

AUGUST 10, 1997
San Jose Mercury News

West

THE VOICE OF SUMMER

What Mike Weiss
misses most about baseball

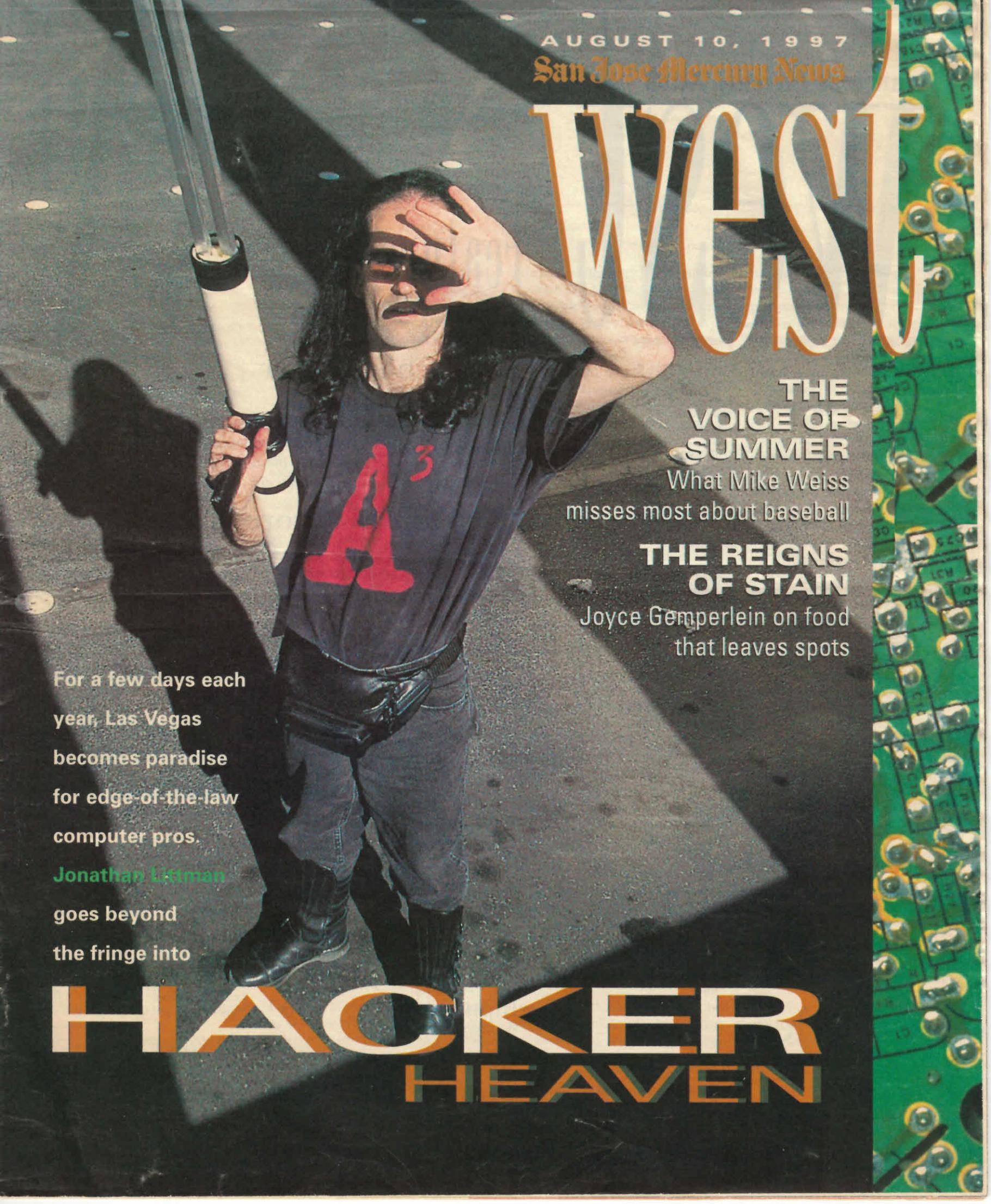
THE REIGNS OF STAIN

Joyce Gemperlein on food
that leaves spots

For a few days each
year, Las Vegas
becomes paradise
for edge-of-the-law
computer pros.

Jonathan Littman
goes beyond
the fringe into

HACKER HEAVEN



Top, A.J. Effin Reznor;
below, Priest

Top, Richard D.
Thieme; middle, Real;
bottom, Vanna Vinyl

Top, Vanna Vinyl;
middle, Opiate;
bottom, Sin

vulnerabilities. To understand how the guns and cops fit in, you need to know what drew these hackers to the desert.

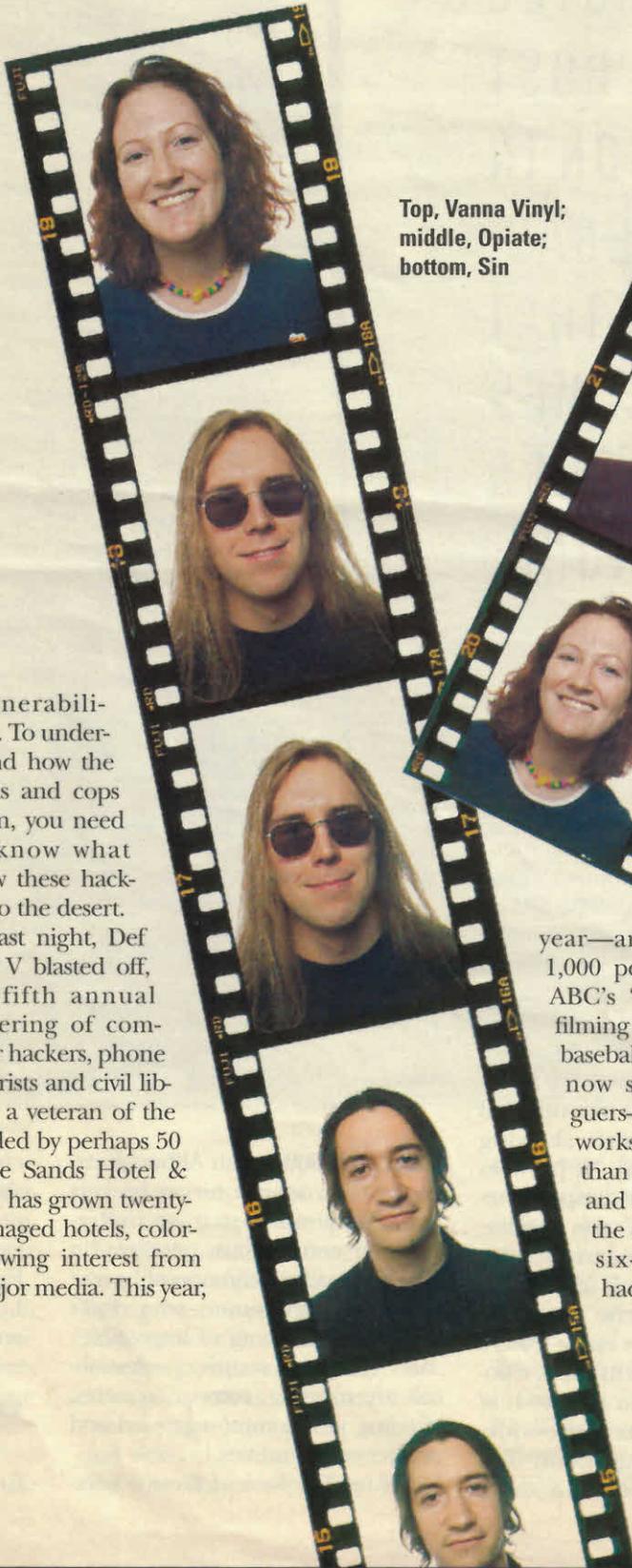
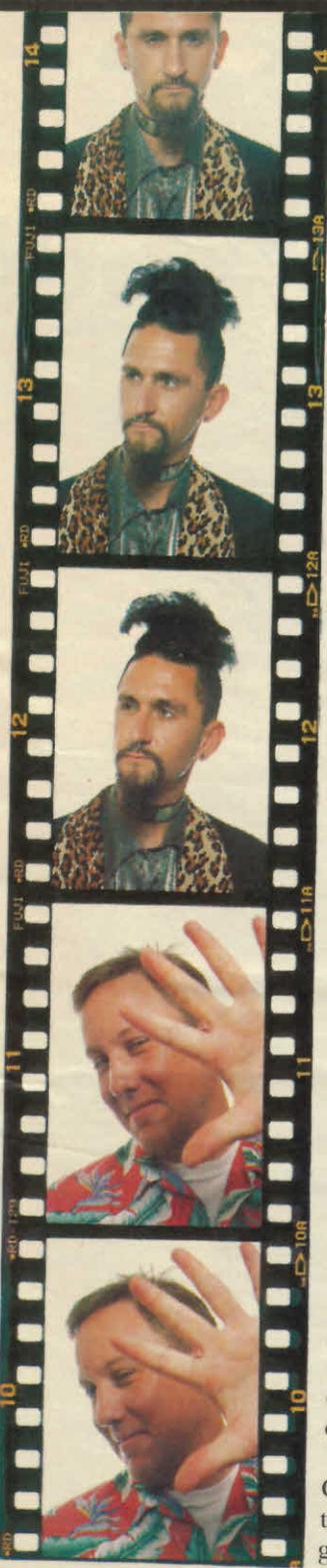
Last night, Def Con V blasted off, the fifth annual gathering of computer hackers, phone

phreaks, programmers, futurists and civil libertarians. I'm a three-timer, a veteran of the first Def Con in 1993, attended by perhaps 50 mostly scruffy youths at the Sands Hotel & Casino. Since then, Def Con has grown twenty-fold, leaving in its wake damaged hotels, colorful arrest records, and growing interest from corporate executives and major media. This year,

as usual, it was a struggle to find a hotel willing to host the event.

But Def Con is different this year—and not only because 1,000 people have come, and ABC's "Prime Time Live" is filming it. Kids with backward baseball caps still show up, but now so do the major leaguers—guys like Rambo, who works for IBM. And more than a few of the longhairs and kids with dyed do's at the conference are earning six-figure incomes for hacking or programming,

Top, Acid Angel; middle, Commander Crash; below, Richard D. Thieme



HACKERS

without the benefit of a college education. Hacking isn't just cool. It's also profitable and, increasingly, respectable.

Tiger hunt

Computer security is big business and a growing worry for corporate and government types. In a reversal of company policy, Microsoft sent senior staffers to Vegas to break bread with hackers (I'm speaking literally: Microsoft picked up a \$600-plus restaurant tab at the glitzy New York, New York hotel and casino) and attend briefings with hackers skilled at finding bugs in operating systems and software. Representatives from Cisco Systems Inc., Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., IBM Corp., the Army and the National Security Agency made the trip, too.

And no wonder. Recent headlines and studies suggest computer systems are more porous than ever and attacks are on the rise. Earlier this summer Mountain View's Netscape Communications Corp. was embarrassed by a hacker who discovered a major bug in its browser and then demanded hush money—or he'd go to the media with the flaw. San Jose's Netcom was taunted by a teenager who revealed to the press that he'd been eavesdropping on the Internet service provider's voice mail since he was 13. Web sites have become favorite targets of the computer underground, and in the last year Web pages at the Justice Department, CIA and Air Force have been tampered with.

"Half of all reported break-ins are what we call hit and run attacks, graffiti attacks," says Eugene Schultz, director of SRI International's information security consulting practice in Menlo Park. "The goal is disruption or destruction." But Schultz and others say these mostly amateur attacks are part of a broader problem. A 1997 Computer Crime and Security Survey by the San Francisco-based Computer Security Institute, with the assistance of the FBI, found that corporate financial losses from computer security breaches are common. Seventy-five percent of the nearly 250 organizations that responded to the survey reported financial losses—everything from financial fraud to theft of proprietary information, sabotage and computer

The lobby of the Aladdin's casino is filled with young hackers—some of whom try to use their computers to beat the casino.

IT HAS
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TO HOST
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viruses. The estimated total losses: more than \$100 million.

"Network security was bad enough before electronic commerce," says Richard Power, director of the Computer Security Institute. "Then companies opened their enterprises to the Internet." Power recommends companies test their security by hiring IBM, SRI International and other reputable firms to do "tiger" or penetration testing. Think of it as like paying a professional safecracker to break into a bank vault: Experts try a number of methods to hack into a company's computer network, and then prepare reports showing where weaknesses lie. "It provides empirical proof of a company's security or insecurity," says Schultz, who heads a 14-member tiger team. "In other words it's a wake-up call to management."

Security checkups range from a few thousand dollars to check a single network server to hundreds of thousands for enterprise-wide, months-long investigations. Top penetration experts earn more

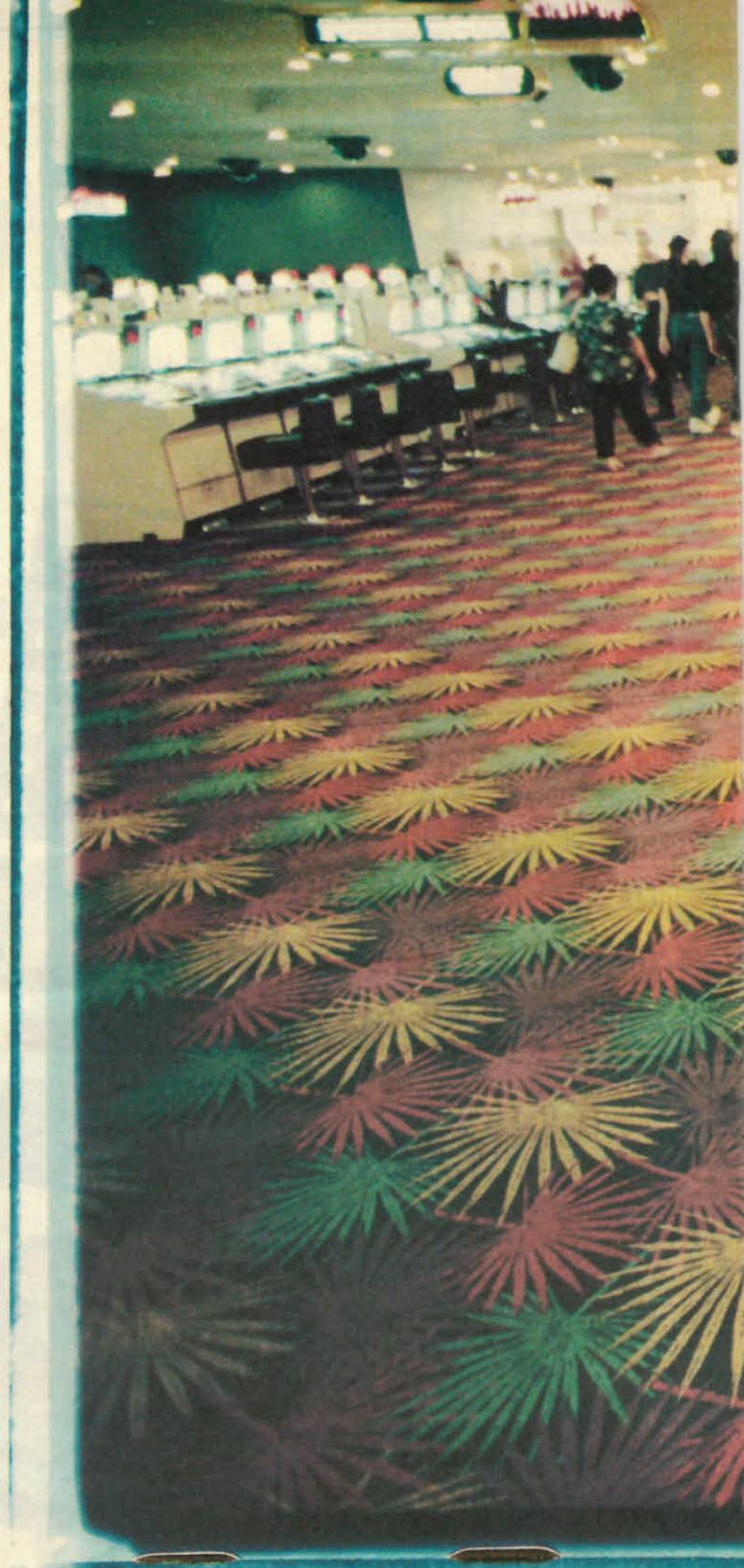
than \$200,000 a year. Although experts warn against hiring hackers with a criminal past or underground connections, people who fit the broader definition of hacker (clever programmers who don't know the meaning of impossible) and computer security professionals are meeting, comparing notes, finding new common ground and career opportunities.

"I used to look at these confer-

ences as events for kids in black T-shirts," says Michael Harris, a vice president of information technology security consulting at Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco. "Now I think of it as a nice quality-testing environment for improving software."

Beyond the pranks

If you're wondering what Def Con stands for, the term, as every





hacker knows, is prominently featured in the classic hacker flick "WarGames," and is short for Defense Condition, military jargon for how close we are to nuclear war.

Def Con I nearly capsized when security at the Sands Hotel & Casino booted out three 17-year-olds trying to sleep overnight in the meeting room. Hackers considered getting even: An attendee offered the conference's promoter the

password to the computer that ran the casino's operations. Fortunately, he turned down the opportunity.

At Def Con II, the favorite game was "spot the fed": vying to identify FBI agents, Secret Service men and NSA spooks who study, record and film the computer underground. Routine pranks have included messing with hotel phone switches and video checkout systems. (Spirited sorts removed parents' blocks

on X-rated fare.) One year someone yanked a fire alarm out of the ceiling, dropped it in an elevator and pressed the down button, ripping out a floor of cables. In 1995, a couple of hackers downloaded 1,700 credit card numbers from Tower Records to show off at the conference. They went to Def Con III all right, and returned home to federal prison sentences.

Last year, female Def Con atten-

dees—a growing contingent—began playfully whipping one another, until hotel security burst into the meeting room. Dark Tangent, the clean-cut 27-year-old promoter of the event, was ushered out of the Monte Carlo Resort & Casino before guards could find him. He hid in another hotel until it was clear he wasn't a wanted man.

It has become increasingly tough to find a hotel to host the



HACKERS

summertime free-for-all in Las Vegas, a city that welcomes porn conventions. Last summer, the Monte Carlo faxed virtually every other hotel in town about the volatile conference-goers. This year, Dark Tangent found a home in the fading Aladdin Hotel/Casino by virtue of a hacker-like trick: He modified the name of his Seattle company to DC Communications.

The hacker ethic

But the fifth Def Con is more than a series of goofy episodes and pranks. This year the conference rose above its amateur roots and celebrated the creative hacker, that symbol of everything wild and frightening in technology.

"Here's how it works," the long-haired individual who shall go unnamed tells me between slugs on a foot-tall plastic beer glass shaped like Aladdin's lamp.

I've clocked maybe three hours in Vegas, and I'm already faced with one of those prickly hacker dilemmas, the nebulous gray area where establishment ethics and electronic exploration collide. Is he talking about a crime or a clever high-tech dodge?

"You hit 9 and then zero on the phone," Longhair continues, describing how to get an outside phone line. Then, he explains how to theoretically do something that might capitalize on an alleged glitch in the hotel's phone switch and save you the hotel's 75-cent access fee.

Another guy at the table, who has wrapped a softball-size wad of lunch meat in napkins, has a more primitive approach to hacking. He plugged his in-room safe into the wall outlet to try to evade paying the \$2 a day fee, an experiment that did not go quite as planned. "His safe is not working," says Longhair with a chuckle, adding philosophically, "Sometimes you have to break a few things."

Two tables away, Paul Leach, an architect in Microsoft's Windows NT group, chews on his lunch. He has come for "Black Hat Briefings," a relatively tame pre-Def Con event designed for corporate and government officials willing to pay \$1,000 for two days of talks with hackers. In a session yesterday, a hacker named Mudge pummeled Leach

with alleged password weaknesses in Microsoft Windows NT. Mudge claimed that in little more than a day he could crack all the passwords of a 40,000-employee corporation.

Leach doesn't mind being interviewed, but like most corporate folks here he seems to have forgotten his business cards. So far, nearly every corporate-government type I've talked with offers only a first name. As at a 12-step recovery meeting, it's unfashionable to be too nosy. I learned this when I met a fellow who said he works for the intelligence community.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Let's keep it a community," he said with a smile.

Paul Leach says he's cool with true hackers. "It serves as a de facto



The audience, including Dead Addict, an earlier speaker here perched on a table, listens to one of the convention speakers.

think are the true ethical hackers? "Mudge, Hobbit, Yobie," Leach answers, sounding as if he's naming characters out of Tolkien. Hobbit divides his time between research and consulting in computer security. Yobie Benjamin is the chief knowledge officer of Cambridge Technology Partners, a consulting firm. Mudge has the coolest job description listed in the conference program: "Mudge works for a 3 letter organization that deals heavily with security, cryptography and various other in-sundry [sic] fun projects." The trio is well known among the cyber-elite for uncovering and publicizing bugs—frequently those found in Microsoft software.

Which naturally leads Leach to express his main concern: Excessive ethics, like anything overdone, might be a bad thing. "We might get a reaction that borders on hysteria, like the electromagnetic power lines problem," he says, grimacing. "The reality might be far less dangerous than the hype."

After lunch, Hobbit, who is short and very smart and wearing a psychedelic shirt, is telling a room crowded with corporate and government types that putting data on a Microsoft network is about as safe as walking down a badly lighted city street alone. "It turns out the best attack is to walk up to the door and twist the knob," he says. "If the front attack doesn't work, you can try. . . ."

Leach arrives and Hobbit continues his rant. "If it [the software] does anything it's useless. . . . Once in, you can do a whole lot of nasty things, remote administration, viruses. . . ."

"Hobbit, this is wrong!" Leach shouts, jerking his hand up without peeling his eyes from the technical paper Hobbit has distributed. The outburst stirs murmurs in the back row. "I'd like to try to hold the questions until later." Hobbit coolly announces.

Mudge brushes aside his locks, taps my wrist and whispers with a grin, "This is brand new to Microsoft. He's showing how to break a [Microsoft] fix." Microsoft, to the hackers' delight, seems to be finding that patching bugs in its software is like trying to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

review," he says, "as long as they follow the hacker ethic and tell the targets before they reveal the bugs."

Hacker ethic? It's a term that's been kicked around for decades, and it means something different to the guy at Microsoft than to the guy who just fried his wall safe. It all depends on where you get your money. If you're hacking for the fun or challenge of it or getting paid by a corporation or the government, you're probably following the "hacker ethic." Criminal enrichment, motives of revenge or mass destruction—e.g., major credit fraud, Web site slamming, erasing your former employer's billing records—generally don't qualify.

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HACKERS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

plug holes in a sieve with a single finger. Leach is silent, nervously popping a pen back and forth in his hands behind his back.

"Does Microsoft want to be wide open?" Hobbit rubs it in, using slides to document supposed weaknesses in how Microsoft protects passwords. "Microsoft is no help, so who's going to do this? Security people and hackers."

Hobbit goes on: "What if the Big Six [accounting firms] start disrecommending these products? It might hurt their wallets." As the crowd applauds, Leach rushes up to Hobbit. But it's not the angry confrontation you might expect. Leach simply wants to whip his laptop out of his briefcase to prove Hobbit is wrong on some claims. Hobbit is conciliatory. "I apologize if that sounded abusive at the end."

At Def Con, hacking Microsoft approaches performance art, with people competing to outdo one another. Later that evening, I cram into a taxi with some hackers. The guy in the front seat starts spinning dials and punching keys on a small electronic device.

"What's that?" the cab driver asks.

"It's a scanner," he replies.

"How much?"

"Three bills."

Seconds later, the taxi's frequency crackles through and the cab driver laughs at the sound of his dispatcher. The hacker pivots and gets in my face. "You can't print our names, all right?" A minute later, he's switched frequencies and pulls the tiny microphone to his lips.

"We've had some problems with Paul Leach," he says in a serious voice. "We need to run a check on him. What's his room number?"

"Who's he talking to?" I stupidly ask my seatmate.

"Security at the Aladdin," he deadpans, as the other

riders laugh wildly.

Merging with the enemy

Minutes later, we've got a table at a Vegas facsimile of an English pub, brimming with fish and chips, lager and nearly a dozen hackers and hangers-on. A clean-cut guy who looks as if he stepped out of a '70s frat house pulls up a chair and orders a beer. He's Fred to the hackers. Fred works for the accounting firm Price Waterhouse.

"I do penetration and probing," he says before apologizing to one of the two women at the table. Fred loves Def Con. "Sometimes it's over my head," he admits, "but I come back with great stories for my talks." Fred had barely walked into his first Def Con conference a few years back when someone pointed at him and shouted, "Fed!" Fred said, foolishly, that he could neither confirm nor deny the allegation. "What a mistake!" he says now. "Nobody talked to me for the rest of the conference."

Chris, a twentysomething Def Con veteran, is warming to a leggy, dark-haired woman from Santa Cruz and talking about the commercial prospects for today's top hackers. One of Fred's competitors "offered me 170 grand a year, six to seven weeks' vacation," Chris says, flashing plastic fangs. "Fifty percent of my time can be spent on *research*." He grins as he lingers on the words, his hand working up his companion's thigh.

Back at the hotel bar, I have a drink with one of the hackers I met at the pub. After he's carded, he tells me his story, the one he's hiding from his fellow conventioners. Upon graduation six years ago—from high school, of course—he interned for Microsoft. Soon he was consulting. Microsoft never suggested he finish his degree and he didn't see the point. He's happily married now with a kid, and just signed onto

the Mother Ship, confidentiality agreements up the wazoo.

Microsoft wouldn't be too happy about his attending Def Con, he says, twisting his backward baseball cap. He has a handle in the underground and knows major vulnerabilities in Microsoft software, but now he's got a hefty salary and stock options he figures will mushroom to a third of a million in a few years—well before he's 30. The newest Microsoft Man, famous for not sleeping through the entire hacking convention, sighs, his puppy dog eyes melancholy. "This is probably my last Def Con."

A power issue

Friday afternoon, the convention yawns to life, the great hall thick with teenage boys sprawled out on the floor tapping on laptops, and earringed vendors hawking T-shirts with slogans like "Microshit. Be Our Slave," or "Big Brother Inside," and used cell phones at \$10 apiece. The usual paranoid books are for sale—"How to Investigate Your Friends, Enemies and Lovers."

Since yesterday I've been trying to corner this platinum blond, sunglassesed, major-pumped dude by the handle of Route. He edits Phrack, a popular underground 'zine, and from the official Black Hat program I read that yes, he performs "tiger team analysis of corporations." I've checked with Mudge and others who give the Walnut Creek coder a thumbs up talent-wise, but Route is hard to track down.

Now that the legions of hackers, wannabes and leather and chains have arrived, the media have, too. The longer or more neon the hair, the more journalists line up to interview and take photos.

Finally, I spot Route's chiseled form, and ask him if he's got a minute. But he's striding fast. "We'll talk later," he says with a wave.

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Some Def Con participants launch a balloon near the Air Force's top-secret "Area 51." After an earlier prank, a fighter jet scrambled from the airbase to check the radar disturbance.

"ABC is waiting."

An hour later, I hop in the front seat of a hacker's rented white convertible Mustang (\$170 a day, plus insurance) and we cruise into the cartoon backdrop of the Strip: three hackers, myself, and a female reporter squeezed between a couple of hackers in back, positioned on the trunk like a girl in a parade. Rich, a 23-year-old with a strut who does the suit thing at a major New York bank, explains what makes Bob—the clean-cut tiger tester next to her—so cool.

"He's God. When a hacker breaks in he leaves a signature. Bob finds that signature." The female reporter is impressed. "It's rad," Rich says, cranking up the Jones Girls' "Nights Over Egypt" until we feel the bass. "He's the best."

At the fashionable Mirage, we stroll over to a restaurant table and the subject is starting your own company. "I have people lined up to give me money," Bob says, already the beneficiary of one public offering. His face glows as he describes the benefits of founders' stock.

"Watching 10 of your friends become millionaires," he says quietly, "is a

quasi-religious experience." Rich tosses up a company idea and Bob shoots it down like a target in a video arcade. But the kid bounces back. He floats his other idea for a company, and this time Bob is impressed. "I've got the same idea," Bob says, pausing dramatically. "Add one piece and you have the potential to take over the world."

Rich grins broadly and orders his steak medium. But all the talk of easy hacker money doesn't kill the darkest fear of even the best hacker. Somebody new is always hoping to bump you. "I love what I do," Rich, who was once known as Master Chemist, says earnestly. "I anticipate I'll be doing it till the day I die. But I'm worried about the kid in the ninth grade. By the time they graduate [from high school] they know access."

"You're saying that soon these kids will be the equivalent of unskilled labor," Bob says.

"I'm saying someday I'll be old and slow."

Bob tells him not to worry. "The people they're turning out [from school] are idiots."

So what, then, does today's earnest young hacker need to get ahead? To

make it as a corporate hacker, my lunchmates say, all you've got to do—along with being a crafty coder—is know the computer buzzwords and fudge your résumé—usually by lying about your age.

Rich says, "My job before—I can't say the name because I'm under an NDA [non-disclosure agreement], I got it through a body shop [a computer consulting firm]—I was the CIO [chief information officer]. I told them I was 28."

One thing these guys won't lower themselves to is a programming test. "It offends my sensibilities," Rich says. His line when he's switching body shops? "You're not going to make me fill out a form, are you?" Nick is a slick, cigarette-puffing 18-year-old New York sophisticate known for donning several thousand-dollar Italian suits at Def Con; he was featured as "Razor" in a Details magazine article on hackers. He says simply: "You walk in and say your number [hourly rate], and if they don't want it you walk out." "Because I am that Ninja," jives Rich, adding with a chuckle: "I am mission critical."

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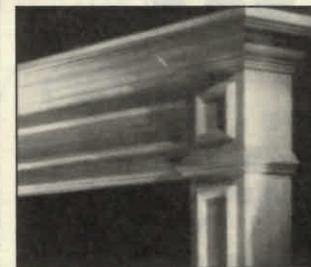
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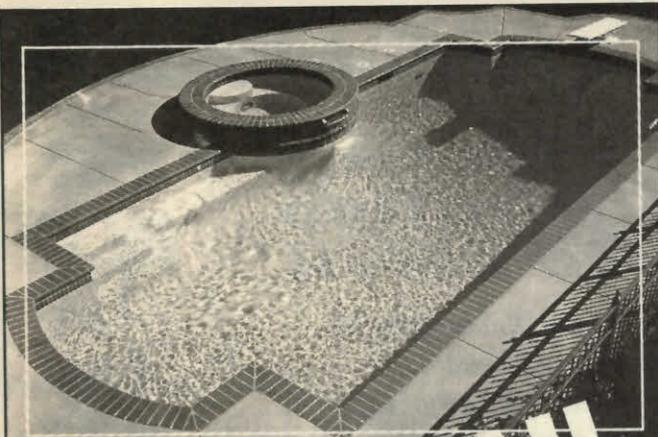
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HACKERS

as we wait for the valet to bring the white Mustang. Talk turns to the chains, spikes and leather that are so much a part of Def Con, the celebrated hackers who openly flaunt their fondness for S&M and bondage.

Rich explains it: "Hacking is a power issue," he says, waving the tip he's about to hand to the valet. "People need you."

In full swing

Sometime after 9 p.m., the conference officially kicks off with Hacker Jeopardy. ("He wore a frilly dress and was in charge of the FBI." "Who was J. Edgar Hoover?") Panelists who err must gulp down a swallow of beer.

The sign that Def Con is in full swing is the arrival of hotel security. Minutes after stepping from the podium, the Chris I'd watched working his girlfriend's thigh is taunted. Some guy sneers that it's too bad about what happened to his "boxes," hacker rap for an attack on his computers that cost him thousands of dollars. Chris spits, and the taunter punches—from behind. Security beams down and then a polished San Francisco lawyer hot to represent hackers negotiates on behalf of her "clients." She quickly defuses the situation: They get banishment from the hotel, no jail, no fine.

The female factor at Def Con is proof that hackers and computer security are now cool. I interview two professional women from a Big Six accounting firm. One is a CPA, the other works in computer security, "trying to gain more knowledge to protect clients against unwanted intruders." Just how different is this from past conventions? Let's put it this way: Attractive women without body piercings didn't go to Def Con. As one veteran hacker

THE FEMALE

FACTOR AT DEF

CON IS PROOF

THAT HACKERS

AND COMPUTER

SECURITY ARE

NOW COOL.

puts it, shaking his head, "What is it with the babes?"

I introduce the Big Six accounting women to another Chris, one of the nation's premier tiger testers, and a former member of the notorious Legion of Doom hacker gang. Chris and two fellow tigers join us for a little dancing at The Drink, Vegas' hottest nightspot. These guys thump confidence. One of them—not Chris—has this thing where he touches a part of nearly every well-proportioned woman who saunters by, bare midriffs, elbows, hair. I keep expecting somebody to slug him, but the women don't even react.

Handguns and hired guns

The desert and mountains stretch before us, downtown Las Vegas just a mirage. The cops didn't look in the trunk, and they didn't find the guns. And after grumbling about the \$150 fine for the illegal turn and missing registration, Rambo is ready to move on to more critical matters. He passes the empty reservoir that our directions said was a lake. At the sign that says, "Wild Burros. Do not feed

or harass. \$25 fine AND THEY BITE," he hangs a left on a dirt road to nowhere.

A rock clangs against the car's underbody and Rambo winces as the car wobbles like a toy boat in a tub. A mile or so later, Rambo pulls over amid cactus, brush and dirt.

As the second car in our group lurches to a halt in a cloud of dust, the weapons emerge: a .357 Smith & Wesson, several 9mm semiautomatic handguns, and, of course, that Chinese-made semi-automatic rifle. No one is sure whether this is where we were supposed to go and whether it's legal, but hey, it's far enough off the road, a hill makes for a safe backdrop, and there's all that ammunition in the trunk just waiting to be fired.

A few minutes later, I'm walking through the desert shaking up diet root beer cans and sticking them on boxes. Shadow, a bulky kid from Fremont in jeans and a green canvas shirt, joyfully exclaims, "I love destroying diet root beer!" Rambo, his two 9mm handguns holstered, and his earmuffs hanging around his neck, repeats the rules of fire, looking into the eyes of the shooters as he finishes with a simple non-negotiable demand: "No assholes." I take up position 15 feet behind the hackers, with Shadow and a couple of other unfortunates who don't have guns.

"Load and make ready," Rambo orders.

The chambers click in, the earmuffs slip over. I squeeze my eardrums tight with my fingers.

Rambo's first shot explodes a soda can, sending a plume of root beer skyward and launching respectful cheers from the peanut gallery. *Pop, pop, pop*, go the guns, interrupted by an occasional *schwoiiiiing* as a bullet ricochets off a rock.

After about half an hour of plugging my ears, I

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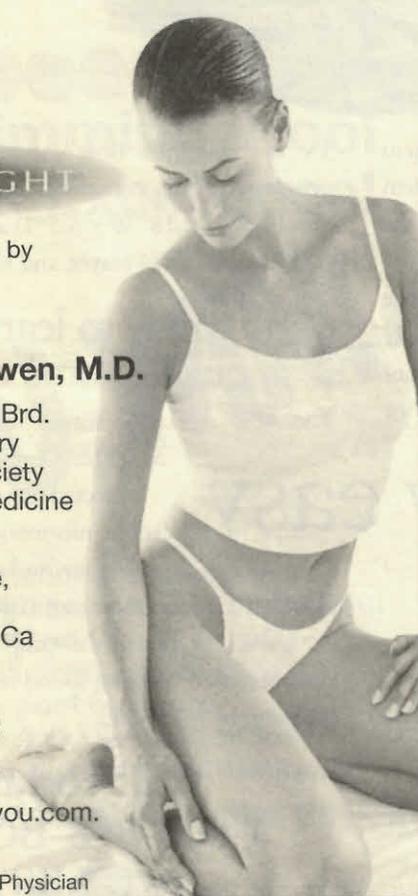
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HACKERS

squeeze off a round from a 9mm semiautomatic and earn some respect by knocking back a can of root beer. Rambo arranges a contest, and looks like the winner when he cans his soda in 3.34 seconds on his first shot. But Shadow squeezes like a pinball wizard and nails his third shot in a blazing 2.13 seconds.

Then it's the grand finale. "What about shooting at Bill Gates?" Shadow shouts. Chip, a jovial IBMer with a hearty belly and a T-shirt that reads, "Life is too short to smoke cheap cigars," pulls out from the car a target of a mugger waving a gun, and writes "Bill Gates" on it. Even Big Bluers, it seems, love to hate Microsoft.

The target is destroyed by a fusillade.

"I want to thank you all for satisfying my personal fantasy," an ecstatic Shadow announces, "We shot the s—t out of him."

As we get in the car, Rambo suddenly looks familiar. Not too long ago an IBM hacker—one of the world's premier tiger testers—was featured in a major New York Times article. "That was me with my parrot on my shoulder," Rambo says with a smile. "IBM rents me out." Nick (Rambo's real first name) was barefoot in the Times photo, shown working from his Boca Raton, Fla., home. The self-taught programmer uses Linux, a free program that is the favored operating system of many hackers.

It all makes sense. Somehow I'm not surprised that the guy leading the desert shoot is a highly respected and well-paid corporate hacker, the ideal to which many Def Con attendees aspire.

On the leisurely drive back to Vegas, I ask Rambo and Chip about corporate hacking and their thoughts about their amateur brethren.

"We're \$3,000 a day—per person," Rambo says,

"plus travel, plus living." Chip jumps in, "We're big guys, we eat a lot."

So how does this work? How does one authorize Rambo and Chip to crack a multinational corporation's computers? The hackers give the clients boilerplate "intrusion" agreements and instruct them to retype their legalese on their own corporate stationery. "They're specifically authorizing us," explains Chip. "It's all illegal" without the agreements. "There are no time limits. They accept all liability. It scares the living daylights out of them."

Rambo and Chip consider it their job to find problems, and thus they often find themselves purveyors of bad news. It's not for the faint-hearted, says Rambo: "If they want fairy tales, don't call us."

Nor do they see themselves as part of some establishment crackdown on hackers. "We're not in the business of putting hackers in jail," Chip explains, saying playing cops and robbers doesn't pay for corporate America. "Leaving your corporation at risk [from more intrusions while law enforcement investigates] and spending time and money with feds is expensive." What about Bug Busters, hackers like Mudge and Hobbit? "Anyone who finds and publicizes vulnerabilities is good," Chip says. "What can you say bad about these guys?"

Before I check out of the Aladdin, I'll talk to the hacker who led a troop in a Humvee out to the Air Force's mysterious Area 51, released a makeshift helium balloon wrapped with foil to trip the radar, and watched with amazement 14½ minutes later when a Navy F-something screamed within 500 feet of the provocateurs. I'll find the pirate hacker radio station putting on a demonstration of techno free speech: Up in a Def Con suite, the pirates are broadcasting on 99.9 FM, playing swiped local FBI

and law enforcement transmissions, eerie music and hacker interviews. And I'll sit Nirva down for a chat. Def Con's resident cyborg, Nirva's hair is flamingo pink and electric blue, a spike sticks out of his lip, steel twirls from his ears—what he dubs "projects." He's slowly unwrapping the Ace bandages on his wrists as he tells of the operation he underwent a month ago, the insertion of large surgical-quality steel rings under the skin on the top of his hands.

"It's subtly extreme," Nirva says of his motivation for making the backs of his hands resemble symbols left by aliens.

There are plenty of freaks here at Def Con, computer drones who crave the attention they can attract by dyeing their hair or strapping on leather and steel. Nirva, surprisingly, isn't one of them. His name is Danny Dalai and his programs for the Wall Street investment firm D.E. Shaw & Co. After a year and a half of high school, Nirva entered a school for "degenerates," passed his equivalency exam in three weeks and was soon consulting. His father designs jet engines for Boeing and GE, and his mother "starts companies." Nirva just turned 20, and he says that between his D.E. Shaw salary and selling his own programs he'll make nearly a quarter million in this, his first full year of work.

But I wouldn't bet on this soft-spoken, articulate prodigy becoming a company man. Nirva may be the perfect poster boy for the New Hacker Generation. As he covers up his implants, he smiles and says of his Wall Street employers, "I'll be there as long as they keep me happy." **W**

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