

Pramodita Sharma
Srinivas Venugopal
Nicole Mallett

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Rhino Foods' People-Profit Dilemma: Inclusive Workforce Challenges and Opportunities

Established in 1981, Rhino Foods Inc. of Vermont was a \$60-million food products manufacturing company by 2019, best known as the birthplace of the iconic cookie dough found in Ben & Jerry's famous ice cream. With its *Do Right* ethos and a focus on an inclusive culture, this B Corporation had been ranked among the best workplaces in its industry and manufactured products for some of the largest food companies in the United States.

Now it again faced a challenge of balancing its people-centric culture with producing consistently high-quality products. In July 2019, a lively discussion was happening at the round table of the Rhino Foods meeting room. Present were Ted Castle, the company's founding president; his son, Rooney Castle, Rhino vice president and soon to be the president; Gene Steinfeld, director of operations; and Caitlin Goss, director of people and culture and the newest member of the top management team.

Earlier that year, Rhino Foods began to experiment working with the local correctional facility to hire new recruits from among people being released from the prison. Operational efficiency was a chief goal for Rhino Foods, particularly for Steinfeld.¹ But for Goss, inclusive hiring and driving a supportive, all-embracing culture among the employees were imperative, and this new initiative could put the company at the forefront of social inclusion work in Vermont and beyond.²

Referred to as No Background Checks, this initiative would eliminate barriers to employment for entry-level job applicants, including a career break forced by child- or elder-care responsibilities, incarceration, rehabilitation for substance abuse, homelessness, and being new to the region.³ Spearheaded by Goss, the initiative aimed to recruit much-needed staff at a time when Vermont's labor pool was particularly low while staying on course with Rhino's people-centric orientation.⁴

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From an operational perspective, and to ensure timely delivery of high-quality products to customers, Steinfeld needed 80 reliable workers for each of the two production shifts, five days a week. In addition, 25 skilled workers were essential for the maintenance and sanitation shift (see **Figure 1**). Floor supervisors could temporarily compensate for up to ten missing workers per shift by moving people around based on skills needed, pulling in a member or two of the maintenance crew to pitch in, or even slowing down a line. But, if more than ten people were missing, one of the five production lines had to be closed, thereby jeopardizing timely delivery. The only way to make up for the lost time was to add overtime weekend production and sanitation shifts that required paying 1.5 times the regular rate. This also would mean that some long-tenured, reliable workers of the company would have to sacrifice their family or personal time to work these additional shifts. So, Steinfeld was concerned about how these new recruits would perform on Rhino's factory floor and whether the company was equipped to support their training and development while meeting production targets.

Figure 1
Rhino Foods' Production and Sanitation Shifts on Weekdays

1 st production shift	11 p.m. – 7 a.m.	80 employees	50 on production lines (10 per line, 5 lines) 30 in support roles
2 nd production shift	7 a.m. – 3 p.m.	80 employees	50 on production lines (10 per line, 5 lines) 30 in support roles
Maintenance & Sanitation shift	3 p.m. – 11 p.m.	25 employees	

Source: Prepared by the case authors based on data collected on 11 May 2022 and 19 June 2022 from Rhino Foods and confirmed by Ted Castle.

Ted Castle, Rooney Castle, and Goss listened carefully as Steinfeld contended, "To deliver quality products on time without adding unnecessary costs, we need well-trained people who will show up every day to do the work."⁵

New employees that joined through the No Background Checks program faced a steep learning curve on the job and, especially at the beginning, many also had to sort through practical challenges of housing, transportation, child-care, and other personal issues. After the first two months of the initiative, it was clear that Rhino was losing a high proportion of these recruits. Many worked well for two to three weeks, but then ran into issues with their probation officer, transportation, healthcare, child- or elder-care, or other difficulties, and stopped coming to work.

Goss remained confident that the right support systems could transform the new hires' lives and their ability to perform at Rhino. "If we can find a way to provide flexibility and meet them where they are during training, we can retain them," she promised. "They'll feel supported, and loyal staff are exactly what the factory floor needs."⁶

It was clear to Ted Castle that both Steinfeld and Goss presented valid and important perspectives. He wasn't sure what the best course of action was, but he knew that his leadership team was passionate and would find a path forward that would benefit both Rhino's people and its bottom line, while meeting customers' needs.⁷ Rooney Castle added: "If we could find a way to do as well with our [No Background Checks] initiative as we are doing with our New Americans hiring, we will have enough qualified and trusted workers to be successful."⁸

How could Rhino Foods live up to its Do Right mantra for its customers, experienced employees, and the new hires? What insights could it draw from its past experiences with people-centric programs to make the new inclusive hiring initiative a success?

Not Business as Usual

Finding themselves in unfamiliar territory was not novel for the Castle family. Ted and Anne Castle were unconventional business people. He was an environmental science student and a hockey player at the University of Vermont in 1972. After his college graduation in 1974, he played and coached hockey in Italy and Sweden, before returning to Vermont as the assistant hockey coach at his alma mater for a few years. In 1981, he and Anne opened Chessy's, a frozen custard shop inspired by Ted's hometown favorite. Anne ran the store, selling their soon-to-be-popular ice cream cookie sandwich called the Chesster.⁹ Ted assisted her when he could, delivering Chessters to local convenience stores and ice cream desserts to restaurants. (see **Exhibit 1**).¹⁰

As the wholesale business began to expand, he left his coaching job to start a new venture with Anne. He said, "We needed a name to incorporate our new wholesale business. On our way to the lawyers, Anne came up with 'Rhino.'" At the time, the name didn't seem important because Chessy's was their main business. Although neither Anne nor Ted had a particular interest in the animal, they liked that rhinoceroses were strong and agile creatures with resilient families.¹¹

Coincidentally, just a few miles from Chessy's, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield started a small homemade ice cream parlor in a converted gas station, in 1977.¹² Over time, Ben & Jerry's would become hugely famous for its ice creams with chunky food bits, as well as its social mission. And, the two Vermont start-ups would become important collaborators.

The Castle family grew with the birth of two sons, Ned and Rooney, in the 1980s. During the summer months Ted remained in Vermont to operate their business while Anne and the children spent time with extended family in Rochester, New York. As he travelled back and forth between the two states, he explored wholesale opportunities with restaurants.

In 1988, the Castles sold Chessy's to concentrate on Rhino Foods Inc. and Anne stepped back to raise their two sons. Investments were made to install top-of-the-line machinery, and extensive training of the staff ensued. The company began manufacturing products for national brands. Examples included supplies for about 25 million ice cream cookie sandwiches to Nestlé's Toll House, and brownie batter and cookie dough to Ben & Jerry's for retail stores.¹³

During a delivery to the Ben & Jerry's research and design lab, Ted Castle saw a box of Rhino's cookie dough cut up into small pieces. Upon asking, he learned that Ben & Jerry's was chopping the dough into smaller chunks and adding it in their cookie dough ice cream flavor. As this flavor was gaining popularity, they were considering packaging it in pints to sell more widely. So, Castle offered to supply cookie dough in smaller chunks.¹⁴

"It sounds crazy, but it took two years to get gooey, chewy cookie dough into a pint of ice cream with the right amount of distribution," Castle said.¹⁵ By 1990, the product and process were perfected (see **Exhibit 1**), and Ben & Jerry's placed its first big order for Rhino Foods to deliver cookie dough for its ice cream pints. New Rhino employees had to be hired and trained in a hurry to deliver on this order.

Inclusive Hiring: New Americans Program

With Vermont's small population and heavy reliance on the tourism and service sectors, finding employees for manufacturing operations was a perennial challenge. New Americans offered a sliver of hope to Rhino Foods. In the 1990s, Bosnian refugees displaced by the Balkan wars resettled in Vermont. This was the first of multiple resettlement waves, with refugees arriving from Bhutan, Nepal, Burundi, Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Vietnam, among others. According to the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, the number of refugees resettled annually in Vermont increased from 89 in 1989 to 387 in 1999, and averaged 336 per year during 2008–2016.¹⁶

Unsure of how to deal with the practicalities of integrating non-English-speaking personnel into an English-speaking manufacturing facility with its exacting requirements, Castle was at first hesitant to hire refugees. However, Rhino needed workers, and he believed that “people want to bring their best selves to work every day and perform their best.” He later explained, “I’m more interested in building an inclusive company with workers from varied lived experiences, as it enriches the workplace culture and makes us stronger. I am more concerned with doing things right, than how big we are.”¹⁷

Rhino Foods was one of the first organizations in Vermont to hire new Americans, sowing the seeds of what was to later become the Inclusive Hiring program at the company.

Overcoming language barriers while training new hires for production lines required creative solutions, like providing instructions on signage with pictures instead of words, pairing new hires with more experienced workers with the same or similar local language and/or religious beliefs, adjusting production lines, and creating physical spaces for *salat*—the prayers offered by Muslims five times a day. Both financial and time investments had to be made to develop each support system.

Kim Underhill, Rhino's employee benefits partner who had worked with the New Americans program hires since it began, said that Rhino offered 24/7 translation services to facilitate conversations with new hires.¹⁸ In addition to showing them how to fill out forms, these conversations often included explanations for potentially unfamiliar practices, such as why they needed to enroll in healthcare or insurance benefits.

Justin Charron, manager of Rhino's People Safety program, explained the importance of proper training in manufacturing environments like Rhino's, where the factory floor was laden with heavy machinery operated in lockstep by synchronized line workers. Rhino invested in translating its operational training documents and adding subtitles to training videos. New hires were paired with tenured employees who spoke their native language. Charron said, “Our new American employees have been very successful and have not been getting injured, which is great.”¹⁹

Rhino's People-Centric Programs

Open Book Management

As an experienced coach, Ted Castle consistently sought to foster the best in the people around him. He recalled a critical conversation with a consultant who helped him see the link between coaching and operations: “Well, in a game ... you know the score, you know who your opponent is, you celebrate wins, you get bummed out after losses, you try to figure out how to build a team to win. At Rhino, I realized that only two people know, ‘Are we making money or not?’—myself and a finance person. So, 28 people have no idea whether we were losing or winning at making money. That's why we adopted Open Book Management.”²⁰

Rhino Foods began the Open Book policy in 1991 to share the company's financial information with employees. To comply with U.S. privacy regulations, salary and health-related information were presented at an aggregate rather than individual level. While transparency made it easier to justify financial decisions about raises or bonuses, and helped employees to understand the importance of their work to the continuity of the company, it also presented unanticipated challenges. Educational investments were required to ensure Rhino employees with varied levels of financial literacy could truly understand the company's financial position. When profits were low, it created a degree of nervousness among employees. Nevertheless, this program helped to further Rhino Foods' reputation as an inclusive company and to set higher expectations for its employees. Castle said, "Opening the books was actually what really started to drive the business, because I started to like business a different way."²¹

Employee Exchange Program

As Ben & Jerry's expanded nationally and the cookie dough flavor gained popularity, Rhino Foods faced an unanticipated challenge. Ben & Jerry's would place large orders that Rhino would deliver quickly, but then would not order cookie dough for several months. What was Rhino to do with its workers during these intermittent months? The two companies came to an agreement that Ben & Jerry's would place smaller order quantities spread over time, but nevertheless, Castle and his team had to figure out what to do with the dozens of newly hired and trained employees when they were not needed on the production floor.

After brainstorming, they decided to help these individuals find alternate temporary jobs and invite them to rejoin Rhino Foods when orders reached normal levels. By 1993, in collaboration with a few regional companies like Gardener's Supply and Lake Champlain Chocolates—that had seasonal business cycles opposite to Rhino's—the Employee Exchange program was formalized. Instead of being laid off or furloughed, Rhino workers were given the option to move to a partner company for an intermittent period. Appreciated by employees and employers alike, this program boosted retention, morale, and productivity, while improving workplace culture for all companies involved.

Resource Coordinator and the Income Advance Program

When Kim Underhill joined the company in 1999, she was surprised that employees would often approach her People and Culture department (Rhino's version of Human Resources) to ask for an advance, payable through paycheck deductions, for personal issues like car trouble or high heating bills. Some employees would go directly to Ted Castle and he would provide them with a loan.²² With 40% of Americans lacking available cash to cover a \$400 unexpected expense,²³ Underhill knew that as Rhino continued to grow its workforce, these situations would increase, and a better way was needed to support employees who lived paycheck to paycheck. Interim payroll advances did not address the root cause of the problem, which was that some employees did not have a credible relationship with a bank or a financial institution.²⁴

To find workable solutions, conversations were held with employees to better understand the problems and their efforts to find solutions. Underhill, Castle, and their leadership team also had discussions with other business leaders in the community to learn how they were managing such issues. The team also attended workshops like Bridges Out of Poverty offered by the non-profit United Way. These conversations helped them realize that many employees (a) were unaware of the support programs offered by governmental or non-governmental organizations in the region, and (b) could not access loans from financial institutions as they did not have a valid credit score. It took the team eight years to develop a two-pronged solution.

The first initiative was in partnership with United Way. A resource coordinator with training in social services would spend 3-6 hours per week in confidential conversations with employees at Rhino, and then help them to access resources. Employee's time spent in these conversations was paid by Rhino Foods.²⁵

The second initiative was the Income Advance Program (IAP) that launched in partnership with the North Country Federal Credit Union in 2007.²⁶ Any full-time employee with a 60-day tenure in good standing at Rhino could get same-day access to a \$1,000 loan for any unexpected need, with no questions asked and no credit score required. The employee would repay the loan within six months through automated payroll deductions.²⁷

This program not only directly helped employees handle unanticipated expenses, but it also furthered their credibility with a financial institution and helped build their credit scores. As employees learned that the small payroll deductions did not materially affect their cash on hand, 97% continued their participation in the program and built savings over time.²⁸

The program's impact was substantial for both individual employees and the company (see **Exhibit 2** for a personal account). Within the first decade of the IAP, the loans to Rhino employees totaled \$380,000 and employee retention had increased by 36%.²⁹ Rooney Castle, who joined Rhino Foods in 2011 as a batter maker on the production floor, explained, "We recognized a business need as we were losing good people, not because of work-related factors, but because they have lives outside of work that sometimes spiral out of control, causing them to miss or leave work."³⁰

By 2018, 50 other Vermont companies had implemented the Income Advance Program.³¹

Benefit Corporation

Rhino Foods became a certified B Corporation (B Corp) in 2013. Developed by B Lab, a nonprofit, this certification was created with a mission to transform the global economy to be inclusive, equitable, and regenerative, and was awarded to companies that met rigorous standards of social and environmental impact. A minimum of 80 points had to be earned on the B Impact Assessment, a score that Rhino Foods was able to achieve in just three weeks. "It was a natural fit," Ted Castle said. "The B Corp slogan, Business as a Force for Good, sort of says the same thing as Rhino's purpose—'To impact the manner in which business is done'—and we came up with that in 1988."³²

In 2019, working in partnership with B Lab, the Rhino Foods Foundation was formed largely to spread the word about the Income Advance Program to other socially responsible companies. All four Castle family members became foundation officers. Rooney Castle said the formalization of the foundation "allows us to think beyond one program and find other ways to support employees through financial means."³³

New Beginnings

When Caitlin Goss joined Rhino Foods in 2017, the company had initiated major facility renovations that would not only house its production machinery, but also expand its employee-centered spaces. By this time, 40% of Rhino's 120 employees were new Americans and several had moved into leadership positions on the production floor or the administrative office.³⁴

The new Crash Café (the staff cafeteria), with the 18 languages spoken at Rhino Foods represented on the walls, became a gathering hub that offered not only food but also free English language classes, employee massages, and other benefits requested by employees. As demand grew, Rhino worked with United Way to increase the availability of the on-site social worker to 20 hours a week, so employees in all shifts could take advantage of this resource.

Production and delivery pressure were increasing as Rhino grew, and the readily available labor pool shrank. In 2018, Vermont's unemployment rate had fallen to 2.5%.³⁵ The number of refugees coming to the state had decreased to 133 in 2018, and fell to a mere 23 by 2020.³⁶ Goss needed to develop new avenues for recruitment and retention.

To gain insight, she spent time with employees on the production floor and in the café. Two ideas emerged from these conversations. First, for retention, introduce paid holidays for major religious festivals observed by Rhino employees; second, extend the Inclusive Hiring program to Americans who were re-launching their work life.

Diwali and Eid al-Fitr

In 2018, when Goss voiced the idea of introducing Diwali and Eid al-Fitr as paid holidays to enhance retention, the leadership team had concerns about the \$50,000 in daily payroll and the potential revenue lost from production line shutdowns. Rhino had to balance inclusive hiring retention with profitability and meeting customers' needs.

In making her case, Goss focused on the value of retention and quantified it using year-over-year engagement survey metrics about why employees stayed and why they brought their friends or family to work at Rhino. She said: "Although it was difficult to make a direct comparison between loyalty, attrition metrics, and production dollars, Ted and the leadership team were willing to listen and saw the intangible but powerful benefits of such investments made in the past."³⁷

Rooney shared that "one of my favorite Rhino memories was announcing these new holidays at an all-day company meeting we call Rhino Day. It was awesome, people were excited, there were tears."³⁸ He clarified that these were paid days off for the entire company. Rhino was closed to give people the opportunity to share what this event was and why it was important to them, and so that all Rhinos could participate in the celebrations together. The company worked with community leaders and Rhino employees to decide what day to close and how to celebrate appropriately.³⁹ While this initiative enhanced employee morale, it also challenged Steinfeld and his team to juggle shifts to ensure Rhino's customers continued to receive quality products in time to fulfill their needs, as most were fully operational on these days.

Inclusive Hiring: No Background Checks

While refugee resettlement in Vermont had slowed, incarceration was growing. According to the Vera Institute of Justice, there was a 297% increase in individuals in Vermont jails and prisons between 1978 and 2015, with the number of incarcerated women rising from 11 to 157.⁴⁰

Goss connected with the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility, a women's prison located near Rhino Foods, and learned that no local employers were hiring women post-incarceration for fear of workplace biases and backlash. As these individuals often lacked work experience, they could not satisfy the reference checks or years of experience required by the traditional hiring systems in place at most organizations. High investment in training and workplace safety acted as further deterrents for hiring previously incarcerated individuals.

Through the closing months of 2018 and early 2019, Castle and his leadership team debated how to balance the people-profit needs. Goss made a case that Rhino needed to recruit amid the scarcity of personnel in the state, and this avenue offered an opportunity to hire individuals eager to join the workplace. The team was not certain that Rhino had adequate support systems in place for former inmates, as well as people in other categories not typically recruited.⁴¹ Steinfeld shared his personal belief in Rhino's

Do Right ethos, and felt that such hiring was the right thing to do even though it would be an uphill battle to integrate these new people into the production floor.⁴² Encouraged by his leadership team, Castle supported the piloting of this new initiative as part of the Inclusive Hiring program.⁴³

Goss' department started by interviewing women in the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility and invited those selected to join Rhino Foods upon their release. However, they soon learned that these interviews did not accurately predict individual success at Rhino, so a decision was made to remove all conventional barriers to entry, including interviews, and try something different.

Starting in May 2019, anyone who wanted an entry-level job at Rhino Foods was invited to take a two-day intensive onboarding and orientation crash course, free of charge. This course was held every other week at Rhino Foods and meals were provided. The course focused on company culture, employee benefits, personal and food safety, and technical skills. Three expectations were emphasized: to be on time, respectful, and ready to learn. During this time, they checked in daily with their supervisor and Goss.⁴⁴ Upon successful completion of this course, the new hires began 60 days at entry-level. Goss explained: "We decided to invest the money companies typically spend in selection and recruitment processes into training and supporting those who come to our facility."⁴⁵

However, the No Background Checks initiative presented many unanticipated hurdles, as some hires struggled with issues such as homelessness, access to childcare or transportation, medical appointments, capacity to work, and more. The flexibility needed to manage such issues was in direct opposition to the demands of manufacturing lines designed to run like clockwork, produce great product, and drive operational efficiencies. Goss explained: "We invited some people to leave, reminding ourselves a lot about 'no judgement in, and no judgement out.' They were welcome to come to Rhino again when they were ready to join the workforce."⁴⁶

However, other challenges emerged. Current employees also wanted to feel comfortable at work, and some were clearly distressed with the knowledge that certain coworkers had joined Rhino without a background check for criminal history. Ted Castle said, "Let's just say that we hire a person with a serious offense—eventually everyone knows over time, leaving our people and culture team to deal with the fallout."⁴⁷

What Next?

By the end of 2019, Rhino Foods had grown to 220 employees while maintaining a spirit of inclusion in its diverse workforce. The company had been recognized nationally for pioneering numerous employee programs that simultaneously supported its social and financial bottom lines. Still, at times tensions arose between these two missions. Perseverance, partnerships, and continued innovations were essential to find pragmatic solutions to juggle these seemingly opposing forces.

Being a family-owned business allowed Rhino Foods to stick with new initiatives, reinvest in the company and its people, and iterate on existing programs. Ted Castle said: "We can try stuff and we don't have to justify it to anybody. Just need to justify it to ourselves. I believe we have a long-term approach to business."⁴⁸

Nevertheless, questions remained: Was the current array of inclusivity programs sufficient to sustain the diverse workforce of Rhino Foods? And, was it an enabler of revenue and profit growth for the future?

Exhibits

Exhibit 1
Timeline of Rhino Foods' People-Centric Programs

Year	Event / Program
1977	Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield open Ben & Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream Parlor in Burlington, Vermont.
1981	Ted and Anne Castle start selling a frozen ice cream sandwich called Chesster from a small store, Chessy's Frozen Custard, in Winooski, Vermont. Rhino Foods Inc. is incorporated to do business as Chessy's Frozen Custard to sell ice cream sandwiches to restaurants and wholesale operations.
1986	First order from Ben & Jerry's company for cookie dough and brownie batter.
1988	Chessy's Frozen Custard is sold.
1990	Working with the research and design team of Ben & Jerry's, Rhino Foods perfects cookie dough for ice cream pints. Ben & Jerry's places large orders for cookie dough, but with intermittent gaps of several months between orders. First wave of Bosnian refugees hired, increasing Rhino's employee count to 30 and setting off a series of inclusive hiring programs. Temp agency engaged to help place out-of-work employees during intermittent gaps in orders.
1991	Open Book Management program launched to share company's financial information with employees.
1993	Employee Exchange program launched with B Corp companies Gardener's Supply and Lake Champlain Chocolates for out-of-work employees during intermittent low-production periods.
2007	Income Advance Program (IAP) launched to support employees in financial distress.
2011	Rooney Castle joins Rhino Foods on the production floor as a batter maker reporting to the shift supervisor.
2012	Gene Steinfeld joins Rhino Foods after 20 years at Ben & Jerry's and 8 years at another manufacturing company in Vermont. Ben & Jerry's becomes a B Corp-certified company, thereby formalizing itself as a company that places equal importance on its products and social and economic missions.
2013	Rhino Foods becomes a B Corp-certified company.
2017	Caitlin Goss, a recent graduate of the University of Vermont's Sustainable Innovation MBA (SIMBA) program, joins Rhino Foods as the director of people and culture. Employee count at Rhino Foods is 120.
2018	Eid and Diwali are declared paid holidays at Rhino Foods. No Background Checks program for new hires is initiated.
2019	Rhino Foods Foundation is established to spread the IAP beyond Rhino Foods. \$60 million in revenue, 220 employees.

Source: Rhino Foods company interviews conducted 11 May 2022 and 19 June 2022 with Ted Castle, Anne Castle, Rooney Castle, Caitlin Goss, and Gene Steinfeld.

Exhibits (cont.)

Exhibit 2
An Income Advance Program Story

For Rhino employee JD, the Income Advance Program (IAP) helped to maintain the personal stability necessary to be promoted from the production line to a management role.

"I was in a tough spot," he explained. "Heating bills can be expensive here, as it gets really cold, and my bill came in a lot higher than I expected. I would have had a really hard time paying it without making a sacrifice to another bill that was due and possibly falling behind on payments on one thing or another. But I had become eligible to use the loan, and I took advantage and avoided a difficult situation. ... Not having to derail at all was massive."

The second time he used an income advance loan was when he found himself without access to transportation and unable to get to work without walking miles, often during inclement weather. Through the IAP, he was able to put a down payment on a new car.

He said, "The IAP had helped me out in a hard situation and put me in a position to more easily make the improvements in my life that I needed to get on track, and today, become the best version of myself."

Source: Anonymized Rhino Foods Employee. Personal interview. 11 May 2022.

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Notes

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