GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

AMONG THE MAGDALEN ISLANDS
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From his 1911 book, "THROUGH THE HEART OF CANADA", Frank Yeigh has left us the following account of the Magdalen Islands more than 80 years ago.

Ken Annett

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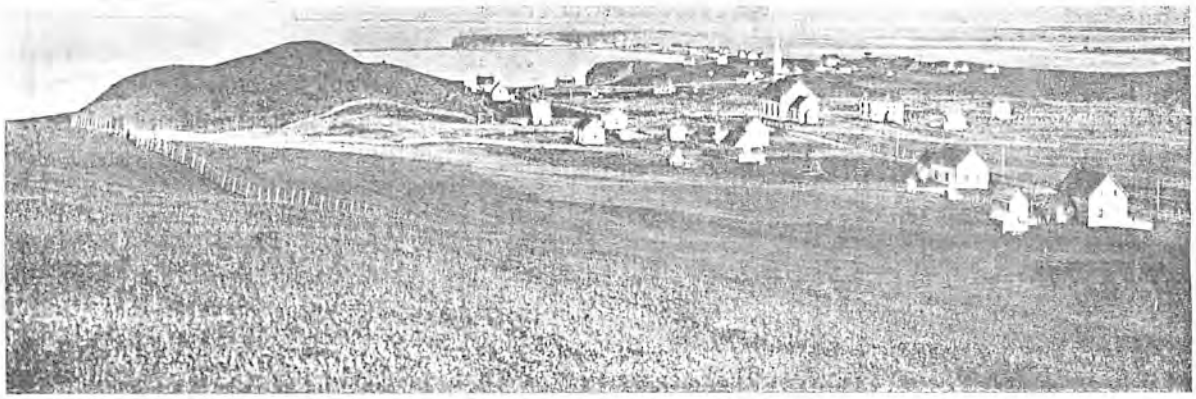
PREFACE

Articles on the Magdalen Islands presented in previous articles of the "GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" series include:

* Dr.John Mason Clarke's account of the Islands - Article #134.
* Victoria Hayward's article on her visit to the Islands in the early 1920's,entitled "THE NECKLACE". Article #170.
* A 1777 MAGDALEN ISLANDS DIARY - a remarkable,day by day,diary of life on the Islands in the era of the walrus.Article #183.
* The early career of the Rev.Felix Boyle,M.A.,the first resident Anglican clergyman on the Magdalens. Article #236.
* 1850 baptismal records of Bishop G.J.Mountain. Article #268.

As the views of various witnesses add colour and richness to the remarkable story of life on the Magdalens, GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY is pleased to include the following account of Frank Yeigh from his 1911 volume, "THROUGH THE HEART OF CANADA". Much has changed on the Magdalens since 1911. This account will provide a measure of those changes that have come to Island life over the past eighty years and more.



AMHERST ISLAND, MAGDALEN ISLANDS.

AMONG THE MAGDALEN ISLANDS

ONE of the quaintest corners of Canada is the Magdalen Islands. The thirteen rocky isles, with their connecting sand-bars, lie stranded in the very centre of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, receiving the angry surf of the Atlantic from every side. Fifty miles to the west lies the island province of Prince Edward; ninety miles to the east, the King's oldest colony of Newfoundland.

One is apt to forget the existence of the Magdalens, with their six thousand souls, in counting up the territorial assets of the Dominion; indeed, it almost requires a magnifying-glass to discern the tiny spots that represent them on the map.

Their history is an interesting one, for they were involved in the various conflicts between England and France, and were frequently the subject of treaties and conventions between the two Powers.

After being bandied backward and forward, they were ceded to England, and, in 1763, annexed to Newfoundland. To this colony they remained attached until, under the Quebec Act, they were joined to Canada and to the Province of Quebec, and part of that province they still remain.

Previous to this cession to England the islands were, during the reign of Louis XV., set apart for the fishing trade of France, when they were inhabited only during the brief fishing season of the summer months. There was no permanent population, therefore, at the time of their passing into the hands of England.

A new chapter in the varied history of the islands was opened when, in 1798, they were given by George III., under letters patent granted by Lord Dorchester, to Sir Isaac Coffin, an admiral of the fleet, who had won the goodwill of his Sovereign by his bravery in defending the American coasts from invasion. It is reported that the old sea captain, in command of a man-of-war, carried Sir Guy Carleton (afterward Lord Dorchester) to Quebec, there to become the Governor of Canada. Sailing by the scattered isles of the Magdalen group, the captain hinted to his influential passenger that they might well be granted to him in recognition of his long services for King and country. Therefrom came the royal grant, with certain reservations, amongst others that they should be held in free and common socage as lands held by Great Britain, and that every English subject should be at liberty to fish in their waters.

So it was that the Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin became the proprietor of the Magdalen Islands, creating a system of feudalism that sat ill on the sturdy and independent settlers who there made their home. The first permanent settlers were ten families of Acadians, who had made their way from Acadia, from which they had been exiled, in 1755.

The ten families soon increased to one hundred, as others found their way to the shores of the islands, and as they regarded themselves as a sovereign people, with no laws to obey, and no means of enforcing them if they existed, they naturally grew restive under the efforts of the proprietor to collect his rents. For a century the old records are full of complaints of high rents for bits of beach used in fish-curing, of the exorbitant price of salt, of the absence of roads, of having to send their grain to Prince Edward Island to be ground, and the like. A government report of fifty years ago says: "Formerly more or less of the people were so pure that no law or judicial institution was known or required. By the decision of the missionaries or a few of the older inhabitants every difficulty was settled and determined, but the increase of population makes us stand in need of a gaol as a means of securing due respect for justice and good order." Thus the crying need of a prison came with the growth of population, though it is pleasant to state that the gaol of Amherst is more frequently empty than occupied, and the hardy toilers by sea and land are, as a whole, a law-abiding, sober, and peaceful folk.

As the inhabitants arrived from the Nova Scotian mainland, they settled wherever they liked, despite the wishes of the proprietor, and it was only in 1830 that any of them consented to pass title deeds. Up to that time they paid what they pleased by way of rent, but their tenure remained undetermined. Two kinds of titles were offered: a ninety-nine year lease, and a concession, without any fixed term, at a perpetual and unredeemable ground rent, the rents averaging about twenty cents an acre. Trial succeeded trial between the people and their overlord before the authority of the latter was recognised. Because of the original squatting, the lands occupied to-day are of all

possible shapes and sizes, and in many cases the holdings overlap. It is now reported that the Coffin Estate has sold or is about to sell its remaining rights in the islands. They are attached to the County of Gaspe, Quebec Province, for judicial and other purposes, and a representative is sent by the islanders to the Quebec Legislature.

The Magdalen Islands will repay a visit. They are best reached by boat from Pictou, Nova Scotia, from which port a mail steamer plies twice a week during the summer. The red shores of Prince Edward Island are passed as the sun goes down, and by daylight the outlines of Entry Island are discerned through the mists. This is the doorway to the queer island world beyond, and a dangerous marine route it is. The Magdalens, like the Channel Islands, are guarded by nature with sunken reefs, dangerous sandbars, low and treacherous morasses, and untrammelled tidal forces. The uneasy sea dashes madly against the bases of great cliffs, or the morning sunlight glints through the sheets of spray flying up the face of the rocks in all the fury of their storm-stirred spirit.

Entry Island, like most of its scattered neighbours, is harbourless. It is the loftiest bit of rock of them all, rising sheer from the sea to a height of six hundred feet. Grey and ghostly it suddenly looked as a filmy mist embraced it, and mysteriously large and ominously close, as the atmosphere played tricks with the distances. There it stood like a massive sentinel at the eastern entrance of Pleasant Bay. Huge as it is in bulk, geologists claim that it was once much larger than it is now, and that it may yet be pounded into oblivion.

It was well that the man at the wheel was keenly alert. With startling suddenness a fishing craft loomed up alarmingly near on the port side, the dark sail proclaiming it an alien, for had it not sailed from a Newfoundland cove? Farther afield the eye caught sight of a strange streak of white

breakers, telling of the ominous Pearl Reef, only eight feet below the surface at low tide, and thus showing its teeth in the breakers that are born above its submerged base.

Due ahead lay Amherst Island, the first stopping-place. The island resembles a human foot, with its great heel stretching toward the west and its long toes of sandhills lying to the north-east. Demoiselle Hill is the dominant physical feature, and from its summit a wonderful sea picture was unfolded. Eleven miles east and west stretched the island, though but a few miles wide. On the south-west the cliffs rose abruptly from the sea. In the interior lay low marshes and shallow lakes, bordered by treacherous quicksands. Pleasant Bay was dotted with the little crafts of the fisher-folk, the low shelving beaches covered with nets drying in the sun. In the nearer distance a group of women were digging for clams, and a company of lads were romping with a mangy, wolflike dog. Around the village of whitewashed houses were the fish-curing flakes, from which many a pungent odour was wafted.

From Amherst and its grey old village, nestling in a cleft of the hills, runs a wonderful sea road, for the thirteen islands of the gulf group are connected at low tide by sandbars. These can be driven over if one chooses to charter a charette—a quaint wooden cart, without springs or paint, and drawn by a shaggy little beast who negotiates the hills at a trot. The journey is not altogether safe without a pilot, for dangerous quicksands abound, and woe betide the traveller who is caught therein or who wanders from the path in the night! Every receding tide changes the course of the way, and fresh sea-pools have to be avoided with each day's journeying. It is a unique drive nevertheless, for the surf beats along one side and wreaths of wild sea grasses are swept around the horse's feet. Delicate mosses and dainty shells strew the route, and the wonders of the ocean world are revealed at every mile.

But he who travels by steamer will the more quickly reach Grindstone Island. The dodging of the boat from isle to isle fairly upsets one's mental compass, until it seems as if the sun were careering madly around the heavens. It is only possible to anchor some distance from the shore, for there are practically no wharves, or very few, among the islands, and what may be a safe anchorage with the wind in one direction is acutely dangerous with the wind from an opposite quarter. A striking instance of this fact is proved by the famous August gale of 1873—as "the Lord's Day Gale" it will go down to history. The Gloucester fishing-fleet lay, as the men thought, safe in Pleasant Bay, sheltered from the north-east gale, but when the wind shifted to due east, forty-two of the craft were driven ashore at Amherst like so many chips. The old inhabitant will tell you that they lay so close on the beach that he walked over the decks of twelve of them, stepping from the one to the other without the need of a gang-plank. One vessel was landed high and dry in a field.

"On reef and bar our schooners drove
Before the wind, before the swell;
By the steep sand cliff their ribs were stove,—
Long, long their crews the tale shall tell;
Of the Gloucester fleet are wrecks threescore;
Of the Province sail two hundred more
Were stranded in that tempest fell."

Grindstone is shaped like a millstone. Its red cliffs, bold in their defiant height, are ever a menace to the luckless mariner, and worn into countless caverns and arches they present further evidences of the power of ocean in its work of disintegration. The base of the high hills of the island shows masses of crumbling lava that have accumulated from the outlets of volcanic action. The town itself is relatively an important centre of trade, especially as a fishing port. There one finds Augustine Le Bourdais, the weather-observer and telegraph operator. This legless man will tell you as thrilling a tale of the sea as one could hear—

an experience of the tragic North Beach. He was mate of the brig *Wasp*, of Quebec, which went to pieces among the islands in a blinding snow-storm in November of 1871. Le Bourdais was the only survivor of a crew of eleven, and having gained the shore as by a miracle, wandered helplessly for five days, eating snow and finally taking shelter in an old hut, where he fell into a deep sleep until accidentally found by some fishermen. Both feet were so badly frozen that they came off at the ankles. There was no doctor on the islands at the time to amputate the limbs properly, but Le Bourdais had a strong constitution and lives to tell his story.

M. Augustin LeBourdais,

No less than thirty wrecks can be traced to the North Beach and East Cape alone during the memory of the present generation. It was at the latter point that, fifty years ago, the emigrant ship *Miracle* was wrecked, with a loss of 350 lives out of the 678 on board, and the bones of two hundred lie buried in the sands on which they were cast.

A weird tale is told of a wreck on North Beach in more recent years, or rather of a coming ashore of a derelict, the English brig *Joseph*. In broad daylight, with all sails set, the vessel ran straight on North Beach. The inhabitants went on board, only to find five men lying dead in the cabin with their throats cut. The vessel's papers were missing and the name had been scraped off in most places. By a slight clue its identity was discovered. The mutineers had landed on Newfoundland and then cast adrift their boat with its grim freight.

There was plenty of material, therefore, for Stedman's poem and for his lines :—

> "Woe, woe to those whom the Islands pen,
> In vain they shun the double capes;
> Cruel are the reefs of Magdalen;
> The Wolf's white fang what prey escapes?
> The Grindstone grinds the bones of some,
> And Coffin Island is craped with foam;
> On Deadman's shores are fearful shapes."

Other islands there are, each with its history. Wolf Island bears a grim name, but not more grim than the dreary waste of shifting sand deserves, for it has been the scene of many shipwrecks. Coffin Island, with its steep rocks and menacing shores, is honoured by the name of the Admiral Proprietor. Alright Island is a deserted stretch of sand-dune and coarse grass—the grass on which the cattle and sheep of the Islands largely subsist.

There, too, lies Deadman's Island, bearing its gruesome name from a fancied resemblance to a giant human corpse shrouded for burial. The

imagination is assisted by three rocky protuberances that stand for the head, chest, and feet of the leviathan of rock half a mile long. Here again scores of cruel shipwrecks have been witnessed by the elements. Many a shipwrecked sailor has been cast up on the unfriendly shores of Deadman's Island, many a life has been battered away against its relentless walls. Tom Moore sailed past the isle one dark September night in 1804, and thereafter penned his poem based on the sight of the lonely place, but he made a trifling geographical error in placing it near Labrador, for some two hundred miles intervene.

Deadman's Island was once a great resort for the walrus, which the fishermen would drive to the sand beaches and there capture and kill them. Jacques Cartier noted their presence when he discovered the Magdalens in 1534. "About these islands," he wrote, "there are several large animals resembling an elephant, which live as well in the sea as on land." All traces of the walrus, however, have disappeared, as have practically the seals. Whereas in former years twenty thousand seals would be caught in a season, now but a few hundred are captured and correspondingly few fishers are engaged in the industry.

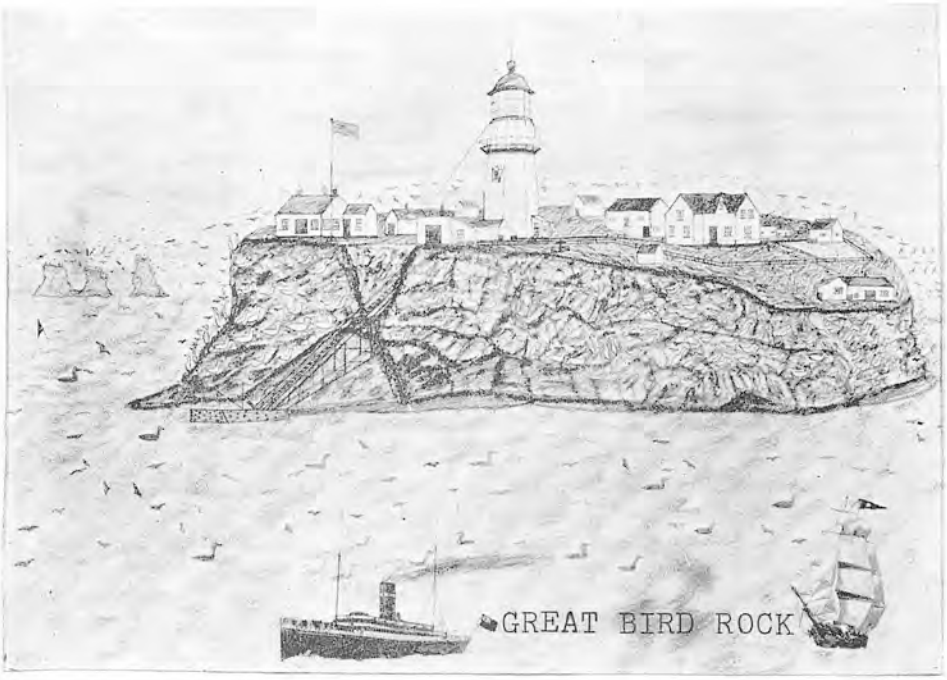
Farther afield in the Gulf rises the black and inhospitable cliffs of Byron Island. It received its name from Jacques Cartier in honour of an admiral of that name who sailed with him on his first voyage to America. Only half a score of families live on this lonely bit of rock, amid its wild waste of waters, with neighbours a score of miles away in the Bird Rocks. The Little Bird Rock is steadily disappearing, and the same end may come to the Great Bird, but as yet it stands a mighty mass three hundred feet high, encircled by wicked and erratic currents and swept by fierce autumnal and winter gales. The ten acres of its summit is a sky parlour for millions of sea-birds, chiefly gannets. Here, again, Cartier observed the feathered throng. To him "the rocks were covered with

more birds than a meadow with grass," and thirty years later Champlain, passing by their inaccessible cliffs, recorded that "vessels sailing by the islands send their boats ashore in calm weather, and a great number of birds are killed with sticks. They are as large as geese. Their beaks are very dangerous. They are perfectly white, with the exception of the tip of the wings, which are black. They are very expert in catching fish, which they carry on their wings to the top of the islands, where they eat them." So chronicled this observant explorer of three hundred years ago.

To-day the birds are apparently as numerous, though the Great Bird Rock has been occupied for thirty years past as a Canadian lighthouse station. Standing on the main thoroughfare between Canada and Europe, the rock was long a menace to the mariner, but with a light throwing its rays twenty-one miles, and equipped with fog-horns and explosives, it has no doubt saved many a craft from destruction by warning off the sailor who approached too close to its precipitous sides.

The Bird Rock is, too, a rock of tragedy, apart from the wrecks it witnessed before the building of the lighthouse. The most recent episode was in March of 1897. Damion Cormier was in charge of the light. With his two assistants, Charles and Arsene Turbide, Cormier was left on the ice to hunt seals, leaving Mrs. Cormier alone on the rock. When they were ready to return, a sudden shift of the wind caused a break in the ice floe, and their means of escape was thus cut off. Suddenly a storm of snow and sleet arose and the current made it impossible to launch their boat. Thus they faced a terrible death. The next morning Charles Turbide became exhausted and died, though he had fed on the warm blood of a captured seal. Damion Cormier succumbed the next day, and his body was afterwards found by a sealer on the ice between Bird Rock and Cape Breton. Arsene Turbide kept on the ice and drifted with it for days, until, almost dead, he

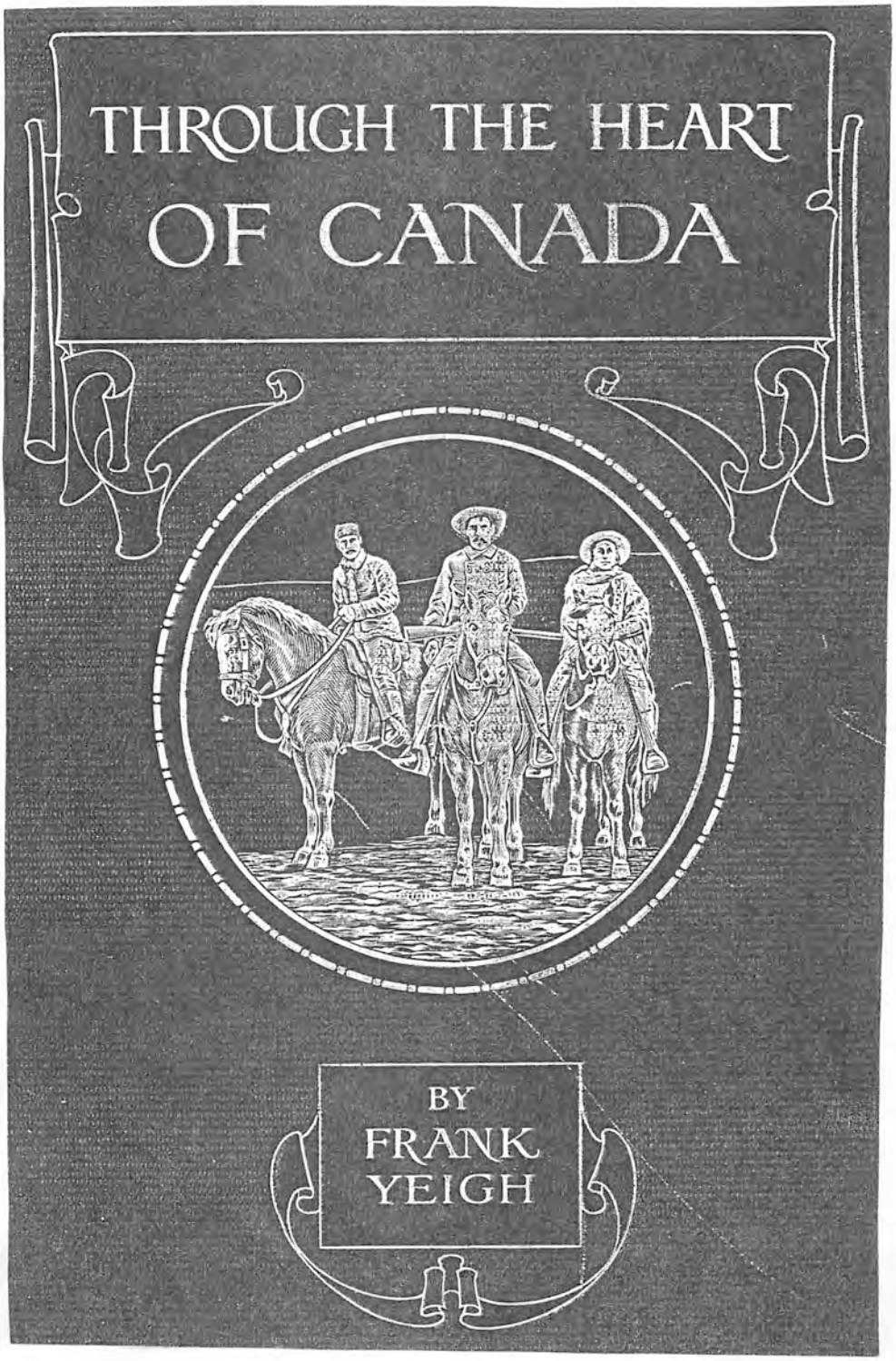
was cast ashore near North Cape in Cape Breton, nearly a hundred miles away. Climbing, or rather crawling some miles to the nearest house, he was in a dying condition, and only survived a few days. In the meantime the almost distracted woman realised the worst. Days elapsed before help came to her from Bryon Island, but she kept the light going and proved herself a true heroine.



These are a few of the islands in the Magdalen Group. It is a kingdom of fish, and its inhabitants are naturally fisher-farmers. The cod forms the staple harvest of the sea, but the herring and mackerel are no less valuable, and the presence in many coves of lobster factories, and the piles of lobster traps along the shores, tell of their presence in large numbers. The skate and dog-fish come with the herring as their enemies, and the porpoise pursues them as well. The fisheries, as a whole, are relatively as sure and profitable as those of Newfoundland, but the scarcity of bait

at times seriously hampers the industry. Some farming is done, though the soil is not of the best. While wheat is grown, the coarser grains and vegetables do better. Considerable numbers of cattle and sheep are pastured, but most of the staple food in the way of flour and pork is imported from the mainland.

A simple, honest, and temperate folk are the island fishermen, and content and happy as well, they will tell you when asked, though toiling hard for their livelihood during the summer days, and imprisoned in the heart of the stormy gulf during the long winter nights.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BY
FRANK
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