornithology and folkways of the Mammoth Cave region. Notes outlining the scope and objective of his studies are in Folder 1. Collected data, notes and studies relating to ornithology are in Folders

2-4. Wilson's data and writings on the region's speech characteristics, local place names and surnames, sayings, folklore and folkways are in Folders 5-10. Of interest (Folder 6) is a collection of obscenities gathered mostly from employees of Mammoth Cave National Park. More general notes and writings on the study of regional speech, including testing materials, are in Folders 11-13.

Box 13 contains Wilson's miscellaneous notes, writing and speeches on ornithology and folklore, and photographs. Included are articles on Calloway County ornithology and animal lore (Folder 1); artwork for *Fidelity Folks* by WKU art faculty member Ruth Hines Temple (Folder 2); collected articles, speeches and radio broadcasts on folklore (Folder 3); collected columns "Birds and the Out-of Doors" and "A Number of Things" that ran in Bowling Green newspapers in the 1920s (Folder 4); an incomplete collection (both published and in typescript) of "Tidbits of Kentucky Folklore" columns, and notes about the indexing project (Folders 5-7); and miscellaneous notes on folklore and folk beliefs (Folder 8). Copies of photographs, both of Wilson and of locations related to his studies, are in Folders 9-11. The original photographs have been transferred to the Special Collections Library.

Boxes 14-16 contain reel-to-reel audiotapes, mostly of Gordon Wilson's interviews of Mammoth Cave area residents in connection with his speech and folklore studies. Wilson's tape indexes, and an alphabetical list of interviewees, are in Box 14, Folder 1. A small number of these recordings have been digitized and saved onto compact disc. Also included are some recordings of speeches by Wilson.

Boxes 17-21 contain Wilson's ornithological research data. A summary of the materials is in Box 17, Folder 1. Boxes 17-20 contain thousands of data cards from 1918-1970 used by Wilson and others to record bird sightings. The cards are grouped by year and record the date, time span, locality, observer, and species of birds observed. Many record sightings at Mammoth Cave National Park, and others record sightings in Bowling Green and Warren County. The cards have not been individually counted, and consequently are not included in the item count for this collection. Box 21 contains data cards representing mostly annual compilations of bird sightings in Bowling Green, Warren County and Mammoth Cave National Park. These cards have not been individually counted, and are not included in the item count for the collection.

Boxes 22-42 contain Wilson's research data on the folkways of the Mammoth Cave region. Most of the material consists of word usages, definitions and other aspects of speech, as well as folk beliefs, remedies and sayings. The data is recorded on 3X5-inch cards or on slips of paper. The cards have not been individually counted, and consequently are not included in the item count for this collection.

SHELF LIST

BOX 1	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Biographical, speeches	1913-1984	110 items
Folder 1	Inventory and correspondence regarding donation of collection		9 items
Folder 2	Clippings and biographical data about Wilson	1958-1984	31 items

Folder 3	Wilson family data and genealogical correspondence	1938-1964,	27 items
Folder 4	Lists of published writing and notes on activities	1928-1969,	12 items
Folder 5	Cards, certificates, mementoes	1913-1967,	14 items
Folder 6	Commencement addresses for schools	1919-1941	1 item
Folder 7	Commencement addresses for schools	1942-1966	1 item
Folder 8	Leiper English Club addresses	1945-1969	1 item
Folder 9	Remarks made at Gordon Wilson Award presentations	1959-1969	1 item
Folder 10	Speeches and articles prepared for clubs, associations, <i>College Heights Herald</i>	1916-1964	1 item
Folder 11	Miscellaneous speeches and writing	1936-1962	1 item
Folder 12	Miscellaneous speeches and writing	1967	11 items
BOX 2	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Diaries	1905-1909	14 items
Folder 1	Diaries	1905	2 items
Folder 2	Diaries	1905	2 items
Folder 3	Diaries	1906-1907	2 items
Folder 4	Diaries	1907-1908	4 items
Folder 5	Diaries	1908-1909	4 items
BOX 3	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Diaries	1909-1913	26 items
Folder 1	Diaries	1909	4 items
Folder 2	“The Mammoth Cave Excursion” (extract from diary)	1909	1 item
Folder 3	Diaries	1909-1910	4 items

Folder 4	Diaries	1910	4 items
Folder 5	Diaries	1910-1911	4 items
Folder 6	Diaries	1911	4 items
Folder 7	Diaries	1911-1913	5 items
BOX 4	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Diaries	1917-1919	9 items
Folder 1	Diaries	1917	3 items
Folder 2	Diaries	1918-1919	6 items
BOX 5	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – “Diary to Kelly”	1959-1967	6 items
Folder 1	“Diary to Kelly”	1959-1962	1 item
Folder 2	“Diary to Kelly”	1963	1 item
Folder 3	“Diary to Kelly”	1964	1 item
Folder 4	“Diary to Kelly”	1965	1 item
Folder 5	“Diary to Kelly”	1966	1 item
Folder 6	“Diary to Kelly”	1967	1 item
BOX 6	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – “Diary to Kelly”	1968-1969	2 items
Folder 1	“Diary to Kelly”	1968	1 item
Folder 2	“Diary to Kelly”	1969	1 item
BOX 7	Wilson, Alexander Gordon - Autobiographical	n.d.	14 items
Folder 1	Autobiographical manuscript – Family and childhood	n.d.	1 item
Folder 2	Autobiographical manuscript – Childhood and Fidelity, Kentucky	n.d.	1 item

Folder 3	Autobiographical manuscript – Childhood and faith	n.d.	1 item
Folder 4	Autobiographical manuscript – Education	n.d.	1 item
Folder 5	Autobiographical manuscript – Journalism	n.d.	1 item
Folder 6	Autobiographical manuscript – “Ups and downs”	n.d.	1 item
Folder 7	Autobiographical manuscript – Teaching	n.d.	1 item
Folder 8	Autobiographical manuscript – Ornithology interests	n.d.	1 item
Folder 9	Autobiographical manuscript – Character sketches; miscellaneous	n.d.	1 item
Folder 10	Autobiographical manuscript – Notes on revisions	n.d.	5 items
BOX 8	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Correspondence	1931-1972	534 items
Folder 1	Correspondence	1931-1961	63 items
Folder 2	Correspondence	1962	105 items
Folder 3	Correspondence	1963-1965	53 items
Folder 4	Correspondence	1966	40 items
Folder 5	Correspondence	1967	62 items
Folder 6	Correspondence	1968	91 items
Folder 7	Correspondence	1969	104 items
Folder 8	Correspondence	1970, n.d.	15 items
Folder 9	Avis (Hines) Wilson – Letter from Jesse Stuart	1972	1 item
BOX 9	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Ph.D. dissertation	1930-1968	25 items
Folder 1	Indiana University – newsletters, etc.	1930-1968	5 items

Folder 2	“Alexander Wilson: Poet – Essayist – Ornithologist,” Ph.D. dissertation abstract; miscellaneous articles and notes on Alexander Wilson	1930-1962, n.d.	16 items
Folder 3	“Alexander Wilson: Poet – Essayist – Ornithologist,” Ph.D. dissertation (pp. 1-185)	1930	1 item
Folder 4	“Alexander Wilson: Poet – Essayist – Ornithologist,” Ph.D. dissertation (pp. 186-315)	1930	1 item
Folder 5	“Some Miscellaneous Writings of Alexander Wilson”	n.d.	1 item
Folder 6	“Selections from the Writings of Alexander Wilson”	n.d.	1 item
BOX 10	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Ornithology	1922-1969	14 items
Folder 1	<i>Birds of South-Central Kentucky</i>	1962, 1969	4 items
Folder 2	<i>Birds of South-Central Kentucky</i> – Research and unedited manuscript	1962, n.d.	47 items
Folder 3	<i>Birds of Bowling Green, Kentucky</i>	1922	3 items
Folder 4	Woodburn Lakes studies (McElroy and Chaney farms)	1927-1939	1 item
Folder 5	Woodburn Lakes studies (McElroy and Chaney farms)	1940-1959	1 item
Folder 6	Woodburn Lakes studies (McElroy and Chaney farms)	1960-1968	1 item
Folder 7	Woodburn Lakes – Published articles	1929, n.d.	4 items
BOX 11	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Ornithology	1922-1970	31 items
Folder 1	Ornithology – Addresses and articles	1925-1952,	1 item
Folder 2	Ornithology – Addresses and articles	1934-1945,	1 item
Folder 3	Ornithology – Articles	1922-1965	4 items
Folder 4	Kentucky Ornithological Society – Miscellaneous materials	1924-1970,	9 items

Folder 5	Ornithology – Miscellaneous materials	1939-1970,	17 items
BOX 12	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region – Ornithology and folkways	1938-1969	78 items
Folder 1	“My Mammoth Cave National Park Studies” and related notes	n.d.	9 items
Folder 2	Mammoth Cave National Park – Data, studies and notes relating to ornithology	1938-1968	1 item
Folder 3	Mammoth Cave National Park – Data, studies and notes relating to ornithology	1938-1969	1 item
Folder 4	Ornithology of Mammoth Cave National Park – Published materials	1941-1958	9 items
Folder 5	Mammoth Cave region – Place names	1967, n.d.	5 items
Folder 6	Mammoth Cave region – Speech characteristics	n.d.	9 items
Folder 7	Mammoth Cave region – Surnames and speech	n.d.	4 items
Folder 8	Folkways of Mammoth Cave region – Published articles	1962-1968	7 items
Folder 9	Mammoth Cave folkways studies – Articles, outlines, speeches	1950-1968	1 item
Folder 10	Mammoth Cave region and folkways – Writings	1969, n.d.	5 items
Folder 11	Regional speech – Writings	1969, n.d.	5 items
Folder 12	Regional speech – Notes and miscellaneous	n.d.	11 items
Folder 13	Regional speech – Testing materials	1969, n.d.	11 items
BOX 13	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Folklore, miscellaneous writings, photographs	1923-1969	63 items
Folder 1	Calloway County, Kentucky – Articles on animal lore and ornithology	1923, 1956	2 items

Folder 2	<i>Fidelity Folks</i> – correspondence, copyright registration, artwork	1946	4 items
Folder 3	Folklore – Articles, addresses, radio broadcasts	1928-1951	1 item
Folder 4	“Birds and the Out-of-doors”; “A Number of Things”; Miscellaneous sketches	1926-1928	1 item
Folder 5	Memoranda regarding indexing of “Tidbits of Kentucky Folklore”	n.d.	4 items
Folder 6	“Tidbits of Kentucky Folklore” – Typescripts of #1683-1688; #1801-1850)	n.d.	1 item
Folder 7	Newspaper articles about folklore, most published as “Tidbits of Kentucky Folklore”	1959-1968	1 item
Folder 8	Folklore – Miscellaneous notes	1969, n.d.	9 items
Folder 9	Gordon Wilson – Photos	1938-1968	22 items
Folder 10	Sally’s Rock (Warren County) – Photos	1944, n.d.	3 items
Folder 11	Photos – Miscellaneous	1937-1969	15 items
BOX 14	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Audiotapes	1963-1970	40 items
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BOX 15	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Audiotapes	1963-1970	14 items
	Tapes 38-48 Tapes CD 1-3		
BOX 16	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Audiotapes, Compact discs	1963-1970	24 items
	Tapes CD 4-8 Tapes LA 1-4		

Tapes LAs 1-3

Tapes A, B

Compact discs

BOX 17	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Bird studies – Data cards	1918-1940
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BOX 18	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Bird studies – Data cards	1941-1953
BOX 19	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Bird studies – Data cards	1954-1963
BOX 20	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Bird studies – Data cards	1964-1970
BOX 21	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Bird studies – Data cards	1912-1969
BOX 22	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data cards – Word usage, folk beliefs; folk remedies	n.d.
BOX 23	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage A-C	n.d.
BOX 24	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage C-F	n.d.
BOX 25	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage F-H	n.d.

BOX 26	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage H-M	n.d.
BOX 27	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage M-R	n.d.
BOX 28	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage R-S	n.d.
BOX 29	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage S-Z	n.d.
BOX 30	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage, folk beliefs & remedies – Plants & animals	n.d.
BOX 31	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Folk remedies; word usage	n.d.
BOX 32	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Folk remedies; word usage; folk beliefs	n.d.
BOX 33	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Folk remedies	n.d.
BOX 34	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Folk beliefs and sayings; word usage	n.d.
BOX 35	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage	n.d.

BOX 36	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Word usage; folk remedies	n.d.
BOX 37	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Place names; surnames; word usage	n.d.
BOX 38	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Folk sayings	n.d.
BOX 39	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Folk sayings; similes	n.d.
BOX 40	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Similes	n.d.
BOX 41	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Similes; folk sayings	n.d.
BOX 42	Wilson, Alexander Gordon – Mammoth Cave Region folkways – Data Cards – Folk remedies; word usage	n.d.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC RECORD

MSS WILSON, Alexander Gordon, 1905-1984
445 1888-1970

Correspondence, published and unpublished writing, and research of Alexander Gordon Wilson, faculty member in the English department of Western Kentucky University from 1915-1959. Includes genealogical and autobiographical material as well as extensive research data and writing on the ornithology of Bowling Green and Warren County, Kentucky, on folklore and linguistics, and on the ornithology and folkways of the Mammoth Cave region of Edmonson County, Kentucky.

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SEE or SEE ALSO

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See also:

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