

Dating the *Carte de Visite* (1858 to 1872).

During the 1860s there were two types of card mounted photographs available to the public—the stereograph and the *carte de visite* (CdV). Since their introduction in the United States around 1858, card mounted photographs became a popular and fairly inexpensive feature of the material culture. They soon became popular as objects to be collected for memory and amusement, than as tools of etiquette (the calling card, see FIG. 1.). They served as objects to be collected and shared. Today they still serve that purposes, but most importantly to historians, they serve as a visual record of clothing, hairstyles, and objects. Because the cards often contained identifying information of the source, sometimes the subject, and even the date, they are extremely useful tools for study.¹

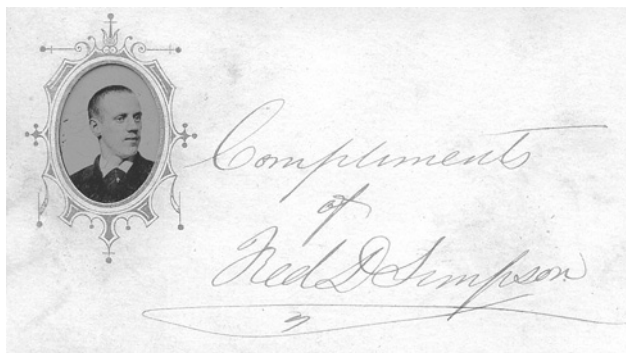


FIG. 1. A calling card with a mounted photograph. This “visiting” card is atypical in that it has a Gem size tintype mounted to it. Most calling cards did not. A search of 1860 and 1870 US Census indices not turn up a match for a Ned (or Fred) D. Simpson (or Sampson). The actual size of the card is 2.00 by 3.44 inches.

The photographs mounted on CdV and stereograph cards were albumen prints. As improvements in salt print (calotype) papers unfolded, a French photographer, Louis-Désiré Blanquet-Evrard developed a new printing paper in 1850. The paper was coated with a mixture of egg white and ammonium chloride. The paper could be dried and stored until need by the photographer. Silver nitrate and pyrogallol were still (as used for ambrotypes) the image producing agents. The paper could be cut to any size and contact prints could be made from glass negatives. The paper was then mounted on card stock or paste board using starch or flour paste.²

The purpose of this article is to provide useful technical information for dating CdVs from 1859 to 1872. Of course, the subject’s clothing and hairstyles, knowledge of geographical details in regard to

¹ The *carte de visite* (CdV) is a specific sized form of albumen print mounted on card stock. In 1854 André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri had developed a camera capable of taking eight individually exposed images on a single glass plate negative. Using a large piece of albumen paper these images were placed on the single sheet and then cut apart and mounted on calling card-size mounts. The dimensions of the image and card were approximately 2.5 inches by 4 inches (the width standard and the height varying slightly).

CdVs became quite popular in Europe. Queen Victoria became an avid collector. An American living in England, John Mayhall, published 60,000 sets of images of the Royal Family. Charles Fredreicks, a former daguerreotypist, was an early promoter of the card-size image in America. During the Civil War the popularity of CdVs increased and along with it the need for CdV albums. Edward Anthony, whose company was the largest supplier of photographic items, soon was mass producing images of famous figures from the military politics, literature and the arts.

Small tintypes (Gem size) were also attached to cards to meet the demand for inexpensive portraits. In smaller quantities Gem size image were actually attached to calling cards. People sometimes did leave CdVs of themselves when calling, but collecting them in albums rather than use as “calling” cards was the norm.

The acronym “CdV” for *carte de visite* is a modern term. During the third quarter of the nineteenth-century, the common term for *carte de visite* was “card photograph” or “card picture.”

² The albumen print time frame: 1850, introduced; 1860–90, peak years and 1890–1910, usage waned.

scenic images and the history of any objects shown are also interpretative features.¹ In the case of women's clothing, a CdV may be dated to within a year if one is knowledgeable of the quickly changing fashion trends popularly delineated in fashion magazines such as *Godey's* and *Peterson's ladies' magazines*.³

As with all identification and dating exercises the concept of evidence and logic is required. While an image may "say" one thing about the photograph, the mounting may say another. It is incumbent upon the researcher to "listen" to all the factors when establishing a date for a card mounted photograph. The factors that I have organized are based and entirely due to the extensive research of one man, William C. Darrah. Darrah's book, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography* should be considered as a standard reference and bookshelf item. Copies of the first editions and additional printings are available at used book store, online, and through Inter-library Loan. Darrah examined nearly forty thousand CdVs for his study and had a huge photograph collection of his own. I merely took the information presented in his book and arranged it in tabular format. I have added slightly to his research and that of others after collecting and examining a meager ten thousand CdVs in my collection.⁴

The tables and their accompanying notes and figures make up the main offering of this article. Using them to establish a date for a card mounted image will provide documentation and dating information for an individual image of study or cataloging information for one's photographic collection. For the most part, the tables are self-explanatory and in some cases additional notes have been added. The tables are "living" entities and constructive feedback is always appreciated.⁵

The Tables.

Table A lists the dating factors of the card stock used in mounting the image. Table B lists the dating factors of the decorative features found on the front of the CdV. Tables C and D list the dating factors of the imprint and backmark features found on the reverse of the card. Table E lists the dating factor of the image medium. Table F lists the dating factors of portrait styles. The shaded areas on all the tables highlights the Civil War years. One must keep in mind that many images we connect with the war years were taken after April 1865 and up to about 1868—that includes soldiers in uniform. Another factor to consider when characteristics are at opposition is that an earlier image might have been copied and mounted later.⁶

As a demonstration for using the tables, here is how the date of a typical card photograph can be approximated (see FIG. 2A and FIG. 2B):

TABLE A: Card Stock: white, less than 0.20 thick, with square corners (slightly rounded with handling) = 1858–69. Comparing the dimensions of this card to those of typical card the height was trimmed (possibly to fit in an album). The very small radius of the rounded corners is 3/32 inches.

TABLE B: Decorative Features: two line border (thick and thin gilt) = 1861–69.

TABLE C: Imprint Features: three lines with the word "duplicates" = 1861–66.

TABLE D: Backmark Features: revenue stamp (two-cent playing card (Scott R11 R2), photographer's initials, but no date) = 1864–66.

TABLE E: Image Medium: albumen paper = 1858–72.

TABLE F: Portrait Styles: seated pose with drape or simple furniture = 1860–66.

³ The CdV time frame: 1854, introduced in France; 1858, introduced in the United States; 1859–66, peak years and 1870–1905, usage waned.

⁴ William C. Darrah, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: W. C. Darrah, 1981).

⁵ My original combined work, the tables of Darrah's CdV documentation, was first published online in 1995 at <http://www.city-gallery.com>. A revised print version was published in *The Citizen's Companion in April 2008*, (vol. xiv, no. 8) and then again in the Michigan Photographic Historical Society's *Photogram* in its Fall–Winter 2017 issue (vol. 45, no. 1).

⁶ The dating factors for all six tables are based on information found on pages 170–96 of Darrah, *Cartes de Visite*.

Combining and analyzing that dating ranges, the narrowest window is 1864–66. In this rare case, the subject has put a fancy stamp with his name and either he or the photographer, J. D. Vickery, has affixed a date to the image. The photographer added the cost of the stamp to the prices of the image(s) purchased by the sitter. Further research of business directories and tax records might reveal information about the years that Vickery was taking photographs in Bath, New York.

In fact, a June 1863 Civil War draft registration for Bath, New York lists James Dallyn Vickery as a photographer. He was thirty-four years old and had been born in England. He as listed as living in Bath in the 1865 New York state census. He returned to England where he died in August 1884.

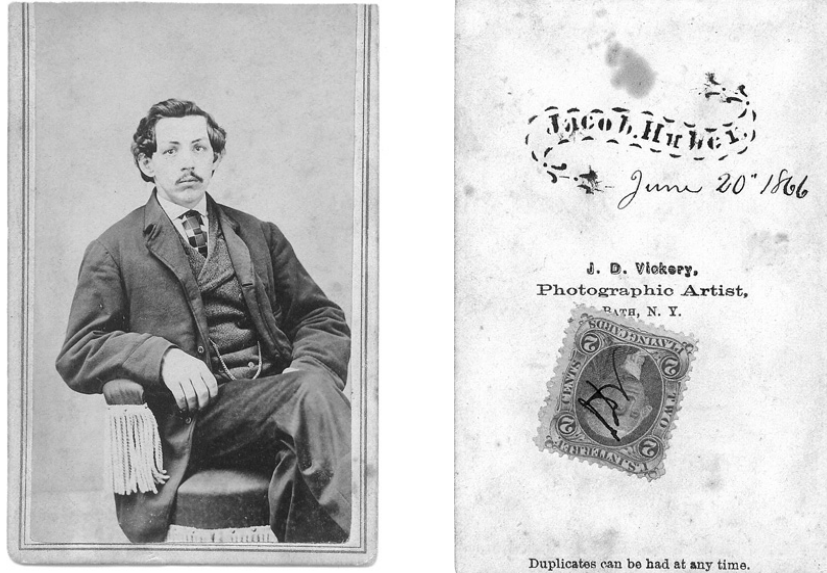


FIG. 2A (front) and FIG. 2B (reverse). CdV of Jacob Huber taken on 20 June 1866 and the reverse of the card. Card photographs with both the name of the subject and the date of the photograph are scarce. Rarer still is to find that information on a card with a backmark. Jacob Huber was born in Wurttemberg Germany in 1842. At age ten he came to the United States with his parents who settled in Bath, New York. He worked as shoemaker and laborer, and eventually became a gardener and church sexton around 1890. He died on 10 July 1913 in Bath and was buried in one of the cemeteries that he tended.⁷

A list of additional (but not exhaustive) reference books related to card mounted photographs appears at the end of this article. Researchers are strongly advised to spend time studying them as the effort will greatly aid their efforts. Since card mounted photographs are rarely found with even the minimum of information such as is on the back of the image above at least the image and its mount can be dated for studying the clothing, objects, or physical scene in the photograph.

My advice based on a favorite quote from Darrah's book is that "ingenuity and painstaking observation are indispensable in the search" for the cataloging, documentation and interpretation of card (or for that matter, any) photographs. The table's contents are open to adjustment based on increasing the sample size of your observation, and always beware the exception to the rule.⁸

Bill Christen

⁷ Information from Ancestry.com and Find A Grave.com.

⁸ Darrah, *Cartes de Visite*, 194.

TABLE A — Dating by Card Stock Characteristics.

Card Stock [1]								
YEAR	White Bristol Board [2]	Gray or Tan Bristol Board	Layered Paste Board [3]	Cardboard or Press Board [4]	Stock Thickness (0.010 to 0.020 inches) [5]	Stock Thickness (0.020 to 0.030 inches) [5]	Square Corner [6]	Round Corner [6]
1858	X				X		X	
1859	X				X		X	
1860	X				X		X	
1861	X	X			X		X	
1862	X	X			X		X	
1863	X	X			X		X	
1864	X	X			X		X	
1865	X	X			X		X	
1866	X	X			X		X	
1867	X				X		X	
1868	X				X		X	
1869	X				X	X	X	
1870			X	X		X	X	
1871			X	X		X	X	X
1872			X	X		X		X

1. The card stock can date the mount, not necessarily the image. Note that a few photographers may have cut and used any type of card stock that was on hand.
2. Bristol board is a stiff, single-ply paper board with a smooth surface. It was used almost exclusively between 1860 and 1866.
3. Paste Board is a paper board with three or more inner layers between better quality outer layers.
4. Cardboard or Press Board is a paper board made from a pulp matrix that has been compressed by rollers. High quality cardboard was more common after 1875.
5. Measure the thickness of the card, not the mount and image (measure near one edge with a micrometer caliper).
6. Cards with square corners can be further dated by the card color (yellow or white, 1869–71; gray, 1872–80). Corners are sometimes found clipped in order to facilitate insertion into albums. The natural rounding off of corners is uneven and not easily mistaken for the machine-trimmed round corners. Very small radii corners (less than 0.125–0.150 inches) are sometimes found on card before 1866—quite possibly the work of the photographer as stander cards were generally sold without rounded corners before 1870. Card stock thickness trumps rounded corners.

TABLE B — Dating by the Card Front Decorative Features.

YEAR	Decorative Features [1]						
	Plain – no boarder (white Bristol board)	Plain – no boarder (gray or tan Bristol board)	Boarder of 1 or 2 lines (gilt, red, blue, green, purple, magenta or black) [FIG. 3]	Oval Frame for Image (one or more lines with one heavy line) [2] [FIG. 4]	Oval Frame for Image (decorative motifs, brown, green, gray or blue) [2] [FIG. 4]	Oval Frame for Image (with tassels) [2] [FIG. 4]	Ornate Rectangular Surround of Oval Frame
1858	X						
1859	X						
1860	X						
1861	X	X	X				
1862	X	X	X				
1863	X	X	X	X			
1864	X	X	X	X		X	
1865	X	X	X	X		X	X
1866	X	X	X	X		X	X
1867	DIMINISHED USAGE		DIMINISHED USAGE	X	X	X	X
1868	DIMINISHED USAGE		DIMINISHED USAGE	X	X	X	X
1869 [3]	RARE		DIMINISHED USAGE				
1870 [3]	RARE		DIMINISHED USAGE				
1871 [3]	RARE		DIMINISHED USAGE				
1872 [3]	RARE		DIMINISHED USAGE				

1. Photographers were independent and did not always follow the fads and new trends in card mounts, decorations or imprints. One must consider all the card characteristics that can be dated. There is also the possibility that old and new stock was mixed during the photographer's period of operation. By 1872 the company of Collins & Son in Philadelphia, was the source for at least seventy-five percent of cards and mounts in the United States.
2. Also known as a cartouche
3. These decorative features rarely, if ever appear on cards produced after 1869.



FIG. 3. One and two line borders.



FIG. 4. Oval Frames. From left to right: one or more lines, decorative, decorative with tassels and decorative with rectangular surround.

TABLE C — Dating by Imprint Features on the Card Reverse.

Imprint Features								
YEAR	Small Pasted Labels [FIG. 5]	Simple Typeset Imprint (small print) [FIG. 6]	Single Line [FIG. 7]	Imprint (2 or more lines without the words “negatives” or “duplicates”) [FIG. 8]	Imprint (2 or more lines with the words “negatives” or “duplicates”) [FIG. 9]	Imprint (with a vignette (eagle, shield, liberty, etc.) [FIG. 10]	Imprint with Curved lines [FIG. 11]	Larger typeset imprint (usually 3 or more lines) [FIG. 12]
1858	X							
1859	X							
1860	X	X	X					
1861		X	X	X	X			
1862		X	X	X	X	X		
1863		X			X	X	X	X
1864		X			X	X	X	X
1865		X			X	X	X	X
1866		X			X	X		X
1867								X
1868								X
1869								X
1870								X
1871								X
1872								X

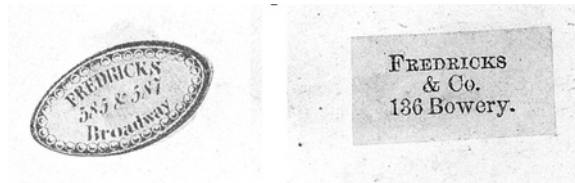


FIG. 5. Two examples of printed labels for Fredericks and Company.

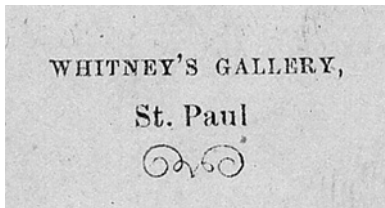


FIG. 6. Typeset imprint.

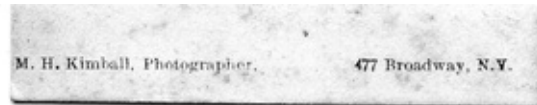


FIG 7 Single line imprint.

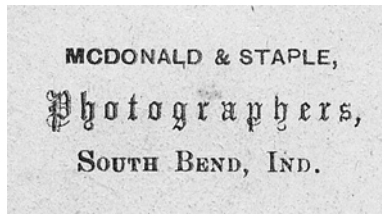


FIG 8. Three line imprint without "negatives" or duplicates."

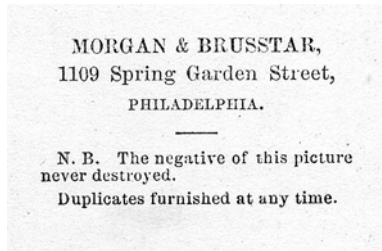


FIG 9. Three line imprint with "negatives" or duplicates."



FIG 10. Vignette Imprint.

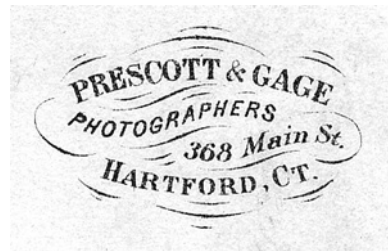


FIG 11. Imprint with curved lines.

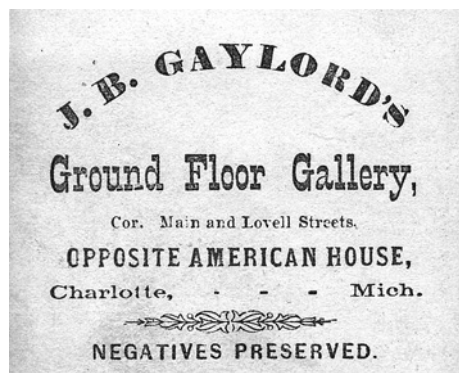


FIG 12. Large typeset imprint.

TABLE D — Dating by Backmark Features on the Card Reverse.

YEAR	Backmark Features								
	Name Vignette [FIG. 13]	Name Rubber Stamped [FIG. 14]	Ornate Vignette [FIG. 15]	“Camera and Cherubs” Graphic [FIG. 16]	Ornate Ground Work with Bilateral Ovoid Area for Imprint [FIG. 17]	Larger Typeset (3 or more lines)	Revenue Stamp Box [FIG. 18]	Revenue Stamp(s) Affixed [FIG. 19]	Length-wise Imprint in Large Type [FIG. 20]
1858									
1859									
1860									
1861		X							
1862	X	X							
1863	X	X				X			
1864	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
1865	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
1866		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
1867		X	X	X	X	X			
1868		X		X	X	X			X
1869		X		X	X				X
1870		X		X	X				X
1871		X		X					X
1872		X		X					X



FIG 13. Name vignette.

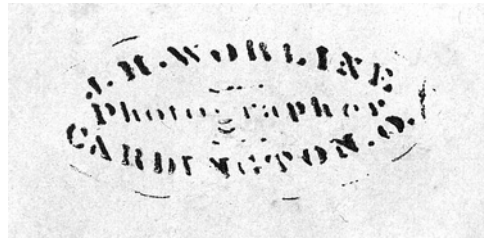


FIG 14. Rubber stamped.



FIG 15. Ornate vignette.

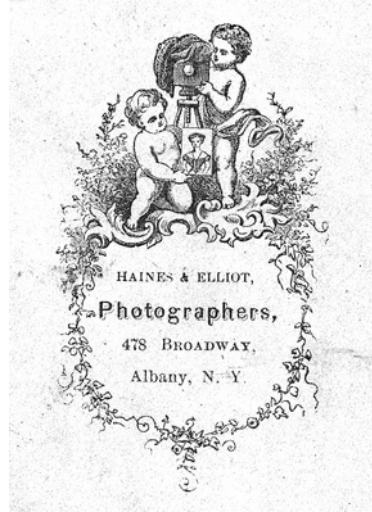


FIG 16. "Camera and Cherubs" graphic.

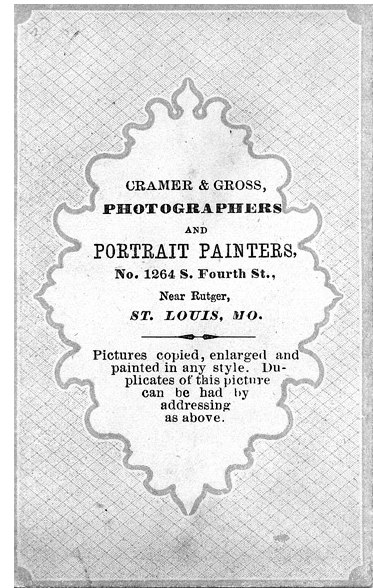


FIG 17. Ornate ground work with bilateral ovoid area for imprint.



FIG 18. Revenue stamp box.

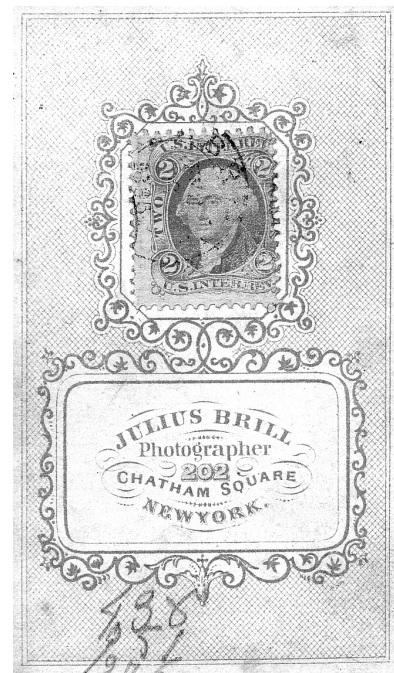


FIG 19. Revenue stamp affixed.



FIG 20. Lengthwise imprint.

TABLE E — Dating by the Image Medium.

Image Medium								
YEAR	Salted Paper (matte or no gloss finish) [1]	Albumen Paper (most CdVs)	Tinted Albumen Image [2]	Carbon Prints (relief effect) [3]	Image “Enameled” or Coated with Clear Varnish [4]	Tintype in Open Window	Tintype in Open Window with Embossed Border	Tintype in Paper Folder
1858	X	X						
1859	X	X						
1860	X	X	X					
1861	X	X	X		RARE	X		
1862	X	X	X		RARE	X		
1863	RARE	X	X		RARE	X	X	
1864	RARE	X	X		RARE	X	X	
1865	RARE	X	X		RARE	X	X	
1866		X	X	RARE	RARE	X	X	
1867		X		RARE	RARE	X	X	
1868		X		RARE	X	X	X	
1869		X		RARE	X	X	X	
1870		X		RARE	X	X	X	X
1871		X		RARE	X		X	X
1872		X		RARE	DIMINISHED USAGE		X	X

1. A positive photographic image can be produced on salted paper from a negative produced in the same manner. This was the process patented by W. H. Fox Talbot in England in 1841. Patent restrictions, long exposure times and grainy image quality salt prints never became as popular as daguerreotypes, especially in America. Salt prints (using the calotype process) could also be made from glass plate negatives. The image base was paper that had been bathed in salt water. The sensitizing agent was silver nitrate and the developing agent was pyrogalllic acid. Calotypes prints of any condition are considered rare.

Time frame for salt prints (CdV or larger): 1841, introduced in England; 1852–57, peak years and 1859–62, usage waned.

2. Colors were applied by hand and often look as if done by a child (“outside the lines” or uneven).

3. Carbon prints involved a technique to reduce fading by using specially coated paper. Images of this type are most often of European provenance.

4. As early as 1861 some images were coated with a clear varnish brushed over the print surface for a lustrous finish. The front of many enameled images often has a red border and “Improved Enameled Cards” along with a one line photographer’s imprint.

TABLE F — Dating by the Portrait Styles.

Portrait Styles									
YEAR	Vignetted Head (smaller than 0.75 x 0.75 inch)	Vignetted Head (between 0.75 x 1.25 and 1.0 x 1.25 inch)	Vignetted Head (greater than 1.25 x 1.5 inch)	Seated or 3/4 Pose (plain background)	Seated or 3/4 Pose (drape or simple furniture)	Seated or 3/4 Pose (vase, book, furniture, etc.)	Standing Pose (plain background)	Standing Pose (drape or simple furniture)	Standing Pose (scenic backdrop)
1858									
1859									
1860	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
1861	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	RARE
1862	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	RARE
1863	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
1864	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
1865		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
1866		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
1867		X	X	X	RARE	X	X	X	X
1868			X	X	RARE	X	X	X	X
1869			X	RARE		X	X	X	X
1870			X	RARE		X	X	X	X
1871						DIMINISHED USAGE	DIMINISHED USAGE	DIMINISHED USAGE	X
1872						DIMINISHED USAGE	DIMINISHED USAGE	DIMINISHED USAGE	X

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