

Shakespeare on the Prairie: The Shakespeare Club of Aberdeen, South Dakota

Lysbeth Em Benkert, Northern State University

Abstract

The Shakespeare Club of Aberdeen, South Dakota — a prairie town with fewer than 25,000 residents — has been meeting for 106 years. The group's carefully preserved records reveal many similarities with other women's clubs in the U.S., but also some key differences. While the Shakespeare Club has throughout its history studied Shakespeare and other figures from high culture, the group's emphasis on charity work, both locally and globally, and its interest in texts from popular culture, among other characteristics, suggest that over the years, the club has provided its members with a connection to the wider world and helped them to feel that what they themselves do matters to the world.

Located in the middle of what was once the vast American prairie, Aberdeen is a small, isolated city in the northeast corner of South Dakota. South Dakota itself is not a heavily populated state. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates its 2005 population at 775,933, which is fairly small when compared to the 5,132,799 living in Minnesota, its nearest neighbor to the east. Within that already small number, Aberdeen ranks as the third largest city in the state, boasting some 24,658 residents in 2004 — which means that the U.S. Census officially classes it as rural. It is a four-hour drive from Fargo, North Dakota; another four hours from Sioux Falls; six hours from Rapid City; and another six hours from Minneapolis. Yet for most residents within a 100-mile radius of the town, Aberdeen is the big city. A nineteen-mile drive northeast leads to Columbia, a town of 140. A twenty-mile drive straight east leads to Groton, a town of 1,351. A short twelve-mile drive to the south leads to Warner, with a population of 419 (South Dakota — Place, 2000). Many of the students in my courses at Northern State University graduated from high schools in which they were one of twenty or fewer to graduate in the same year; several of them had graduating classes with fewer than ten students. In Aberdeen, there is no professional orchestra, no professional theater, no zoo, no professional sports team. The largest store in town is Wal-Mart, and the median income is only

\$33,000 a year (Aberdeen, South Dakota 2006). Many residents in Aberdeen find it easy to feel disconnected from outside concerns because the town is so isolated geographically.

When I first moved to Aberdeen, it seemed as though I had moved into a cultural wasteland. Having grown up a short distance from Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute and Heinz Hall and then spent my graduate school years in a vibrant, culturally aware and open college town in the northwestern United States, Aberdeen looked isolated, closed-minded, and culturally homogenous. My transition was made even rougher by the cold, early winter. When I saw the snow falling outside my office window on September 23 that first year, I could almost hear the soft "snick" of the lock that closed me off from the life I had known.

Shortly after I arrived, however, I was blessed with an invitation to present a program for the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club. At the time, I had never heard of a Shakespeare Club, let alone expected to find a group of people in Aberdeen who would gather together on a regular basis to talk about Shakespeare. I had no idea what to expect when I arrived at the meeting. What I found was a small group, mostly women, who were not only pleasant company, but who also enjoyed learning, enjoyed talking about what they learned, and enjoyed finding new people who shared their excitement for learning. They were completely unaffected and friendly, both intelligent and unintimidating — qualities that immediately appealed to a shiny new assistant professor who felt more than a little out of place in her new community. Since then, I have been able to attend many meetings of the Shakespeare Club. They are one of the things I have found in Aberdeen that keep me connected to a life where learning is valued just because learning is a good thing; the club is one of the things that makes the winters not quite so unbearable.

The same reasons, perhaps, were on the minds of the women who originally founded the group. The club first met and drafted its constitution over 100 years ago, shortly after the town itself was incorporated in 1901. Its membership was relatively small at about a dozen, and they agreed to meet weekly at the members' homes to study Shakespeare and his works (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 1, 2). Over the succeeding decades, the club would thrive, growing in size to a maximum of twenty-four active members during the 1920s (vol. 2) and rising to that number again in the 1940s and 1950s (vols. 3 and 4). While membership fluctuated and the club's activities have changed in response to national concerns and local economic pressures, what remains consistent is the group's desire to stay connected with the world outside of their households and outside of South Dakota. Life on the prairie isolated these women from centers of intellectual growth and cultural stimulation, and the brutal winters could have isolated them socially. The Shakespeare Club offered not only an outlet for the social and intellectual energies of its members, but also a focus for the group's charitable impulses and political work. Through the work of the Shakespeare

Club, members could actively learn about and participate in effecting change in issues that mattered not just to Aberdeen, South Dakota, but to the nation and the world.

The club's 106 years of existence make it the oldest club in town, a fact of which the members are justifiably proud. The club celebrated its centennial in the same year as the university by sponsoring an exhibit at the local museum, hosting a guest speaker on Shakespeare through a small grant from the South Dakota Arts Council, and donating copies of their minutes to the university's archives. They also left the originals, along with a collection of program booklets, with the Dakota Prairie Museum (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001; Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 2003-2006, 2004-2005, and 2005-2006). Members see themselves as an important part of Aberdeen's history, and they have worked to foster their own intellectual development despite the obstacles of geography and demographics.

The group's longevity and careful record keeping make it appealing to a researcher, but what makes it most interesting is its difference from other groups of its kind. On the one hand, it is different than most reading or book clubs, as documented by scholars. In many such groups, such as the AAUW (American Association of University Women) Book Club, or the Book-of-the-Month Club, members share a common reading list. For most of these groups, everyone is expected to at least have attempted to read the monthly selection before coming to the meeting. If there is a single member in charge of the program for the evening, she will usually be responsible only for an introduction to the discussion — giving a brief biography of the writer whose work is to be discussed, or perhaps sharing some published book reviews in order to start a larger group discussion (Long 2003, 68). The Aberdeen Shakespeare Club more closely resembles the pattern established for women's reading groups in the late nineteenth century in which a single, designated member is solely responsible for the evening's discussion (68). If a book is to be discussed, usually one member will read the work and review it for the rest of the members. The group can then discuss the issues raised by the book, relying on the reviewer's summary and critique. Many group meetings center around a specific topic report compiled or written by one of the members (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 2004-2005, 2005-2006). The group is different than other Shakespeare clubs because its members rarely read the plays aloud together — in fact, they have not done so in decades. While the evening's program might be about some aspect of a play, the talk does not revolve around reproducing the text in the same way as did the famous Philadelphia Shakespeare Society (Savage 1952, 341). They are also not tied to discussing just Shakespeare. Currently, members agree on topics that are coordinated by the Vice President, topics which could, theoretically, cover anything. In many years, the club has decided on a theme for its programs that has nothing at all to do with Shakespeare. In 1994, for example, the group decided that all of its

programs would deal with Christopher Columbus and the Americas, in recognition of the 500th anniversary of his landing in Central America. These differences speak directly to the main, though unspoken, purpose of the group — not just to learn, though that is certainly important, but to learn about issues that matter in the world in order to stay connected to it.

According to its original constitution, whose draft date is around 1905, the purpose of the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club was and remains to help its members "derive intellectual benefit and pleasure" (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 1). Membership is conferred by invitation once a candidate has been nominated and approved by the existing membership. It was originally stipulated that there should never be fewer than twelve members, and the original dues were set at one dollar a year (vol. 1). By 1905, the club met twice monthly in the homes of its members from October through May (vol. 1), though in the 1940s the constitution was amended so that they met only once a month (vol. 3). As documented throughout the club's collection of minutes, the business portion of each meeting generally follows Robert's Rules of Order, starting with the approval of the previous meeting's minutes, moving to a reading of any club correspondence, after which the group deals with Old and then New Business. Once the business meeting concludes, the group hears a program on a designated topic by a specified member or guest, and afterwards shares refreshments and informal discussion. The club also has a tradition of producing small program booklets for its members that detail the dates, meeting places, hostesses, and program topics for the year. The careful structure of the club's meetings and attention to detail offer a good indication of how the women both wanted to take their studies seriously and to be taken seriously by others.

Another indication that the women wanted to be taken seriously as amateur scholars comes out of the close ties the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club has maintained with the city's college. In the same year that the Shakespeare Club was established, the school was officially founded as the Northern Normal and Industrial School, offering teacher certification and training in the industrial arts (*A Brief History of NSU* 2006). Of the eight charter members of the Shakespeare Club that I could locate in the 1900 U.S. Census, three were teachers, and one, Celeste Barnes, was the head librarian for Northern Normal (United States Census 1900). In the Census of 1910, I could locate ten of the club's members; once again, three were teachers — though not the same three as before, for within ten years the membership had changed almost entirely; Mrs. Barnes, however, was still a member (United States Census 1910). In 1920, I could find eighteen club members in the Census, two of whom taught at Northern Normal and one whose live-at-home daughter was a teacher. A third woman, Vera Lighthall, while not in the Census, shows up in the yearbooks of Northern Normal as an English teacher (United States Census 1920). In 1930, the most recent year for which census data are available, eighteen members were listed in the Census: of these, one member taught at

the college, while another, Mrs. Barnes, still served as the school's librarian; Vera Lighthall also remained both a club and a faculty member, though she still failed to be accounted for by the Census (United States Census 1930). In addition to these connections, the club often invited instructors from Northern to speak at their meetings and occasionally held their annual Guest Days or other special meetings in campus facilities. In fact, the club still holds its opening supper and Christmas meetings on campus (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 2005-2006).

In many ways, the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club served, and still serves, as a social club. Refreshments were and are still served after each regular meeting. In the minutes, refreshments may be referred to variously as "delicious refreshments" or even "dainty refreshments," or might be described in detail — on November 4, 1930, "seasonal refreshments were served by Mrs. Rasmussen, which consisted of pop corn and apples" (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 2). In 1910, members decided that every other meeting would offer a supper "to be served at 6:30, limited to six articles of eatables" (vol. 1). In the early years, in fact, the minutes consist mostly of descriptions of the food. On November 15, 1910, the club was treated to a "buffet luncheon of creamed potatoes, veal loaf, sandwiches, white and nut bread, jelly, cake, ice cream, and coffee," while on February 27 of the following year, "Miss Johnson was in the way of a Valentine Party, a fine luncheon of white and nut bread sandwiches, potato with baked filling, pressed chicken, pickles, Bavarian cream, cake, and coffee" was served. Some meetings, in fact, chose to forgo formal programs altogether and were instead given over to bridge, Mah Jong, or community singing.

The club's social aspect sets it apart somewhat from other early twentieth-century women's clubs. Elizabeth Long writes that, in the effort to appear more serious, "many clubs forbade extensive refreshments, and some banned them altogether" (Long 2003, 48). For the Aberdeen women, however, these social activities nourished them as much as the intellectual ones did. The prairie in the winter can be a very lonely place. Many long-time residents have stories of snow drifts piling up to second-story windows, completely blocking the first-floor entrances to houses and businesses. Planned social activities would have filled a vital need for those stuck indoors during the cold winter months.

In the 1920s and 1930s, refreshments remained a regular part of the meetings, but supper meetings would become limited to just three meetings a year: the initial club meeting in October, the Christmas Party, and Guest Day. These last two would evolve into impressive affairs before the Depression, and the Dust Bowl years shrunk them considerably. The Christmas parties were devoted to seasonal activities. As documented in its minutes, the club read Christmas stories aloud, sang Christmas carols, or listened to performances by club members. Usually, this was when

members collected items for the annual charity basket, to be given to a needy family, and exchanged gifts with one another. In 1924, the group threw a party for their children. The secretary wrote, "It was a kid party and proved one of the jolliest affairs ever given by the club," including gifts, games, and lots of sweets (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 2). In May of each year, the club hosted its annual Guest Days, meetings to which club members could each bring one or two guests. A full, formal meal was served, prefaced by an extensive musical, and sometimes dramatic, program. The culmination of these was held on May 5, 1931, when the club met at the home of Isabel Bragg, who hosted the affair with the help of a committee. The event began with music provided by a voice teacher from Northern State Teachers College, John Lukken. A club member who also taught music at the college, Miss Grace McArthur, played the piano, as did Miss Margaret Russell, the daughter of a second club member. An article in the local newspaper wrote that "to climax the affair, lunch was served on one long table which will be remembered for its artistic decorations of roses, snapdragons, and tall, lighted tapers" — a full, formal dinner for forty (vol. 2).

Despite its social aspects, however, the club's central purpose remained intellectual. Their constitutionally stated goal of "deriving intellectual benefit," however, encompassed a broad range of possibilities, a range that changed as members came and went and as national concerns shifted. While minutes of the group's meetings before 1907 are lost, and for a few years afterward are a little sketchy and at times difficult to read, the club's records since have been meticulously maintained. The picture that emerges from these later records shows a group solidly in the tradition of the ladies' clubs, as described by Elizabeth Long (2003), which focused not only on intellectual development, but also on social activism. In 1907, the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club had nineteen active members. That year, they participated in dramatizations and/or readings of *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*. In addition to their literary programs, however, the business meetings approved a two-dollar scholarship for a girl to study in Oxford, England, paid dues for membership into the State Federation of Women's Clubs, and directed a letter to be written to state representatives about a pending bill on child labor (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 1). This mix of literary, charitable, and political activities faithfully represents the Shakespeare Club throughout its first fifty years.

Charitable work has always been a strong component of the group's activity, even though it is never mentioned in the constitution. In a sense, these women saw themselves as active nurturers for not only their own households, but also the community at large, and their outreach work kept them directly connected to that broader group. Once again, this is consistent with other women's clubs discussed by Elizabeth Long. During their 1911-1912 season, the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club gave \$4.50 to the Salvation Army, and individual members pledged money to the YWCA

(Young Women's Christian Association). Over the 1914-1915 season, the club collected \$60.50 for a French orphan and gave \$20 to Near East relief. The following year, they donated money for a children's table at the library. In 1917-1918, they bought curtains for the YWCA, while once again giving money to the Salvation Army to "distribute to the poor" (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 1). In 1918, the club voted to "adopt a French orphan" in honor of a club member who was about to leave Aberdeen for an extended visit to Europe. Presumably, this meant that they sent money to the orphanage for the child's upkeep, but the minutes seem to imply that they actually picked a specific child for this adoption, a little boy whose name is illegible in the records. In November, they began collecting money for the child, and by March had accumulated \$36.50 (vol. 1). By early 1920, there was apparently some concern about where the club's money was going since it was "moved and seconded that further investigation be made concerning our French orphan" (vol. 1). This issue did not resolve itself until November of that year, when "a letter concerning our French orphan had been received from the NY Board," and in January of 1921, they received and read at their meeting letters that were purportedly from "their" orphan. Curiously, this note was the last mention of the orphan in the club minutes.

Finally, the First World War clearly had an impact on the priorities of the women. The minutes of the opening meeting in October, 1918 state that "each member will be responsible for the program once during the year and will be free the rest of the time to do other war work" (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 1). Club members kept their minds on Europe well after the war was over, too, sending money in the early 1920s to fund Near East and Armenian relief funds.

Locally, the group exerted energies in a variety of causes. In 1923, the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club began a thirty-seven-year tradition of gathering together groceries and other items for a Christmas basket for a "worthy" poor family in the area. In the 1930s, the group also supported the local Girl Scouts and the YWCA to send a "poor girl to camp" (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 2). The club also urged members to donate jelly to St. Luke's and Lincoln Hospitals. However, the minutes from this period also show evidence of the financial stress that hit the Dakotas so hard during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl years. By 1924, the yearly dues had crept up to \$2.50 a year, a fairly steep sum for the 1920s, which seems to indicate the members' secure financial positions within the community. Two years after the stock market crashed (1931), though, dues were lowered by fifty cents, and the following year were lowered again by \$1.50 to just fifty cents a year, where they would stay until 1944-1945. The club also seems to have rationed its charitable donations during these years. In 1931, the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club chose to send the annual charity basket of groceries to the Salvation Army rather than making an additional cash donation, and several requests for money received by the club were tabled rather than acted on:

A request from the Girl Scouts for six dollars was tabled in 1933, as was another request in April of the following year. In 1935, the club went ahead and decided to collect twenty-five cents from each member for the Girl Scouts, but the minutes carefully noted that "it was charitably discussed as our finances are critical" (vol. 2).

As one might expect, the group's charitable work increased in the 1940s and remained steady through the 1950s as the nation's economy improved. Money for the Girl Scouts and the Girl Reserve (later the Y-Teens) became a reliable yearly expense, as did donations of time and money to World War II causes. After the war, the club's work was wide-ranging and included cash donations to a library building project, a rural school milk fund, the March of Dimes, and clothes for needy children. They also donated their time, and for many years committed themselves to visit elderly patients confined to a local rest home, sending them birthday and Valentine's Day cards, as well. While they paid these visits, they worked with the City Federation of Women's Clubs to improve cleanliness and care at the facility (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 3).

The political interests of the Shakespeare Club members were just as wide-ranging as their charitable work. Many women's groups used their organizational skills and the power of their numbers to gain a public voice in an era that would have preferred they remain silent (Long 2003, 52-58). In the years following the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the members of the Shakespeare Club were directly solicited to become involved in state politics. Members actively supported women's participation in politics as offering a potential for positive social change. In March of 1923, "Mrs. Smith from Deadwood spoke a few moments on the menace of a certain candidate for governor and urged the women actively to support a credible woman" (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 2). They were asked to support a state bill amending the county library law in 1921. That same year, in a move that seems inconsistent with its other political and charitable works, the club voted to endorse a state bill to "segregate the feeble-minded." However, this endorsement is consistent with the mood of many intellectuals in the United States in the 1920s who felt that eugenics offered the chance for positive social engineering. Like many outside of South Dakota, the women of the Shakespeare Club saw themselves as part of a force for positive social changes, changes which included improving child labor laws, charity for the honest working poor, and "improvements" to the genetic pool. Like many optimistic intellectuals, they had not yet seen these theories put into real practice, as they were by the Nazis, and still felt that eugenics offered scientific guidance for social engineering.

During the early years of the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club, political issues also integrated themselves smoothly into the club's meetings, furnishing program topics nearly as often as did literary pursuits. These topics directly reflected current national and international

concerns. From 1917 through the spring of 1919, the club's programs were dominated by reports on international affairs. Topics of programs during this period included German philosophy, the German government, Turkey, Greece, Russia, and "The Political Situation in Europe and the U.S." (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 1). During the 1920s and early 1930s, the calendar of literary programs was interspersed with reports on topics such as "The Problem of Social Welfare" (vol. 1), a "discussion of spirituality" (vol. 2), "Americanization" (vol. 2), "The Labor Problem" (vol. 2), and "World Peace" (vol. 2). The year 1925 was devoted entirely to programs on Latin America, and each member was assigned a separate South American country on which to report. Similarly, 1929-1930 was devoted entirely to programs about Russian history, politics and culture, while 1931-32 was devoted entirely to India. The women were actively reaching out to learn about other cultures and to imagine life beyond the prairie. At one meeting in February of 1927, they invited a Chinese immigrant to speak to the group about Chinese customs and show them some items family members had sent to him from China (vol. 2).

After the early 1930s, topics such as these fade to the background for nearly a decade, until the Second World War once again prompted the club to return to current affairs in their program schedules. Here their topics included "Social Service Work" (1940), "Efforts of International Peace Past and Present" (1941), "Women and War Work" (1942), "Obstacles and Difficulties to a Unified Western Hemisphere" (1943), "Feeding a Hungry World" (1943), "The Motherland, Finding a Jewish Settlement in Australia" (1943), "Post War Industry" (1944), and "Women Doctors in the War, especially Russian" (1944). Once again, the club members looked for ways to connect themselves to and understand the world outside of Aberdeen in order to overcome the isolation of home and rural life.

The majority of the Shakespeare Club's meetings, however, were literary in emphasis, although once again, the club never limited its scope, keeping true to its general purpose to "derive intellectual benefit and pleasure" in the best way members saw fit. As such, in the first fifty years of club minutes available that listed program topics (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vols. 1-3), I counted only forty-three programs devoted primarily to the study of Shakespeare. Some of these programs consisted of reports on aspects of the plays or Shakespeare's life — "Clowns in Shakespeare," "Lovers in Shakespeare," "Education in Shakespeare's Time" — and a few consisted of meetings set aside to read plays aloud and discuss them.

Aside from these, topics of the group's literary programs crossed a wide spectrum, from the unquestionably literary to the decidedly popular. At one end of this spectrum, the club devoted the entire spring of 1917 to the study of Goethe's *Faust* and the opera based on it. Among the programs were reports on the life of Goethe, "The Origin and Chronology of Faust," "Grand Opera to the

Musical Person," and "Grand Opera to the Average Person" — this last was a magazine article that was read aloud to the group. The study culminated in April with a supper at a local tea room, after which the members traveled to the house of Lela Finch, where they listened to selections of the opera on a Victrola (Aberdeen Shakespeare Club 1901-2001, vol. 2). In this same vein, the club often heard reports on or reviews of works by famous authors, both historical and contemporary. In 1921, they heard reviews of works by Sherwood Anderson, an author once praised as "America's most distinctive novelist" by writer H. L. Menken. In 1923, they focused their studies on modern drama, opening the year with a program titled "The Early History of American Drama" and hearing reviews and summaries of plays throughout the year, even reading aloud at least one one-act play (vol. 2). The 1930s devoted several programs to Pearl Buck, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Good Earth*. In 1945, the group discussed Nobel Prize winner Gabriella Minstral (vol. 3).

Another quality that may distinguish the Aberdeen club from most women's literary clubs is their willingness to discuss non-literary reading. Many of the clubs described by Elizabeth Long focused solely on works from the established literary canon: "Popular culture was almost entirely absent from clubs' programs; the same was true of most all avant-garde literature" (Long 2003, 45). The women in Aberdeen, however, often discussed readings from popular culture. Between 1921 and 1935, librarian Celeste Barnes offered at least eight programs in which she recommended to members books from those that had been published recently. These programs were such a regular occurrence that by 1934 they were referred to by the secretary as "Mrs. Barnes [*sic*] book talk." She also offered more than once programs that examined magazines and recommended to the ladies which ones were worthwhile. In addition, I found at least three programs during the first thirty years of the group devoted to reviews of plays currently in production on Broadway. In its quest to learn about the world outside of Aberdeen, the Shakespeare Club looked everywhere for its resources.

What these wide-ranging programs tried to do consistently was to help keep members connected with the world outside of Aberdeen, to give them something that an isolated, rural town could not. Certainly, it appears that, in the 1920s at least, membership in the club, to a certain extent, might have been about social status. These were women whose names were mentioned in the newspaper and who attended meetings of the City, District, and State Federation of Women's Clubs. Yet meetings of the Shakespeare Club might also have lessened the cabin fever just enough on those nights like January 22, 1935, when the club secretary noted that "the thermometer registered 24 degrees below so all members who did not come are forgiven." Every program, whether it focused on Shakespeare, other literary concerns, political issues, or popular culture, seems to return to this need, and it ties in particularly well with the demographic make-up of the club members during those early years. Of the thirty-nine members listed in the club's minutes whom I could locate in

the U.S. Census — in 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 — only five were born in South Dakota. Every other member had moved to South Dakota from another state or from Canada.

Because of their geographical displacement, I believe, the women of the Aberdeen Shakespeare Club wanted to maintain a sense that they were still a part of the world outside of South Dakota and that what they did mattered to the world. Even during their opening meetings in October, for which there would be no set program, members looked for ways to connect to the outside by sharing vacation stories. Frequently, entire programs were devoted to travelogues by members or their friends, programs in which the group leader for the day would recount recent trips — trips to New York, to Seattle, to Texas, and to England. Reading, talking about the world outside of South Dakota, and engaging in charitable works enabled these women to feel that what they did mattered, that their lives might be more than they appeared to be, and that even though they lived in an isolated prairie town, they were still part of something larger than themselves.

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