

THE STORY OF ST. LOUIS PARK, MINNESOTA – AS OF 2020

11,000 BCE – 1800 CE

THE LAND AND WATERS ARE DEFROSTED, DEFORESTED, OCCUPIED BY HUMANS

It all started with the land and the waters. In Minnesota, those were created in current form by the last glaciers that melted around 11,000 years ago, (9,000 BCE, Before Common Era). At the Jeffers Petroglyphs Historic Site, 100 miles southwest of the Park as the crow flies, the earliest signs of native people occupying Minnesota appear around 5,000 BCE, creating a place for spiritual gatherings.

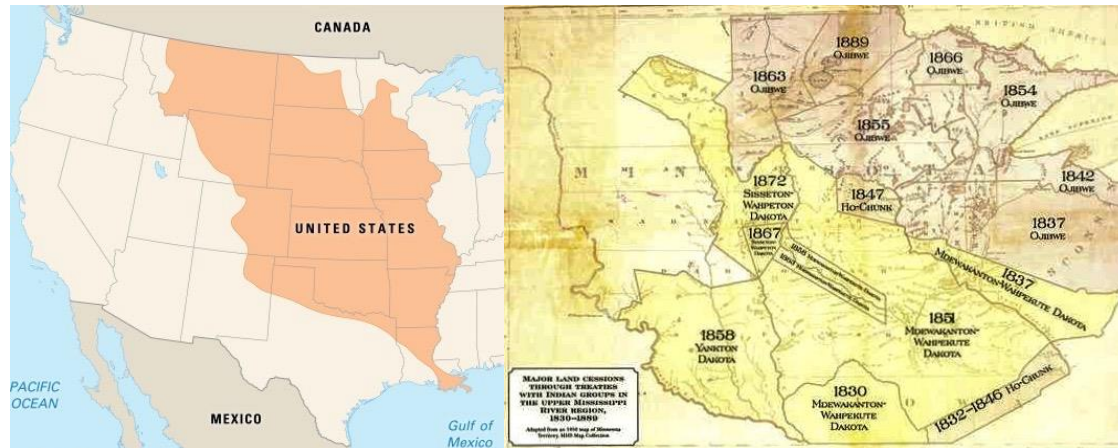


Left: The Des Moines lobe of the last glaciers rolled back around 9,000 BCE. Center: Map of the Dakota nations – (aboriginal map of North America denoting the boundaries and locations of various Indian tribes. The House of Commons. Britain: 1857). Right: The Jeffers Petroglyphs record the earliest evidence of human history in Minnesota.

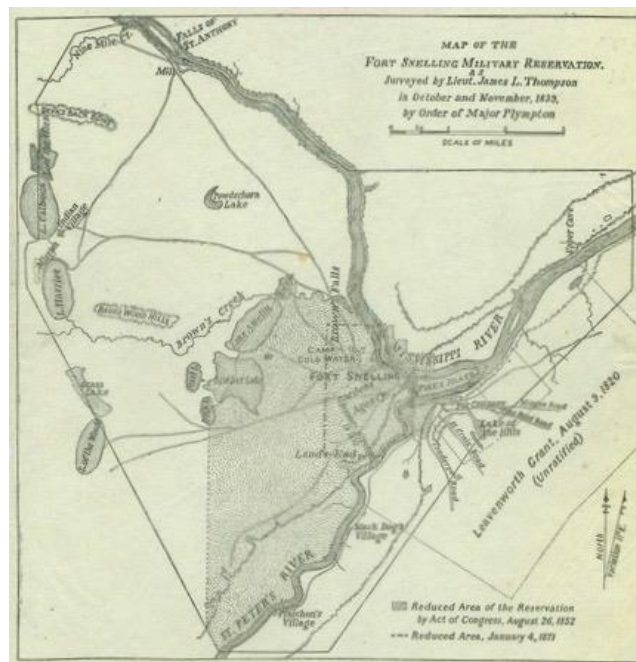
1800 – 1850

THE LAND AND WATERS ARE SEIZED

St. Louis Park's land came into the U.S. in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Or, perhaps the U.S. only obtained the right to purchase the land from the natives. Which it did by multiple treaties, including a never-ratified treaty negotiated by Zebulon Pike in 1805 that set the stage for military Fort Snelling to be built at another sacred Dakota place, Bdote. Native paths almost certainly followed Minnehaha Creek from Bdote to Lake Minnetonka, passing through the Park.



The Louisiana Purchase got the land business going in 1803; multiple treaties with natives were required to seal the deal, and a bogus treaty negotiated by Zebulon Pike in 1805 led to the creation of Fort Snelling at Bdote to exert actual control over the land in 1820.

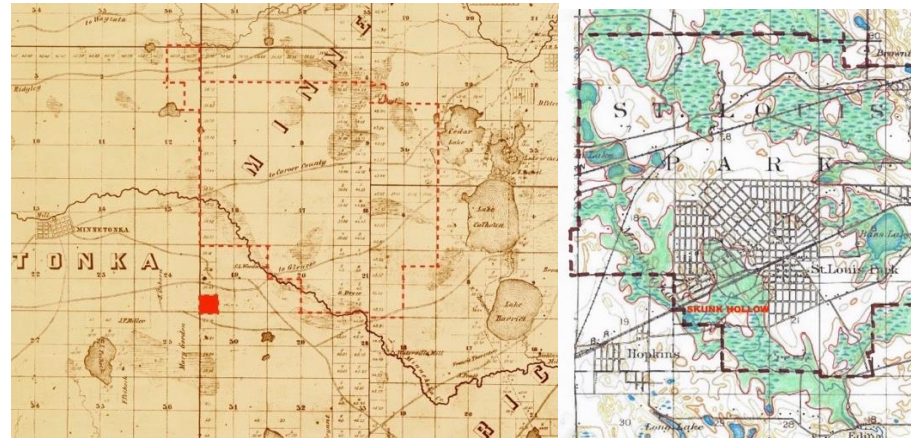


1850 – 1900

THE LAND AND WATERS ARE SIZED AND SOLD TO FARMERS, AND GIVEN TO RAILROADS

The basis of the U.S. economy at the dawn of Minnesota Territory was the sale and development of the land and the waters. To be sold, the land had to first be measured, accurately surveyed according to strict rules; the first surveys of the Park were done in the mid-1850s. The federal Preemption Act of 1841 allowed squatters on the yet-unsurveyed federal lands to purchase 160 acres for \$1.25 per acre, and secure final title if improvements were made in five years. By 1856, a settler could buy 160 acres to farm for about the same money.

St. Louis Park is an area of 10.64 square miles (6,810 acres) of the land. That land was measured, surveyed, beginning in 1854. By 1856, land was available for sale in the Minnesota Territory, and in 1858 in the new State of Minnesota. The accidents of geography and the last period of glaciation left this particular hunk of land half dry and half wet; oak savanna uplands interspersed with ponds, swamps, and the Minnehaha Creek and floodplain bordering its southwest flank.



The 1860 plat map, left, above is the first composite record of the Park's land and waters. The approximate city boundaries of today are superimposed; the infilled red square represents 40 acres. On the right, a USGS map from around 1900 is colored to show areas of swamp or wetland. Skunk Hollow was a well-known district of the Park, and remained wet and wild for many years. The first Pratt School (left) burned in 1866 and was immediately replaced. The second Pratt School was moved across the Big Swamp, then moved again to become the first Oak Hill School (center). The North Side School (right), eventually renamed Eliot School was the first north of Minnetonka Blvd.



Farming was the principal use of land in the Park, for subsistence of the farm families and eventually to provide food and dairy products for the region. The local farm families teamed up to educate their children by building their first schoolhouse in 1859. The Pratt School stood on the corner of Excelsior Boulevard and Wooddale Avenue; more one-room schools followed and the school district was organized in 1888.

All settlement patterns in the area were driven by two powerful forces: the hydro power of St. Anthony Falls in Minneapolis, the largest vertical drop on the entire Mississippi River, and the riverboat transportation corridor connecting the heartland to the world from St. Paul New Orleans. That power, plus the first-

growth bounty of Minnesota's pines, made lumber the king of Minnesota's economy until that resource was depleted, then the milling of flour, once the regions farmers had tamed the prairies in favor of wheat.

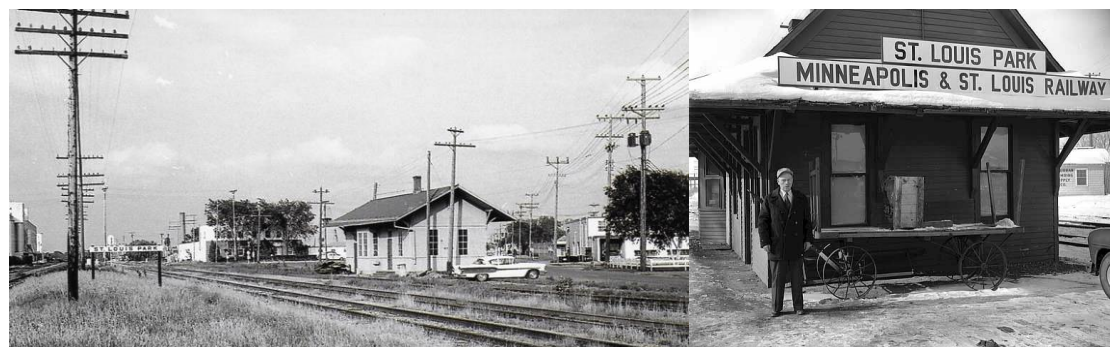
The surveying of the nation's land coincided with the introduction of the railroads, which replaced the riverboats and oxcarts with faster and more reliable transport. Federal lands when finally surveyed were given to the railroads in mind-boggling quantities, amounting to total acreage almost equivalent to the state of Texas.



The steam engines of the Great Northern, the Minneapolis & St. Louis, and the Milwaukee Road defined life in the Park from 1867 until today. The iconic William Crooks (left), perhaps the first engine to traverse the Park in 1867, was preserved and restored by James J. Hill and can be seen today at the Railroad Museum in Duluth.

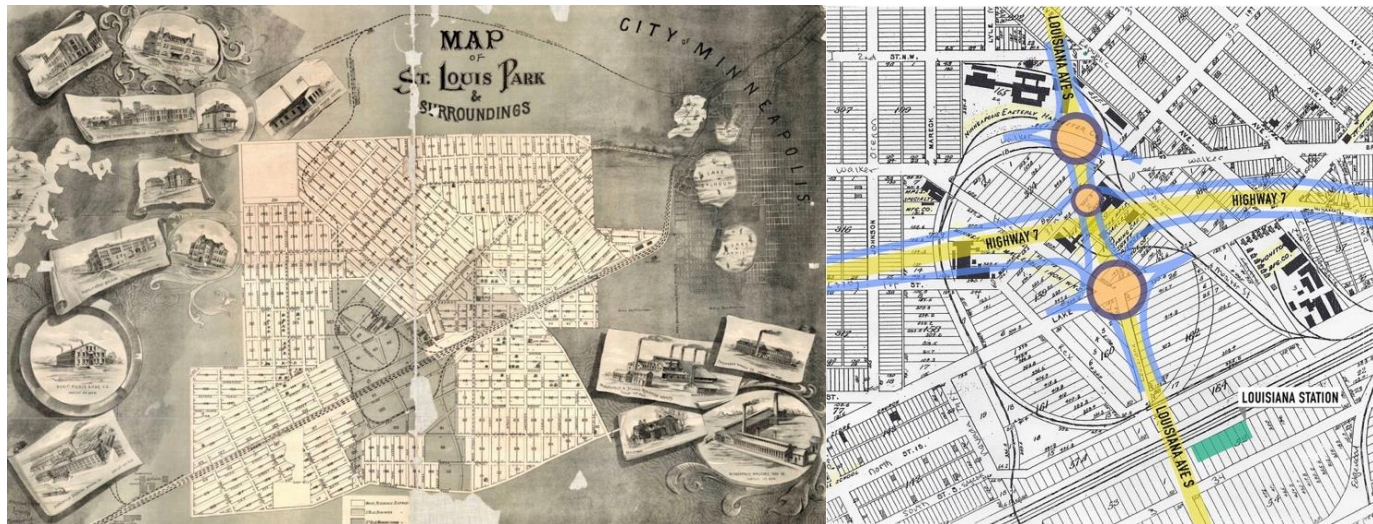
That the railroads transformed the land is irrefutable, and three rail lines heading west from Minneapolis transformed the Park from a largely inaccessible farming community to something else. The Great Northern, now the BNSF, (1867), the Minneapolis & St. Louis (1870), and the adjacent Milwaukee Road (1872), sliced the Park into three zones, northern, central and southern. The Dan Patch Railroad would arrive 45 years later, slicing the Park from south to north. The Great Northern had modest impact on the Park because James J. Hill was building a transcontinental empire. The M&SL and later the Milwaukee Road were designed and built to thwart the power of that empire by providing service to local farmers and merchants.

Not long after the railroads came, the local residents were numerous enough to officially organize as a village government. The election was held at Pratt School on October 4, 1886 and the majority of the 66 voters opted for the incorporation of the village; it was officially recognized on November 19 by the Hennepin County Commissioners. The Park was named for its first Granger railroad, the Minneapolis & St. Louis, as part of a deal that located a depot and established a post office here.

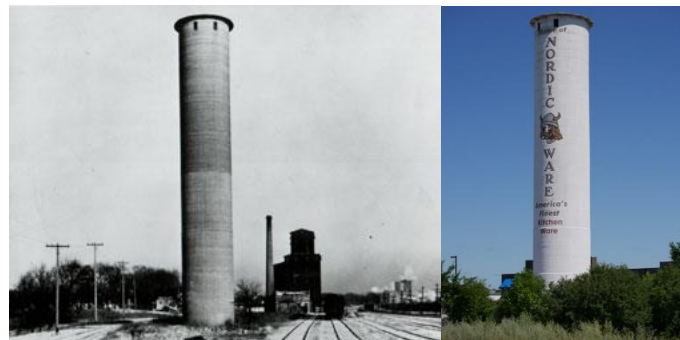


The M&SL depot, on the north side of the tracks, and the Milwaukee Road depot, on the south side, were built within 100 yards of each other in 1886. It was that local rail service that attracted lumber baron and Minneapolis civic leader Thomas B. Walker to the Park, along with his cabal of speculators in real estate, the Minneapolis Land and Development Company.

Walker envisioned the Park as an industrial district of Minneapolis, and proceeded in 1890 to buy up 1,700 acres, (2.66 square miles), of farms, and to replat the land into industrial sites centered on a new, M&SL/Milwaukee Road railroad roundabout. Modeling his effort after Pullman, IL, Walker commenced to build workers' houses on 25-foot wide residential lots.



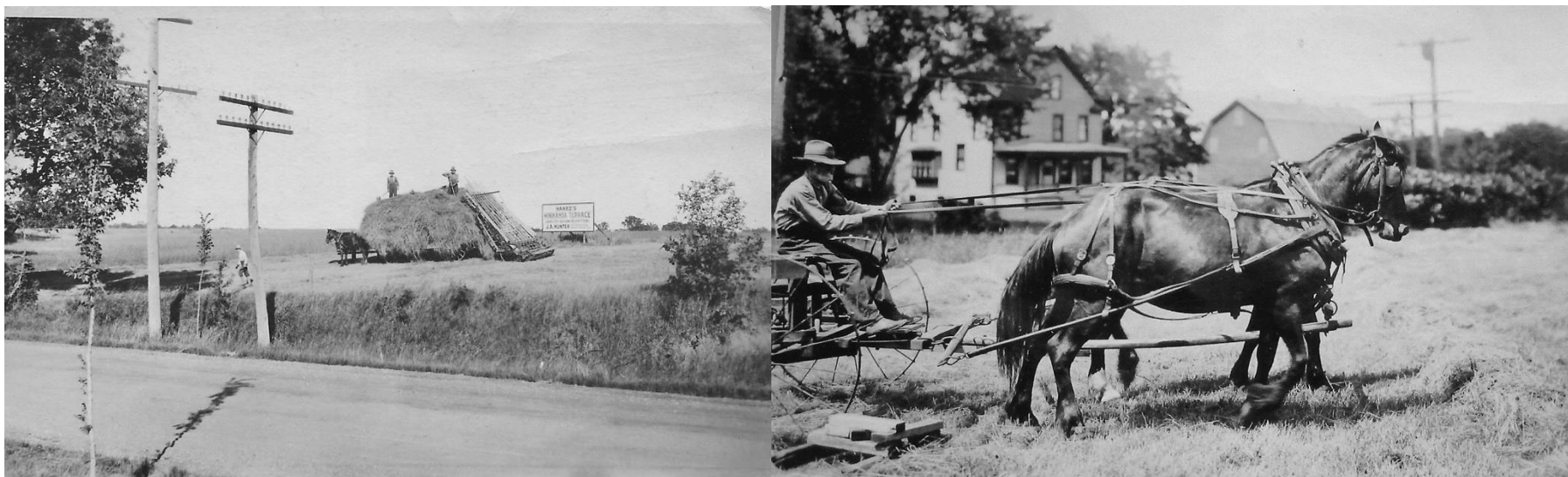
T.B. Walker's Rearrangement of St. Louis Park extended from Excelsior Blvd on the south to Minnetonka Blvd on the north; it was designed to attract industry, and it did. Built on the northern lobe of the Big Swamp, the railroad roundabout hub used land that was less suitable for residences. The industrial surge was stopped dead around its tracks by the Panic of 1893 and never recovered. Today's traffic roundabouts at the Hwy 7-Louisiana Avenue interchange overlay the ghosts of Walker's industries.



As Minneapolis' flour milling industry came to be the world's largest with the Pillsbury and General Mills brands, the M&SL and Milwaukee Road rail lines provided sites for grain storage prior to milling. At the Interior Elevator site, Peavey and architect-builder Charles Haglin teamed up to solve the biggest problem of grain storage bins constructed of wood – the threat of fire – by designing, building and testing an experimental storage silo of steel-reinforced concrete, configured as a cylinder. The Peavey-Haglin Experimental Elevator was constructed in 1899 and proven effective in 1900, revolutionizing the form of grain storage structures and spawning thousands of similar structures around the world. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979(?) and stands today on the Nordic Ware campus.

1900 – 1950

THE LAND AND WATERS ARE CONFORMED TO THE AUTOMOBILE



Early in the 20th century, farming of the land began to yield to subdividing the land for new housing. The Christopher Hanke family was one of the first and purchased its 205-acre farm straddling the Excelsior Road and France Avenue in 1860. Christopher's son Charles was still harvesting hay while advertising new residential lots in 1916. The photo below, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, shows the Hwy 12/Hwy 199 cloverleaf under construction in the Great Depression, looking south. On the horizon stand the three massive grain elevators of the Park; left to right – Belco, Interior (with the Peavey-Haglin silo), and Commodore.





Just to the east of his industrial hub, Walker began development of a commercial center (Monitor Drill complex lower half of photo). His 1892 Walker Building paired with the Hamilton Building to form downtown SLP, (upper right in photo), and is the Park's only pre-1900 commercial building to survive today in any form; it currently owned and occupied by Sota Clothing, which renovated the ground floor and installed fire sprinklers. Population growth required a new high school, so the Lincoln School was built in 1895; it also served as the Village Hall. Two decades later, in 1914, a bigger high school was built on land donated by T.B. Walker. The photo on the right below shows the new high school in 1937, with the pedestrian tunnel under Hwy 7 visible at left.



Walker's replat created the southwest diagonal of Lake Street, which connected Minnetonka Boulevard and Lake Street in south Minneapolis to his new industrial and commercial, city center via electric streetcar.

As in all human endeavor, timing is everything, and Walker's timing was unlucky. The Panic of 1893, which saw dozens of railroad corporations and hundreds of other companies bankrupted across the nation, froze his vision of a commercial/industrial district in the Park for the next six decades. Walker weathered the economic disaster, but not without a lot of pain. In 1914, he donated land for a new high school, (now occupied by the old Central High building), in lieu of paying back taxes on hundreds of undeveloped lots.

Walker, who never lived in the Park, had a personal art collection that launched the Walker Art Center. He died in 1923, the 10th richest man in the world, a similar position as 2020's Rob Walton, son of the Walmart founder.

The demise of industry in the Park was not instantaneous. The original manufacturing enterprise that Walker lured to the Park in 1890 – The Monitor Drill Company – was merged with industrial powerhouse, Minneapolis Moline, and was the Park's largest employer until about 1920 when its jobs were moved to the Hopkins Moline plant.

The Republic Creosote Company arrived in 1916, thriving on the railroad access of Walker's roundabout, and manufactured and shipped creosote-treated railroad ties, telephone poles and wood piling by the millions of pieces everywhere in the U.S. until 1969. Republic remained the Park's largest employer until it closed in 1970.

As pivotal to Park history as Walker's industries were, the manufacturing residues dumped in the ground by those and Republic Creosote created a legacy that promises to last much longer - the Park's very special drinking water.

As much as the railroads sliced up the Park, Depression-era highways 100 and 7, neither of which was a roadway beforehand, created larger separations of historic neighborhoods.



Marie Hartmann, (left), founder of the St. Louis Park Historical Society, stands along Highway 7 shortly after it opens in the mid-1930s. The Highway 7-Highway 100 cloverleaf was a traffic engineering marvel, shown in this aerial photo with the Commodore Elevator lower left and Minnetonka Blvd, top. Highway 100 was landscaped with lilacs and became known as Lilac Way through the western suburbs, and roadside parks, such as the restored Lilac Park west of Nordic Ware, provided picnic venues for the accelerating automobile society, post-WWII.

1950 – 2000

THE LAND IS CONFORMED TO THE AUTOMOBILE, ON STEROIDS

On July 2, 1951, eleven doctors who were WWII veterans and had worked together at the VA Hospital, each with a different specialty, opened the St. Louis Park Medical Center at 4959/4961 Excelsior Blvd. By 1956, the Center had 17 doctors and added to the original building, and by 1967 they had annexed the building next door. In 1960, the St. Louis Park Medical Center Research Foundation was formed to promote medical research and community education. In 1961, there were 24 doctors on staff; the total staff of 100 served an average 300 patients a day. The 3800 building, originally known as the Northland Building, was dedicated on January 18, 1969. It eventually grew to seven floors, the tallest building at the time in St. Louis Park. More additions and more new buildings followed in the 1970s and 1980s.

Methodist Hospital began life as Asbury Methodist Hospital, founded in Minneapolis in 1892. In the early 1950s, facing a deteriorating building and a baby boom that left the area short of hospital beds, it decided a new building would be built in the suburbs. In 1954 the property at 6500 Excelsior Blvd. was purchased; the swampy site next to Minnehaha Creek had to be filled and 100-foot pilings had to be sunk to support the structure. An Open House was held in January 1959 and over 10,000 people toured the facility before it opened for business. The first baby was born and the first patients admitted on February 16, 1959. The hospital has been expanded many times since then.



Founding staff. (l-r) Front row: George Lund, Wyman Jacobson, Sewell Gordon, Robert Green, David Anderson. Back row: Richard Webber, Robert Giebinik, Alex Berno, John LaBree, Arnold Anderson, Donald Freeman.



In 1983, the St. Louis Park Medical Center merged with the Nicollet Clinic to form the Park Nicollet Medical Center, and in 2013, Park Nicollet merged with HealthPartners to become the state's second-largest hospital system behind the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. As noted by the *StarTribune*, the merger brought together:

...two of the Twin Cities' premier hospitals -- Regions in St. Paul and Methodist in St. Louis Park. HealthPartners brings 44 primary care clinics, 18 urgent-care clinics and 20 dental clinics to the mix, while Park Nicollet brings lucrative specialty clinics, including the Fraumshuh Cancer Center and the Melrose Institute for eating disorders, plus 26 clinics.

Seven years after the 2013 merger, the St. Louis Park campus has annexed and converted to healthcare uses a six-screen movie theater, a coffee shop, three fast food restaurants, a steakhouse/brewpub, a 4-story bank and office building, and assorted smaller properties.

2000 – 2050

THE RAILS RETURN TO THE LAND, AND THE INTERNET CHANGES EVERYTHING

