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Mar 2002

# Historical Society Of Pottawattamie County

*Member Newsletter*

March 2002

## Quick Takes

### R.H. Fanders , Alice Bontz, Pam Kinney appointed to Society positions

Society president Ralph Wright appointed Mr. R.H. Fanders to fill the vacant position of vice president for the remainder of the term. The position will be up for reelection next year. The board also approved appointments of Alice Bontz as genealogy committee chairperson and Pam Kinney to the post of membership committee chair.

### Board meeting time changed

The monthly board meetings will be held the third Monday of each month at 6 P.M. The meetings take place in the conference room at the Council Bluffs Public Library. The change takes effect for the next board meeting March 18.

### April speaker announced

UNO history professor Judith Boughter presents "Betraying the Omaha Nation" April 22.

## Lewis and Clark in Iowa Topic of Next Meeting

Just two hundred years ago many Americans- almost all living east of the Mississippi River- envisioned the land that would one day become Iowa to populated with scary mammoths and even more frightening Indians. The land of the Louisiana Purchase was one big mysterious question mark; it was anyone's guess what would be found here. There was also the promise of a passage, via rivers, to the Northwest allowing more direct access to the Orient.

Soon after Thomas Jefferson became President in 1801, he began to plan an expedition to chart a route through the Louisiana Territory and the Oregon region. He believed that a route to the Pacific coast along the Missouri and Columbia rivers could be part of a land-and-water passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

On February 28, 1803, President Thomas Jefferson won approval from Congress for his plan to answer those questions. The idea was an 8,000 mile exploratory journey of the new territory, to began near St. Louis, and report back just what the new acquisition contained.

Our area played a significant role in the Lewis and Clark journey. Learn more as historian Gail Holmes presents a program on the Lewis and Clark journey through our region at the next meeting of the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County. The meeting is scheduled for Sunday, March 17, 2 P.M. in the auditorium of the Western Historic Trails Center, 3434 Richard Downing Avenue (exit 1B of I-80/I-29). There is no admission charge.



## Council Bluffs History Trivia

The sign on the huge old Playland Park roller coaster that reigned along West Broadway in the 50's and 60's proclaimed the area to be "Susanna Dodge Park." Who was Susanna Dodge?

*Answer is on page five*

Playland Park began as the inspiration of two brothers from St. Joseph, Missouri; Abe and Louis Slusky. The Slusky brothers had experience in the amusement business, including for a time operating the concessions at Krug Park in Omaha and having their own amusement park- also called Playland Park- in Houston, Texas. Under the proposed plan Louis would remain in Houston to operate that park, with Abe in charge of the new park in Council Bluffs.

The original posting of the park's incorporation in the "legals" listed directors as Able Slusky and prominent local businessman Harry Cohen.

The firm bought 14 acres north of the Iowa approach to the Ak-Sar-Ben bridge from the Omaha and Council Bluffs Railway and Bridge company and leased additional land, a portion of Dodge Park, from the Frontier Association. The park was owned by the city but leased to the civic group Frontier Association for one dollar a year; Playland planned to pay the group \$8,000 for the sublease, money that the organization hoped to use to upgrade the park. Included in the lease was a grandstand and race track;

it was owned by the park but Playland would now have rights to use it except during

the one week "Frontier Days" festival annually hosted by the Frontier group.

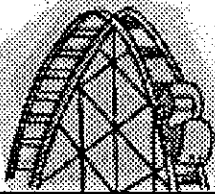
Much excitement was generated by the grand plan of the \$250,000 park slated to open Decoration Day, 1948, but not all approved. Sufficient protest was generated to the City Council in April, 1948, that the Council voted to force a halt to construction of the huge roller coaster. Some were concerned footings on land so near the river wouldn't be sound enough to support such a large roller coaster; there were also concerns that the roller coaster passed over two city streets (40th and 41st Streets), and some neighbors were concerned about noise from the monster coaster being so near their homes.

The concerns were addressed and the park opened with much fanfare, but controversy returned two years later over the name. The huge Roller Coaster proclaimed this was "Playland Park". Some came forward saying this violated the deed that gave the park (now leased to Playland) to the city in the first place and the land may now have to revert to private owners. It seems the deed, dated September 23, 1931, giving the land to the city for a park contained the stipulation that the park be named after the wife of Nathan P. Dodge as an honor in "recognition of her work in public welfare matters."

The park worked around the

problem by adding in neon letters on the roller coaster "Susanna Dodge Park" (see photo page 4). Even this simple solution wasn't without hitch; the original neon arrived with the name "Susanna" misspelled, and the project had to be delayed as a new sign was made.

The park appeared to prosper and grow. The signature feature remained the huge roller coaster, with three humps, rising to 60 feet on the first hump, and going right over two city streets. Indeed driving under this roller coaster and then seeing all the lights, games, and rides as one approached the parking lot made a memorable first impression to the visitors. Rides and attractions were modified and added over the years; some remembered favorites were the bumper cars, ferris wheel, crazy house with its strange mirrors, boat and auto rides for younger kids, and a spook house. There was "Pump It" with miniature railroad type flat cars mounted on rail track in which the rider pushed and pulled a t-shaped handle to make the car move. One tale has it "The Bullet" was a favorite of park employees because they got to keep whatever change flew out of the riders' pockets onto the ground during the ride. There were midway games and there was a Playland Drive-In with the "French Terrace" of-



Playland incorporated, 1948

Converted dog track to midget auto track, 1949



Race track opens for modified stock cars, 1952



Giant roller coaster torn down; Playland shrinks from 60 acres to 20 acres, 1964

*"Playland Park", continued...*

fering outdoor dining facilities.

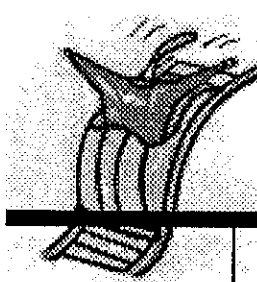
In addition to the amusement rides and games the park developed the Dodge Park race track. In 1949 it was converted from a dirt dog track to a paved midget auto track; in 1952 the track was adapted for modified stock cars.

Racing fans adopted the park as a favorite for its track, crediting owner Abe Slusky for constantly keeping up with innovations that kept the racing up-to-date and fresh; they remember the stands being packed most of the time. Local media celebrities many times worked as track announcers from a wooden tower in the center of the infield, including Frank "Coffeehead" Allen, popular KOIL personality, and television personality Joe Patrick.

A news report in 1963 quotes Abe Slusky as saying he was aware of the proposed new interstate bridge to replace the Ak-Sar-Ben but hoped that if it cut off any Playland land they could double up their amusements on the remaining property and continued business as usual; "we have no plans to relocate."

Just a few months later it was confirmed it was more than "a little" land the bridge and access ramps to it would claim; the project

would take two thirds of the land on which Playland operated, including the item most



associated as synonymous with the park- the big roller coaster. Playland Incorporated appealed the condemnation but lost. The famed roller coaster came down in 1964.

While the new bridge was a setback, it wasn't the end; though the park went from 60 acres to 20 it reopened with 12 rides on the remaining land. A new but smaller roller coaster- the Wild Mouse (with painted nose and round ears on the front of each coaster car)- was added.

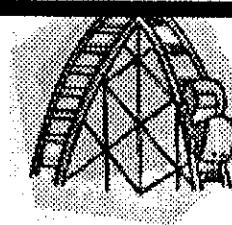
Loss of the prominent old roller coaster and the torn up roads from construction of the new bridge and ramps made many think the park was not open, business fell off and the rack track closed for two years.

The track reopened in 1966 featuring races with modified coupes and recaptured many of its fans.

Abe Slusky died of a heart attack at the age of 59 in August of 1970. It was decided after that to concentrate just on the track, and all of the remaining rides were taken out and shipped to "Frontier City" in Oklahoma City, a park the Slusky brothers had purchased in 1969. Playland reopened in 1971 but just for race fans; for the first time in 23 years there were no amusement rides.

As one of the few asphalt tracks of its kind in the region Playland continued to attract racers and race fans until the track was closed in 1977.

*(Dick Warner)*



Race track closed due to congestion from construction and lack of attendance; Park remains open with 12 rides and midway, 1965

Race track reopens featuring modified coupes; track becomes very popular with race fans, 1966

Track closes, 1977.

Abe Slusky dies; amusement rides and midway eliminated; track remains open, 1970

## Giant River Fountain Nearly Replaces Roller Coaster as West Council Bluffs Landmark

The demise of the Ak-Sar-Ben bridge may have spelled the end of an era with the demolition of that visual landmark of West Broadway, the Playland Park roller coaster, but some sought to add what might have been an even more spectacular visual piece.

An engineer from Omaha, Wes Latenser, proposed a plan in which the easternmost pier of the Ak-Sar-Ben bridge would be saved and a "quasi public building" be erected atop it. A water jet would be constructed in the river at the bridge site on a line with Douglas Street in Omaha which "would make the plume of water to appear to be coming directly out of the middle of the street as you drive in Omaha towards Council Bluffs".

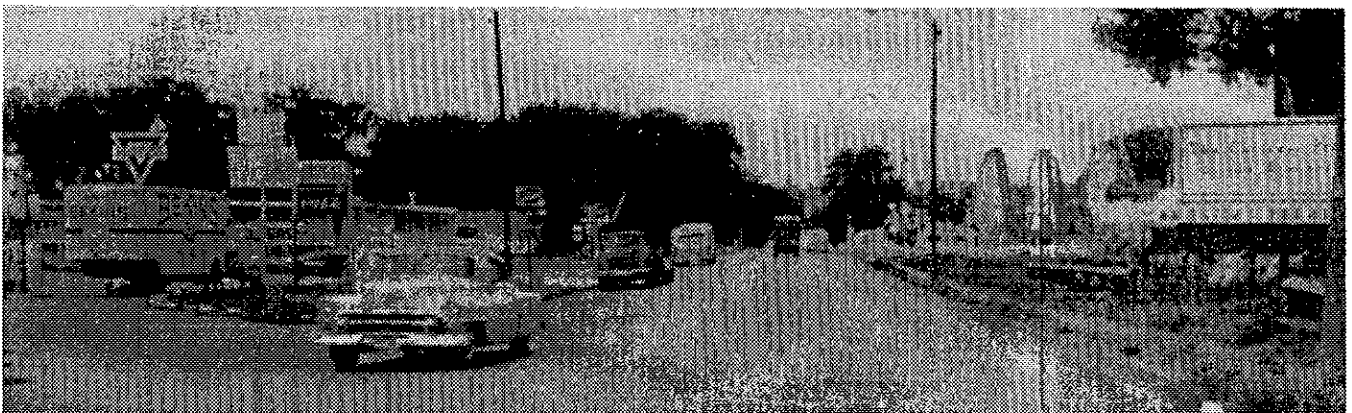
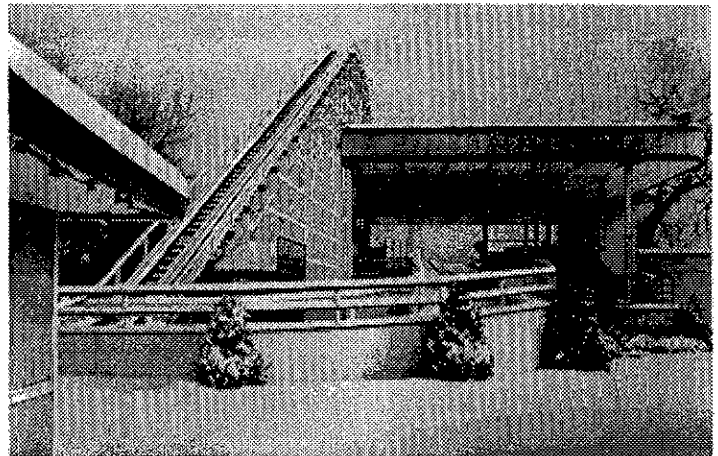
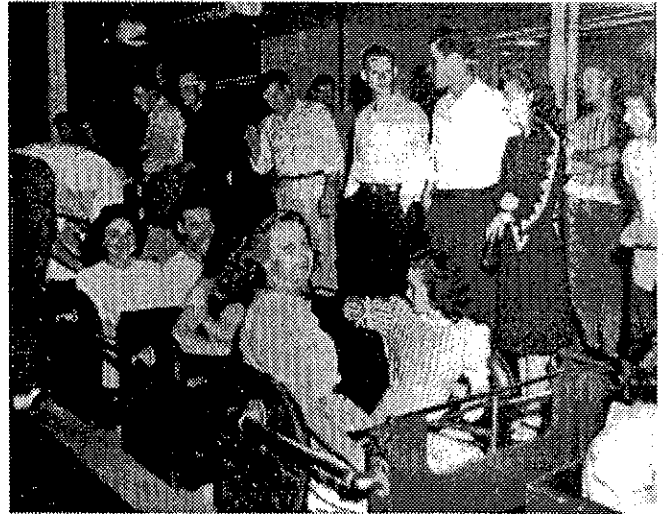
The idea attracted the attention of the Council Bluffs Park Board; J. Frederic Schlott of the board was quoted as saying this would be tied in with a whole project of riverfront development between the Union Pacific railroad bridge and the city waterworks.. Mayor Walter Hathaway envisioned the proposed \$300,000 building as having public meeting spaces and food services as well as private offices, tying in the historic preservation of a part of the Ak-Sar-Ben bridge and modern usage.

The building atop the pier would be reached by a footbridge to the

*(Continued page 5)*

# Images of Playland

*(Special thanks to Mr. Pat Daeges of Council Bluffs for contributing the photo below and the photo of the bumper cars in the left column. Other photos are from Society archives and a newspaper clipping.)*



## "River Fountain", cont.

Council Bluffs side of the Missouri River.

While the proposed project never materialized another attempt at a plume of water rising from the Missouri resurfaced in 1974.

The Friendship Fountain was planned as a bicentennial show-piece and was to mark the spirit of cooperation between the people of Iowa and Nebraska.

Isamu Noguchi and Sasaki Walker Associates were selected to design the fountain. In June of 1974 Mayor Stroben appointed a citizens commission to work with the designers to plan the fountain. Dodge Park was to be developed for best viewing of the fountain. The design was intended to reflect our heritage in two ways; one by epitomizing a "return to the river" of our beginnings and recalling our pioneer heritage through its "wind-mill" appearance.

Designer Noguchi described the fountain as being 150 high with a water effect of a fine spray resulting in "a vision of constantly changing interaction between a dense fog of water and the wind rotor."

Concerns were expressed over water potentially blowing onto the bridge or interfering with river traffic but the designers claimed the water falling at ground level "should not be more than that of rain."

## St. Patrick— A Former Slave Boy Who Captured A Country

Men and women who on March 17 wear a touch of green carry a bit of Ireland around in their hearts. For Wednesday is the anniversary of the death of their patron saint.

Probably no one in all history so captured the hearts and imagination of a people as St. Patrick did the Irish. But in the first place, St. Pat wasn't even an Irishman. You have the word of the Rt. Rev. J.F. Costello pastor of St. Patrick's Catholic church here, for that statement. The saint was born Patricius, son of a Roman decurion, military governor of a town in Britain. At 16, Patrick was captured by a party of raiding Celts and carried to Ireland as a slave.

### Escaped to France

He escaped to France six years later and lived for a time at Tours, and the island of Lerins. "But he was discontent," says Msgr. Costello. "According to his own writings, he seemed to hear the voice of the Irish people calling him, 'come back, oh, holy youth and live amongst us once more.'"

He then decided to become a priest and in 432 commissioned by Rome to return to Ireland to convert the people of Christianity. "He did a good job of it too," explains the monsignor. "For the climax of his career came shortly after his return to Ireland.

"Laeghaire, pronounced Leary, the king of Ireland, and all the great Celtic chiefs were gathered at the hall at Tara for a feast. "By edict, all fires in Ireland had been put out in preparation for the great pagan feast.

"According to historians, St. Patrick arrived at Slanc, a few miles from Tara on Easter Saturday. There he lighted the Paschal fire, in defiance of the edict. He was immediately haled before the king and court at Tara to answer for his act. Druid priests said to the king: "If the fire is not put out tonight, it will burn forever in Ireland."

### Trivia Question Answer

The name "Dodge Park" is familiar to generations of Bluffs residents, but actually the area was acquired in various different pieces by the city and was really named after two different Dodges.

The first 140 acres of the park was named Nathan P. Dodge Park. In 1931 an additional 130 acres was added named after the wife of Nathan Dodge, Susanna Lockwood Dodge. She was the daughter of Isaac Lockwood, of St. Louis; they married in 1864 and had five children.

*("From Trading Post to Modern City", Robert and Marcia Hastings, 1995, and information provided by Cathy Danielson.)*

St. Patrick confounded the Druid priests and was permitted to go free to preach Christianity. From then on it was smooth sailing for good St. Patrick, according to historians. An able organizer, St. Patrick had some of the modern world efficiency. He carried with him a troop of craftsmen and artisans.

*(Continued page 7)*

With March being "Women's History Month" I wanted to share with you a little bit about some of the pioneer women from Council Bluffs. Keep in mind as you read this article that it was written 102 years ago. -- Cathy Danielson

Mrs. Hardin Davis, has the honor of being the first white woman to settle here, coming with her husband and family in 1838. She was the mother of Richard and the late D. Hardin and Mrs. Cromwell of Sidney, IA. Her husband was sent by President Van Buren to instruct the Pottawattamies on their arrival here. The soldiers, who accompanied them, after building a little fort on the hill, rear of the present site of Mrs. Clausen's house in the First Ward, built a small log dwelling near the big spring by Grace Church, where for a time she reared her family, which became some of our most respected citizens.

Mrs. Francis Guittar, although coming here later, was a conspicuous pioneer, having lived with her husband among the Indians in what was the Missouri Territory (now Nebraska). Her husband, being a trader in the employ of the American Fur Company, brought her in close contact with the Indians, and she was expected to dispense a generous hospitality, which she did in her little one-room house, frequently cooking for and feeding as many as twenty at a time. She is still with us, a matronly woman, with her hair whitened, but looking well.

Mrs. William Garner, came in 1847, and had barely gotten settled when her husband was mustered in for the Mexican War. It then devolved upon her to care for her little family and manage the farm, which she did in good shape until his return. Until the death of her husband, about five years ago, she lived on their large farm a few miles east of the city. After that she came to the city, where she is enjoying the evening of life in the ease and comfort to which a long life of industry and frugality entitles her.

Mrs. David DeVol, came in 1847, first to "Winter Quarter's," as it was then called, about five miles north of what is now the center of Omaha, then moving back here, having all their worldly goods on a wagon drawn by two yoke of oxen. Among them were three hens and a rooster in a tub, and, while coming over, each of the hens laid an egg, which was considered a good omen and contributed to their first meal in Kanessville. Kind and gentle, loving and tender, she was such that any one of the greatest of men might be proud to call mother. She left some three years ago for the better land, her aged husband, one son, P. C. DeVol; and two daughters, Mary and Mrs. W. R. Vaughan, surviving her.

Mrs. William Folsom, came in 1847. She was one of six sisters, maiden name was Clark, originally from Lebanon, N. Y., were all what you might call brilliant women. She was fond of company, although frugal and domestic in her habits, and was a firm believer in the doctrines of the Latter Day Saints. She lived here until '59 or '60, when the family moved to Salt Lake City. Her daughter, Amelia, was a brilliant woman and became the wife of Brigham Young, and still lives in that city.

Mrs. Rachel Swarner, came in 1847. She was a woman of sterling qualities, domestic and retiring in her habits, strictly honest in all her dealings, self-reliant and industrious. She lived with her daughter, Mrs. Davenport, on North First Street, until her death some eight years ago.

Mrs. Sylvester Smith, was another 1847 matron, of retiring, domestic habits. She reared a large family, of which G. F. and Spencer Smith are among us; also Will H., I. M. and Dr. V. L. Treynor are among her grandchildren.

Mrs. G. A. Robinson claims the honor of being the first gentile woman to make her home in Council Bluffs, locating here in 1850. With her own hands she made a bureau and planed the rough floor, of her home, besides making many other articles to add to the comfort and convenience of her surroundings.

Mrs. W. H. Robinson, was the first gentile bride in Council Bluffs, Rev. G. G. Rice performing the ceremony.

Mrs. L. S. Amy, was a conspicuous pioneer. Business-like in her habits, she acquired a handsome competence and reared a family of one son and four daughters. She is still with us, but quite infirm, at 87 years of age.

(Continued next page)

## *Pioneer Women, continued...*

Mrs. Dr. Ballard, has endeared herself to the people by her generous donation to the W. C. A. Hospital. She came in the early '50's, and has reared a family, most of which she survives.

Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, her name is conspicuous in the literary world. Always in advance of the great procession for the uplifting of womankind, she did her work and did it well, and lived to see in a large part the good results of her labors.

Mrs. W. W. Maynard, has also shown ability as a writer and assisted her husband in his editorial work on "The Nonpareil" of long ago.

Mrs. G. G. Rice, belongs to the distinction of being the wife and co-laborer of the first gentile minister and is still with us.

Mrs. Perry, appears to have helped pioneer in music, who brought the first piano, and there are elderly men here that, as barefooted boys stood, under her window to hear the wonderful music.

Mrs. Henry Delong, came at an early day, and for many years has devoted her time and many years has devoted her time and energies to religious work, mostly among those least able to contribute to the established churches.

Mrs. Dr. Ellsworth (afterwards Snodderly), was the pioneer female physician. She had quite a large practice, and for thirty years, in all kinds of weather, her carriage was a familiar object on our streets, but her work is done, she passed away a few years ago.

Mrs. Sylvanus Dodge, was a woman of more than common ability, which she has transmitted to her children, the eldest of whom, Gen. G. M., has achieved a national reputation. She was also the grandmother of Miss Caroline Dodge, the first female practitioner at the bar of Pottawattamie County.

There are any number of other pioneer women that were equally entitled to be mentioned. If each family would sit down and write a few sentences about their pioneer women think of the legacy we could pass on to future generations.

*(Source: The Daily Nonpareil, Tuesday, February 22, 1898 written by Emma L. Cavin Contributed by: Cathy Danielson)*

## *St. Patrick, continued...*

He left behind him everywhere in Ireland, organized churches.

### **Snakes a Fable**

"About the myth of driving all the snakes out of Ireland, there's nothing to it." Says Msgr. Costello. It's an allegory, with the snakes symbolizing sin, the monsignor says.

St. Patrick has no special powers of intercession for members of the Catholic faith. He is asked for almost any kind of spiritual aid. Often people, weary and heartsick with the problems of the world, slip quietly into St. Patrick's church. At the feet of a life-sized statue, wearing a mitre and carrying a staff and a shamrock, they kneel and whisper a prayer to the former slave boy who captured a country.

*(Nonpareil, March 16, 1948; Contributed by Darlene Vergamini)*

*From the Newspaper Archives*

## **GENERAL FREMONT**

### **He is Pleased and Surprised at Several Things**

At the Transfer yesterday, we had the pleasure to grasp the hand of that tried old soldier and man of varied fortunes, General John C. Fremont, now in his sixty-first year. The General wears his half dozen decades with wonderful ease, and would readily pass for a man of forty-five. He informed us that he was on his way from California to his home near New York; that he was greatly pleased with the management of the U.P.R.R., courtesy of its conductors, etc. He expressed himself surprised at the growth of Council Bluffs, and remarked that its fame and prospects were matters of comment wherever he went. The General's family is now in the West Indies for the benefit of one of the children.

*(April 22, 1874; Contributed by Darlene Vergamini)*

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The Historical Society of Pottawattamie County is dedicated to the preservation of books, letters, sites, records, artifacts and buildings of historical significance in the county. The Society operates and is restoring the Historic Squirrel Cage Jail, Rock Island Depot, involved in the efforts to create a local museum, and is active in promoting historical and genealogical research.

Requests for information about Society projects, membership, and volunteer work are welcomed. Write the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County, Post Office Box 2, Council Bluffs, IA, 51502.

The Historical Society of Pottawattamie County Member Newsletter is printed eleven times a year and mailed to all members. The membership mailing list is maintained by the Society Secretary, Robert Hastings. Please direct any address corrections to Mr. Hastings at 322-0612 or to the Society post office box listed above.

Members are always welcome to attend a Board Meeting. Anyone desiring to speak at the meeting should send a letter or call either the Secretary or President to be placed on the agenda.

Historical Society of Pottawattamie County web address: [Http://www.geocities.com/heartland/plains/5660](http://www.geocities.com/heartland/plains/5660)

**Historical  
Society**  
Of Pottawattamie County

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