

CYNON VALLEY HISTORY SOCIETY

CYMDEITHAS HANES CWM CYNON

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HANES

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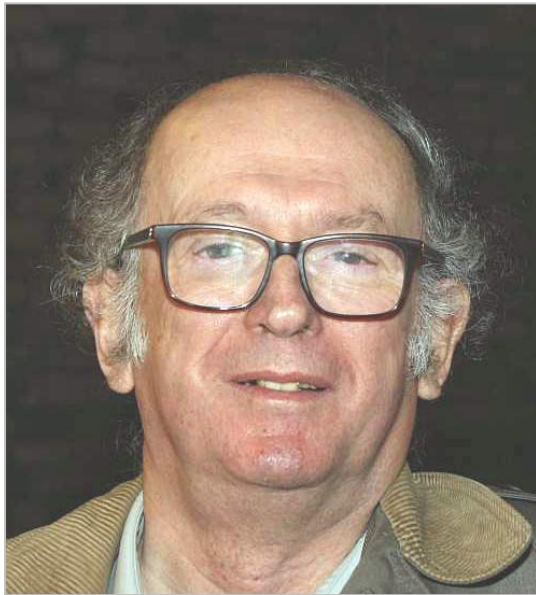
WINTER 2024

As we see the days lengthen and the wet winter losing its hold on us, we look forward to Springtime.

In this issue we look at the lives of some important people of this valley: a great activist, a painter and a historian.

Enjoy this issue.

Brian Davies: "Much more than a local historian"



Brian Davies

It is with sadness that we remember Brian who died on 4th December last year.

He was born in 1951 in Mountain Ash and his love of history started at a young age: at Mountain Ash Grammar School, Derek Thomas was such an inspirational history teacher that he had Brian and 35 pupils in his A-level class. A second influence was his uncle Bryn Davies, headmaster of Penrhiwceiber Junior School who had a knack of making distant history relevant to present day events.

Then he left Wales and went to York University to read history in 1969–72 where the introductory history lecture was given by the late Professor Gwyn Alf Williams who told the students to always challenge accepted versions of history. This would be

his watchword of life: "Always Challenge and often argue"!

Coming back to Wales in 1973, he went to Swansea University to do a postgraduate degree under the tutelage of David J.V. Jones, but he did not like that university's atmosphere. There he got involved with the Friends of Chile organisation at the time when the dictator General Pinochet seized power in a military coup. Later he joined the Wales Anti-Apartheid Movement.

From Swansea he moved to Cardiff where he became the Education Officer at the National Museum of Wales.

He was a strong Communist and contributed to *Cyffro*, the Welsh Marxist quarterly journal.

Big Pit at Blaenafon is internationally famous and much of that is due to Brian who was its first curator, there from 1981–84. He made coal mining history come alive. Not only was he concerned about Big Pit but he deeply cared about the whole town and obtained grants to renovate Blaenafon Miners Hall.

Brian although a bachelor had two babies whom he loved dearly! The first was Pontypridd Museum where he was the curator between 1984 and 2014. Once again, his great enthusiasm fired him to make it a first-class museum.

His second baby, or obsession might be a better word, was Hetty otherwise known as the Great Western Colliery Preservation Trust. The colliery site with its winding engine is situated at Trehafod, near Pontypridd. When he retired in 2014, he spent more time working there. He was the Honorary Secretary of the Trust and spent many days, or should I say about 25 years, renovating it with a group of enthusiasts. It has long been a Scheduled Grade I Ancient Monument. He also renovated an old steam-powered launch called Wide Awake at Penarth Marina.

Brian had various sides to his character: he was a champion of the oppressed who enriched the lives of thousands of people, and he had a dry, ironic, satirical sense of humour. Yet he would often argue and challenge anybody even if he was in a minority of one. He hated bureaucracy and was very much anti-establishment.

Terry Evans reminisces that Brian had an antediluvian computer which was 'maintained' locally in a Pontypridd backstreet. His Dai-cap replacements were either Cardiff or Aberdare market sourced and cost a maximum of six pounds. His LPG Land Rover conversion frequently refused to move and spectacularly combusting in 'downtown Pontypridd'. Right to the end, digital photography was resisted and his slide projector remained a feature of his public talks. He had a big collection of old SLR cameras including two Russian cameras.

He made outstanding contributions to Chartist studies in Wales and wrote several articles on this subject including some on Dr William Price, a Chartist who also re-invented cremation.

At Glyntaff Crematorium on 14th February over 100 people gathered to pay their respects to this great man. There were many tributes given.

One speaker was Robert Griffiths, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He once asked Brian why he was not a member of the Labour Party, and Brian replied that he "did not want to be part of a criminal conspiracy", which is what he thought the Labour Party was in Wales many years ago!

Brian took part in Open Doors events and led a historical tour around Treforest and once gave a lecture about Pontypridd railway station and told us some of it dated back to ancient Egypt! He meant its mock Egyptian columns which I had never noticed.

He was a very popular speaker all over south Wales and his lectures were on many and varied subjects. His last lecture at the Cynon Valley History Society was on the E. Thomas & Williams Miners Safety Lamps, which was illustrated by his collection of numerous lamps. His knowledge of their development was very impressive. There is an exhibition of these lamps at St Elvan's Church in June.

[A few weeks before his death he phoned me asking for information about the firm. Ed.]

He was as Terry Evans has said: "The finest schoolteacher who never was".

I would like to thank Ann Wilson, Alun Williams and Terry Evans for their information about Brian.

Les James has written an excellent obituary and has listed a bibliography of Brian's works in <http://thechartists.org/m25-brian-davies.html>

Ceridwen Brown by Dr Daryl Leeworthy



Ceridwen Brown, (the woman wearing spectacles), on campaign, c. 1935.

Ceridwen Thomas was born in Aberaman on 10th October 1896, the daughter of Morgan and Rachel Thomas of 27 Regent Street, later 196 Cardiff Road. In 1914, she married Edward Brown, son of Walter and Catherine Brown of Station Street, Aberdare, and moved into 194 Cardiff Road. Together they had three children – Jennie, Ronald, and Doreen.

Ronald was to serve in the International Brigades in Spain but always credited his mother with shaping his outlook. An active campaigner from the early 1920s, Ceridwen Brown was involved in the Women's Co-operative Guild, the anti-war and pro-peace movements, anti-austerity and anti-poverty action, and other forms of grassroots community organisation.

By 1926, she was recognised as the leader of the Communist women's section in the Cynon Valley as well as a founder member of the Aberdare branch of the party.

In 1929, she was put forward by the Communist Party as the first woman ever to be nominated as a parliamentary candidate for the Aberdare Constituency. As the Western Mail noted at the time, this was an important moment: "the lion's share of interest centres on the candidature of Mrs Ceridwen Brown." In the event, poverty intervened, and she was

compelled to withdraw for personal reasons. Two years later she was nominated again. However ill from starvation and grieving the loss of her daughter, she withdrew leaving the sitting M.P. George Hall, to be returned unopposed.

During the 1930s, Ceridwen Brown stood multiple times for election onto Aberdare Urban District Council, achieving a highwater mark of more than 1,300 votes in 1935. She raised money to support the Republican Government during the Spanish Civil War and also took part in the Hunger Marches. Here are two descriptions of those activities:

In the winter of 1935, she was a desperately thin, sallow-faced woman suffering from the grief of having buried her eldest child. She was not yet 40. With her family out of work and with little money coming in, she was also starving. Family meals were limited, her own food even more so, as food was redirected to her children. Yet, on the morning of 4th February, having walked to Merthyr Tydfil over the mountain from Aberdare, it was to her that a crowd of nearly 3,000 men and women looked for leadership and guidance. After almost a decade and a half of poverty, the crowd had gathered outside Iscoed House, the offices of the Unemployment Assistance Board in protest at the Means Test to exact revenge on the system which oppressed them. The crowd went inside the building and destroyed as much as possible. The police tried to intervene, but the crowd recognised only the leadership of Ceridwen Brown and one other: Jack Williams of Dowlais, who was to fight in Spain.

The previous day tens of thousands of people all over Britain marched against the new Means Test regulations. Ceridwen Brown wearing her trademark trench coat and a red beret, a sartorial style picked up in Moscow and brought back as a symbol of revolutionary devotion, led the 50,000 strong crowd who marched through the Cynon valley, many of them tramping in the wind and rain.

After the Second World War, she moved into peace campaigning and fundraising for the fight against cancer — a disease which claimed two of her three children. Ceridwen Brown died in 1976, a few months short of her eightieth birthday — a remarkable age for someone who had spent almost her entire adult life at or below the poverty line.

Her legacy remains that of encouraging women, in particular, into public life, and providing or encouraging the tools for them to do so. As she put it in 1950, in a speech captured by the Aberdare Leader, "there needs to be more support [given] to women to take a more active interest in public affairs." Despite many personal tragedies, it was to this public purpose that she devoted her life, and so it is for this reason — along with the rich catalogue of activity detailed above — that Ceridwen Brown is to be honoured and remembered with a blue plaque to be unveiled at a ceremony on Friday 8th March at St Elvan's Church.

Source : Dr Leeworthy's book *Causes in Common: Welsh women and the struggle for social democracy*.

Nicholas Evans (1907–2004) Painter Extra-Ordinary

How did a man who was a miner and a preacher become one of Wales 'best painters in the twentieth century.' ?

This man was Nicholas Evans who was born on 10th January 1907 in Aberdare. He was the second child born to his father, a miner David Nicholas Evans and his wife Mary Ellen, who had been a pit girl at Blaennant Colliery on the Merthyr Mountain.

At the age of one year old, he won first prize in a beautiful baby contest!

For a short time, he worked down the same coal mine as Edwin Greening.

At the age of 16, Nicholas lost his father, aged 43, in a mining accident at Fforchaman Colliery, Cwmaman, Aberdare. He left a widow with three young sons: Nicholas, Gilbert, William Henry and a baby daughter Estelle.



Nicholas Evans

Seeing his father lying dead on the kitchen table made Nicholas decide to leave mining which he did, and he joined the Great Western Railway.

At that same age Nicholas underwent a Christian conversion experience. After that he joined the Apostolic church and became a local preacher.

Throughout his life Nicholas preached. In the early days when he could not afford the bus fare, he walked from Aberdare over the mountain to chapels in the Rhondda Valley, returning on foot. The next morning, he would go to work. He said, "God is no man's debtor".

On the GWR he became an engine driver. He did not like the railway, but he never took a day off except when he was ill with pneumonia, and he continued working until he retired.

Nicholas married an Aberdare lady Annie Maud Lambert, and they had a daughter Rhoda and two sons Victor and Peter.

He never had an art lesson in his life, but he always enjoyed drawing and painting. His gift remained dormant until it burst forth, as from nowhere, when he was 70 years of age.

How did it all begin? Rhoda Evans states that: "In 1978 he was awarded £1,000 by the Welsh Arts Council to enable him to buy materials and to launch exhibitions. As a result of this award, he held a one-man exhibition at The Oriel Gallery during September/October that year and simultaneously, (as he had sufficient paintings), at a one-man show at Browse & Darby, Old Bond Street, London.

His pictures depict mining life during the 1920s and in some cases much earlier, working in deplorable conditions in cramped positions, the soup kitchens, lockouts and disasters. They look very bleak and tragic. His miners' faces are stylized with deep sunken, sad eyes, long noses with hard dark outlines. It seemed many people found his work gloomy and difficult, but he was quoted as saying, "the pictures create a disturbance which causes you to think. I don't like them either,

but I am a slave to them”.

For his research he visited every coal mine in south Wales, and he also built up a collection of over 200 items connected with them.

He also painted some religious works including some of the Holocaust.

In the beginning, his paintings were of a uniform size — four feet square as they were painted on hardboard, prepared with white emulsion paint. The only colours he ever used in his paintings was Winsor and Newton blue/black, which he applied with his fingers and a rag. This technique took a long time to perfect, and he used that technique as initially he could not afford brushes.

Evans lived to paint, working for long hours and often into the night. It seemed he was driven to capture or curate the dark and difficult images of mining. In fact, in an interview with Bernard O’Higgins in 1979 for “Art Log”, he said: “I paint for the glory of God and then I paint for the miner. I want to draw attention to how the miner suffered, how things were in the past so we can improve things for the future. I am bringing back the past so that it will not happen again. I am a miners’ historian and do not want to paint anything else.”

His paintings of the cruel, bleak, hard lives of the miners tell in pictures what Bert Coombes records in his book “These Poor Hands.”

One would expect Nicholas to be like the miners in his paintings, tragic, bleak and miserable but in fact he was the opposite: he was warm, funny, exuberant and joyful, such a contrast to the images he painted.

Professor John Harvey, Director of the Centre for Studies in the Visual Culture of Religion at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, has described Nicholas as “a unique artist in Wales and unique in the genre of industrial painting, largely because I see him as fundamentally a religious artist and as one of the finest painters Wales has ever produced!”

There are a few of his paintings on display in the Cynon Valley Museum in Aberdare.

Sources: *Symphonies in Black* by Nicholas & Rhoda Evans. My thanks to Elizabeth Blinkhorn for some of this information.

40th Anniversary of the 1984/85 Miners Strike by Rod Jenkins

This is a project entitled *The Voices from Underground* aimed at marking the anniversary of the miners’ strike through a range of arts and community projects throughout the period from March 2024 through to March 2025. Over two hundred people came to the launch which took place at St Elvan’s Church on 17th February.

The event opened featuring the Lewis Merthyr Brass Band and the Pelenna Male Voice Choir followed by a range of guest speakers.

Beth Winter, M.P., gave a passionate speech about the strikes and their legacy, and Darren Macey, RCT Heritage Officer, gave a talk in the same vein about the 1972/74 Miners’ Strike.

Ceri Thompson, the curator of Big Pit talked about his experiences as a miner at Cwm Colliery. He talked about his time on the picket line and being bussed to England because in south Wales there was no strike breaking.

Ann Jones spoke about life as a miner’s wife. The hardship, what it was like at

Christmas, and the community food banks. Her husband was a miner at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun. Her story can be found on the radio programme *The Miners' Strike: Return Journey*. Her story is in part 4 of a series of 5, which can be found on BBC Sounds. This programme covers the various people involved in the strike and makes fascinating listening. Also, there is *Miners' Strike : A Frontline Story* on BBC iPlayer.

Owen Owen by John Driskell

My maternal grandfather, Owen Owen, was born around 1874 and wanting a better life, in the 1890s worked his passage to New York on a steamer, sleeping on a mattress on the deck. Then he crossed the continent by train, working in Colorado for a while before continuing to the west coast. He saw the Grand Canyon, when in those days, it was a two-stagecoach ride from the railway.



Owen Owen

There are more tales: He was captured by Native Americans, found a human finger in a Chinese meal, and fished with dynamite. There was also a mention of a railway journey toilet stop somewhere in the forests of the Rocky Mountains. As the train started to build up steam to continue its journey, the passengers heard the cries of a desperate man who had gone too far into the forest to protect his privacy and had got lost. He was shouting at the top of his voice, terrified of being left alone in the wilderness. "A man lost!" and then adding to the amusement of those on the train – "and a good man too!"

Later Owen went further west to a very small town called Carbonado, fifty miles southeast from Seattle in Washington State, where he worked in a coal mine. Other Welsh miners must have worked in this town, as in the town's cemetery, there are a large number of headstones with Welsh names, including one with this inscription:

<p>Er serchog gof am John Williams Ganwyd ef yn Aberaman Cymru yn 1860 Bu farw Carbonado, Was. Mehafin 23ain 1909</p>	<p>In loving memory of John Williams He was born in Aberaman, Wales in 1860 He died in Carbonaro, Was. June 23rd, 1909</p>
Original inscription	Translation



John J. Williams headstone,
Carbonado, WA.

The Welsh language newspaper, *Tarian Y Gweithiwr*, 5th August 1909, recorded the death of this Aberaman emigrant, commenting that he was known as 'Jack Great Northern', and was the son of John Williams, Griffin Inn, Aberaman. He moved to the USA in the 1880s and travelled a great deal there. He was a miner with no wife or children. Indeed, his wife had died before he emigrated. In the United States, he led a relatively free and easy life and was a member of The Order of Knights of Pythias who handled his funeral arrangements.

Returning to Owen Owen, after three years abroad he came back to Wales.

David Leslie Davies adds:

Owen Owen's family came from the Ystradgynlais area and came to live in Cwmaman. He and his brother Daniel built and settled at both 18 and 19 Llanwynno Road and named them both 'Cynlais Villas' after their place of origin. Owen married his wife Gwenllian around 1899.

Not wanting to go back underground, he opened well-known provisions stall at Aberdare Market as well as an early van-delivery business from there during the 1930s. As a local outlet, he ran a grocer/fruiter's shop on Fforchaman Road in his home village. The family were Welsh speakers and attended Seion Welsh Baptist chapel.



Owen Owen's delivery van

[Owen died in February 1952 Ed.]

Rose Cottage, 428 Cardiff Road, Aberdare: The home of Rev. Dr. Thomas Price.

Last November, the owner, Don Wittridge kindly showed some members of the society's committee around his house, Rose Cottage. It was fascinating to see the house where Rev Price lived, as he was one of the most important figures in the history of the town during the nineteenth century. He was the minister of Calfaria Chapel in Monk Street, Aberdare.

He married Ann Gilbert, (née David), a widow, in 1847 who was the heiress to the David family whose fortunes were made by the profits of the coal mines on the Abernant-y-groes estate, which were owned by her family and Thomas Wayne. With this money the two-storey house was built in 1846.

When the houses across the Cardiff Rd were built, he could not see his beautiful view northwards, so he had the third storey built.

His wife sadly died in 1849 thereafter Price lived in the house with his sister, stepson, John Gilbert Price and daughter Miss Emily Price.

At some point in time a cast iron balcony was built on the front first floor of the house, maybe for Price to address the crowds. At the back of the house a partial extension was constructed.

He died on 29th February 1888, and his daughter Emily continued to live in the house until she died in 1928. Then a Mrs Blodwen Price lived there.

Around 1943–47, James Whitaker from Cardiff bought the house and it became "Piano House", where pianos were sold. He added the double gates and pathway in the front garden to allow access for the pianos. Sadly, he demolished the balcony as he was concerned for his children's safety.

Mr and Mrs Wittridge bought the house in 2009 and have done much to keep the house as it was in Thomas Price's days. The original wooden staircase is a work of art.



Rose Cottage exterior



Rose Cottage, interior

Local History Publications

Women in Welsh Coal Mining: Tip girls in a men's world by Norena Shopland.

This is an incredibly well-researched book of a subject that has been forgotten. One of the women that she mentions is Mrs Ann Howells who died at the age of 105! The following is a summary about her from two articles from the *Aberdare Leader* of 6th June 1903 and 25th June 1904:

"One of the most interesting characters in South Wales passed away last Saturday, in the person of Mrs Anne Howells, who if she had lived until June 22, would have been 106 years old!



Group including female pit workers at Blaenant Pit or Mountain Colliery, Abernant

She was born at Abercwmboy Farm near Aberdare. She worked for many years as a pit girl doing heavy work unloading trams of coal and screening slag and refuse at the pit head of Abernant Colliery. Earlier she worked at some of the ironworks in the Aberdare valley.

She came from a family noted for their longevity. Her parents lived to a good old age and her brother reached the age of 98.

Her first husband was Mr David Lawrence. Before many years, he died leaving her a widow with five children. After forty years of widowhood, she married again, at the age of 90, [amazing! Ed.], to a Mr Thomas Howells who predeceased her by 6 years.

She remembers the battle of Waterloo and has very vivid reminiscences of the

riots in Merthyr 72 years ago, of Chartists drilling on the top of the mountain between Aberdare and Merthyr and recollects the day Dick Penderyn was hung.

Mrs Howells retains her physical senses wonderfully. Her eyesight is good, and she has never used glasses. Her mental faculties are also well preserved for her patriarchal age.

The venerable old lady was a thoroughbred Welsh woman and was unable to speak English with any degree of fluency. Thus, has been removed the oldest living landmark of old Aberdare."

Even in 1897 women were still working as tip girls on the surfaces of coal mines. Here is an excerpt from the Western Mail of 27th March and a poem from Norena Shopland's book:

"They often appear more like animated lumps of coal or clay than human forms divine. After their day's work is over and on Sundays, they carry their heads as high as duchesses. They generally spend their earnings in finery, of which they are immoderately fond. Yet they work outside in the cold and rain.

These drawbacks notwithstanding, many girls prefer roughing it in this fashion to seeking any other kind of employment. They have their independence and look down on those unfortunate girls who are employed in domestic service.

Also, their lot is ever so much better than many farmhouse servant girls in rural Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire where they are one step removed from that of slavery."

James Spinther, (1837–1914), a collier in Aberdare from 1854 to around 1859, wrote a Welsh language poem entitled *Merch Y Tip* (The Tip Girl). Here are a few lines translated into English:

Through blinding sleet and snow
A tip-girl from her work passed by,
Lonely and wet was she,
Plaintively singing to herself
Her doleful misery.
"I am the poorest loneliest lass
On God's earth ever found!"

Norena Shopland has also written another book: *The Welsh Gold King: the life of William Pritchard Morgan*. He was a Liberal Member of Parliament, MP, for Merthyr Tydfil including Aberdare from 1888 to 1900, when he was defeated, losing his seat to Keir Hardie. It is an interesting read, and Shopland describes him as "self-aggrandising, an adventurer, a shameless self-publicist and similar to Donald Trump!"

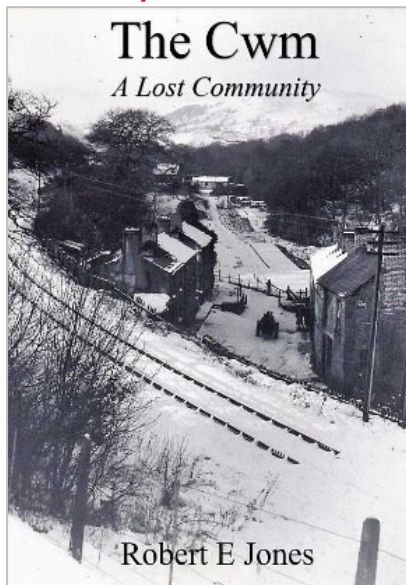
[Photo of colliery workers courtesy of RCT Libraries.]

Plygain in the Cynon Valley

David Leslie Davies has written a bilingual account of this traditional Welsh Christmas service in the Cynon Valley and beyond.

It costs £3.00 and the proceeds go to support the 2024 National Eisteddfod to be held in RCT. Copies are available from the Cynon Valley Museum.

Society News



The society is publishing a new book entitled: *The Cwm: a lost Community*, by Robert E. Jones, a CVHS committee member.

It is a 160-page history of The Cwm which was a small community located on the river Dare near St John the Baptist School.

The village lasted a hundred years from 1850 to 1955, and the book traces its history and includes stories of its residents.

The book will be launched at our monthly meeting on 7pm at Thursday 18th April at the Cynon Valley Museum, Aberdare.

Lecture Calendar

Following the untimely death of Brian Davies who was due to give our May lecture, on May 16th, James Stewart will on the same date deliver his talk entitled, *Edward Evan: Hen Dŷ Cwrdd Minister, Poet, Local Farmer, Radical*.

Abercynon during World War 2

There is an interesting website about wartime Abercynon. See

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-war-time-events-at-abercynon-1943-online>

Old Cynon Valley on film

To see these archive films search <https://bbcrewind.co.uk/>

Closure of the Gadlys Lidl Supermarket

The Lidl supermarket closed on 25th February and, with the Gadlys Convenience store having closed some time ago, there is nowhere in the Gadlys to buy food!

The plot, which was next to the long-gone Park Cinema has an interesting history. Initially, a large house, called Gadlys Cottage, was built there and occupied by Miss Wayne, a daughter of Matthew Wayne who co-founded the Gadlys ironworks.

In the early years of the twentieth century, it was the home of one of the sons of William Hodges, the outfitter and clothier of Victoria Square.

In June 1938, the house and gardens were sold to the Western Welsh Omnibus Co. for £1000, and buses from their garage in High Street were transferred to the new Gadlys garage.

This in turn closed in 1971, and the building became the Ready-Roasted Chicken factory; then an ATS tyre depot, and finally its last use was as Aberdare Corn Stores builders' merchant before making way for the Lidl store.



Gadlys Cottage



Gadlys Western Welsh Garage



Lidl Supermarket

Feedback

I would be grateful for feedback about any articles in this issue. Articles on any subject about our valley's history for possible publication are welcome.

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