Company Towns: From Coal Mines to Elon Musk

I. Introduction

The term "company town" evokes potent images from American history: isolated communities carved out of wilderness, dominated by a single industrial enterprise, where the rhythms of life were dictated by the factory whistle or the mine shift. At its core, a company town is a community where one firm is the principal employer and typically owns most, if not all, necessary services and functions, including housing and stores.[1] However, this basic definition belies significant variation. Some were purpose-built by corporations in remote areas to access natural resources, often requiring workers to live in company housing as a condition of employment.[1] Others emerged from existing small towns that grew alongside a dominant local company, sometimes with privately owned housing.[1] The term itself gained currency in the late 19th century, frequently associated with the mining camps and smelters of Appalachia.[6]

These communities played a pivotal role in the economic and social development of the United States, particularly during the era of rapid industrialization.[1] While such towns existed globally, the unique American context—vast undeveloped land, abundant natural resources, a tradition of social experimentation, and an initial laissez-faire approach to business regulation—provided fertile ground for their proliferation across various regions and industries, from New England textiles to Appalachian coal mines and Western lumber camps.[1]

Company towns embodied a fundamental duality. They were presented, and sometimes genuinely conceived, as "industrial Edens" or "model towns"—planned communities offering workers superior living conditions, modern amenities like indoor plumbing and heating, schools, libraries, and a morally regulated environment, intended to foster a healthy, stable, and productive workforce.[1] Conversely, many devolved into "Satanic Mills" or "exploitationvilles," characterized by corporate control bordering on the absolute, poor living conditions, the exploitative scrip system, suppression of dissent, and the constant threat of eviction.[1] This tension between paternalistic benevolence and autocratic control is central to the company town narrative.

The definition and societal perception of the company town have not remained static. They have evolved in response to broader shifts in economic structures, labor relations, and social values. Initial justifications centered on the practical necessity of housing workers in remote locations and the paternalistic ideal of moral uplift.[1] As

industrial capitalism matured, analysis increasingly focused on mechanisms of control—company stores, scrip, anti-union tactics—highlighting the potential for exploitation.[4] The mid-20th century saw the decline of the traditional company town, rendered largely obsolete by technological advancements like the automobile, the rise of organized labor, and transformative government policies like the New Deal.[7] Yet, the concept endures, experiencing a complex resurgence in the 21st century, particularly within the tech industry and through the ambitious, controversial projects of figures like Elon Musk.[1] These modern iterations, often framed around solving contemporary problems like housing affordability or fostering innovation, nevertheless raise familiar questions about corporate power, worker dependency, and community autonomy.

This paper will explore the trajectory of the company town in America, examining its origins, the mechanisms of corporate control, the history of labor resistance and conflict, the factors contributing to its decline, and its contemporary revival. It argues that while the form and context of the company town have evolved significantly, the fundamental dynamic—the concentration of corporate power shaping the lives of workers and communities—persists, presenting enduring ethical challenges from the coal mines of the 19th century to the tech campuses and planned communities of the 21st. The American landscape itself, with its vastness and resource wealth coupled with periods of weak regulation, created unique opportunities for this model to flourish, suggesting a deep connection between the nature of resource extraction, frontier capitalism, and this particular form of socio-economic organization.[1]

II. Origins and Early Forms: Necessity, Paternalism, and Profit

The emergence of company towns in the United States during the 19th century was driven by a confluence of factors rooted in the demands of industrialization and the specific conditions of the American landscape.

- **The Imperative of Necessity:** Foremost among the motivations was sheer necessity. Many key industries, particularly extractive ones like mining and lumbering, or those reliant on specific natural features like water power for early textile mills, were located in remote, undeveloped areas.[1] These locations often lacked existing towns, housing, infrastructure, or a readily available workforce. To operate, companies had to build communities from scratch, providing not only the factory or mine but also the essential living facilities for their employees.[1] Furthermore, large industrial complexes required significant physical space for their initial construction and potential future expansion, which remote, undeveloped land could readily provide.[5] The establishment of these towns was often a pragmatic solution to the geographical isolation of the industrial

enterprise.[4]

- **Securing a Labor Supply:** Closely linked to necessity was the challenge of attracting and retaining labor, particularly in the relatively labor-scarce environment of 19th-century America.[5] Company towns offered a way to draw workers to remote locations by providing housing and basic amenities. Early textile towns like Lowell, Massachusetts, actively recruited specific demographics, initially young, single women from rural New England ("Lowell Girls"), and later immigrant families from Ireland, Canada, Greece, Poland, and elsewhere, to meet their labor needs.[5] Providing housing, especially, was a key incentive to attract workers who had no other options in these isolated settings.[5]
- **Paternalism: Idealism and Pragmatism:** The concept of paternalism played a significant role, representing a complex mix of idealistic intentions and pragmatic business strategy.[13] Some industrialists genuinely viewed it as a moral or even religious duty to improve the lives of their workers, aiming to create orderly, healthy, and "morally uplifting" communities.[6] They sought to avoid the squalor, congestion, and perceived immorality associated with industrial cities in Europe, believing that a better environment would lead to a better society and reflect well on the young American republic.[5] Francis Cabot Lowell, for instance, was reportedly repelled by the conditions he saw in British mill towns and envisioned a different model for his workers.[10] This often involved providing amenities like schools, libraries, churches, and parks, while simultaneously prohibiting perceived vices such as alcohol consumption and strictly regulating social behavior.[4] However, this paternalism was frequently intertwined with the "sagacity of self-interest".[7] By controlling the living environment and promoting certain behaviors, companies aimed to cultivate a loyal, disciplined, productive, and, crucially, non-unionized workforce.[4] The "moral uplift" was often a tool for workforce management.
- **Profit and Control:** Economic motives were ever-present. Owning the housing and stores created a captive market, allowing companies to recoup infrastructure investments through rent and potentially charge inflated prices for goods.[3] Rent was often deducted directly from wages.[19] This economic control reinforced the company's dominance over the workforce.[26] The very remoteness that necessitated the town's creation also facilitated this monopoly, limiting workers' access to outside merchants and alternative employment.[4] Thus, the solution to the problem of accessing remote resources inherently created the conditions for potential exploitation through economic dependency.
- **Lowell, Massachusetts: The Archetype:** Lowell stands as the quintessential early American company town, founded in the 1820s by the Boston Manufacturing Company.[5] Built near a waterfall on the Merrimack River to power its textile looms

[5], Lowell was a meticulously planned industrial community.[5] Its founders recruited young, unmarried women from rural New England farms, housing them in company-owned, supervised boardinghouses.[5] Life for the "Lowell Girls" was regimented, governed by factory bells and strict rules mandating church attendance, temperance, and curfews, enforced by boardinghouse keepers and a system of "morals policing".[5] Missteps could lead to blacklisting.[5] The town's physical layout itself reflected the factory hierarchy, with managers' housing situated more prominently than workers' boardinghouses.[7] While initially profitable and lauded, Lowell eventually faced labor protests over wage cuts and deteriorating conditions as early as the mid-1830s.[5] The workforce diversified with the arrival of immigrant families, the boardinghouse system declined, and the town faced economic hardship due to competition, overproduction, and the Civil War's disruption of cotton supplies.[5] Lowell's trajectory illustrates both the initial motivations and the inherent limitations and conflicts of the company town model.

Other early examples included numerous textile mill towns across New England [5] and industrial villages in the Northeast designed to create a specific social order.[8] These American experiments drew inspiration from, and sought to improve upon, earlier industrial villages in Britain [8], while the concept of purpose-built worker housing dates back even further, to ancient Egypt.[13]

III. The Company Town Matures: Life Under Corporate Dominion

As the company town model proliferated across various industries—coal, steel, lumber, manufacturing—during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the reality of life within these communities became more complex and often fraught with tension. While some towns offered commendable living standards, the overarching structure inherently concentrated power in the hands of the employer, leading to various forms of control and potential exploitation.

- **Housing: Shelter and Control:** The quality of housing provided by companies varied dramatically. At one extreme were the early, often temporary, camps associated with logging or mining, which might consist of little more than tents or rudimentary shacks with no running water or electricity.[19] At the other end were the "model towns" like Pullman or Hershey, which boasted well-constructed homes featuring modern amenities for the era, such as indoor plumbing, gas lighting or electricity, central heating, and maintained yards.[1] However, even good housing served as a mechanism of control. In many remote towns, residing in company-owned housing was mandatory or a practical necessity for employment.[1] This landlord-employer relationship gave the company significant

leverage. Rent was typically deducted directly from wages, and while sometimes reasonable, could be inflated in the absence of market competition.[4] More critically, the company held the power of eviction, often on very short notice (e.g., five days), which could be used to punish workers for infractions, perceived disloyalty, or, most significantly, participation in strikes or union organizing activities.[7] Losing one's job invariably meant losing one's home.

The physical layout of company towns often deliberately reflected and reinforced the corporate hierarchy and social order. It was common practice to segregate housing based on occupational status, ethnicity, and race.[7] Managers and company officials typically resided in larger, better-appointed homes in more desirable locations ("Quality Hill"), while laborers lived in smaller, often identical houses or boardinghouses closer to the factory or mine, sometimes in distinct sections designated for specific ethnic groups ("Hunk Town," "Pink Town") or African Americans ("Colored Hill").[7] This spatial organization served as a constant, visible reminder of the power structure and the company's control over the community's social fabric.

- **The Company Store and Scrip System:** The company store was a ubiquitous feature, often holding a monopoly on retail trade within the town due to isolation or company policy.[3] This lack of competition frequently allowed companies to charge inflated prices for groceries, tools, clothing, and other necessities.[3] While some investigations found prices comparable to or only slightly higher than nearby independent stores, particularly in later periods or where unions exerted pressure, the potential for price gouging was significant, especially in the most isolated camps.[7]

Compounding the issue was the widespread use of "scrip"—company-issued tokens (metal or paper) or coupons used as a substitute for legal tender.[3] Scrip was often advanced to workers between paydays and was typically redeemable only at the company store.[3] This system served several purposes for the company: it reduced the need to keep large amounts of cash on hand, minimized payroll theft, ensured patronage of the company store, and provided a mechanism for extending credit.[22] However, it severely limited workers' economic freedom. Scrip was often non-transferable or could only be exchanged for cash or used at independent stores (where accepted) at a steep discount (25% or more).[22] The amount drawn in scrip was deducted from the worker's wages on payday, often leaving little or no cash earnings.[22] This economic arrangement functioned as a powerful tool for labor discipline, restricting workers' purchasing power outside the company's sphere of influence and reinforcing their dependence.

- **Debt Peonage:** The combination of potentially high prices at the company store, the restrictive nature of scrip, and deductions for rent, tools, medical fees, and other charges could easily trap workers in a cycle of debt.[4] Miners often received pay envelopes marked with the "bobtail check" or "snake," signifying no cash wages due after deductions.[22] Workers were frequently required to pay off any outstanding debt to the company before they were allowed to leave their employment, effectively binding them to the company.[4] New employees, particularly immigrants recruited from afar, might start their jobs already indebted for transportation costs and the mandatory purchase of tools and supplies.[42] While legally outlawed by Congress in 1867, debt peonage persisted, particularly in the South where it sometimes intersected with the convict lease system, and in isolated industrial settings.[4] Some studies suggest that outright debt peonage was not universal and that many workers managed their credit carefully [39], but the system clearly created conditions ripe for abuse and severely limited worker mobility, especially for vulnerable populations like recent immigrants.[22]
- **Social, Political, and Moral Control:** Beyond economic leverage, companies exerted extensive control over the social and political lives of residents. Company towns frequently lacked any form of democratic governance; they were often unincorporated territories run directly by company officials, with the plant superintendent or manager acting as a de facto mayor, sometimes possessing the power to evict residents at will.[1] Workers had little or no voice in local affairs.[9] Companies often controlled local law enforcement, sometimes paying sheriffs or employing their own guards to maintain order and suppress dissent, particularly union activity.[7] Access to the town could be restricted, with visitors needing company permission.[7] Paternalistic regulations extended into personal lives, with rules governing alcohol consumption (saloons often banned), mandatory church attendance, curfews, and acceptable forms of recreation.[4] Companies might censor library materials or theatrical performances.[11] Surveillance by company officials or informants ("snitches") could lead to reprimands or blacklisting.[5] Even the provision of amenities under the banner of "welfare capitalism"—schools, libraries, parks, recreational facilities—served the dual purpose of improving workers' lives while fostering loyalty and discouraging unionization.[4] The absence of independent civic institutions was a key feature enabling this comprehensive corporate control.
- **Case Study: Pullman, Illinois:** The town of Pullman, built south of Chicago in the 1880s by George Pullman for employees of his Pullman Palace Car Company, represents perhaps the most famous and ambitious attempt at a model company town, and ultimately, its most spectacular failure.[9] Pullman envisioned a meticulously planned community that would prevent labor unrest, attract skilled

labor, and enhance productivity by providing a superior, controlled environment away from the vices of the city.[11] Designed by architect Solon S. Beman, the town featured over 1,000 attractive brick homes with yards and modern amenities, alongside parks, a library, a theater, churches, and markets.[9]

Despite the impressive facade and amenities that won national praise [11], life in Pullman was characterized by rigid control.[9] Workers could only rent their homes, not own them, and were subject to eviction on short notice and intrusive inspections.[9] Rents were set significantly higher than in surrounding areas to guarantee Pullman a 6% return on his investment.[19] Saloons and town meetings were banned, and Pullman exerted control over library content and theater performances.[11] This "excessive paternalism" bred resentment among the workforce.[9] The breaking point came with the Panic of 1893; Pullman drastically cut wages (by an average of 25%) and laid off workers but refused to lower rents or prices at the company store.[9] When a workers' committee attempted to negotiate, Pullman refused and fired the members, triggering the massive Pullman Strike in May 1894.[19]

Table 1: Comparison of Control Mechanisms in Selected Historical Company Towns

Feature	Lowell, MA (Early Textile)	Pullman, IL (Model Industrial)	Typical Coal Town (WV/KY, late 19th/early 20th C)	Hershey, PA (Benevolent Paternalist)
Housing Ownership	Company-owned boardinghouses initially	Company-owned, rental only [9]	Primarily company-owned, rental tied to employment (80% in WV by 1922) [7]	Company offered affordable homes for rent or purchase [11]
Housing Rules	Strict supervision, curfews, moral codes [5]	Eviction on short notice, inspections, no modifications allowed [11]	Eviction for striking/union activity common; lease tied to job [7]	Company maintained lawns; efforts to police off-clock behavior [10]
Store System	Company stores existed	Company owned stores,	Company store often sole	Company stores existed, but

		markets [9]	provider, potential for high prices [4]	town also developed independent businesses [15]
Currency Used	Primarily cash	Primarily cash, but rent deducted [19]	Scrip (tokens/paper) widespread, used for advances, often discounted [22]	Primarily cash
Political Structure	Integrated into existing local structures eventually	No elected officials; run by Pullman Co. [9]	Often unincorporated, run by company officials; company influenced law enforcement [7]	Integrated into Derry Township, but company heavily influenced development [15]
Social Regulations	Mandatory church, temperance, curfews [5]	No saloons (except hotel), no town meetings, censorship [11]	Restricted visitor access, company guards patrolled [7]	Promotion of "healthy" activities (parks, zoo), but some policing of behavior [11]
Union Policy	Early protests/strikes occurred [5]	Anti-union; refusal to negotiate led to strike [11]	Strong anti-union tactics; eviction/violence against organizers [7]	Tolerated unionization later, but faced 1937 strike [11]

IV. Resistance and Conflict: Labor Struggles in Company Towns

Life under the pervasive control of company towns inevitably bred resentment and resistance among workers. Grievances ranged from economic exploitation and dangerous working conditions to the lack of personal freedom and political voice. This discontent frequently erupted into organized labor actions, strikes, and sometimes violent conflict, met with determined, often brutal, opposition from employers who wielded the unique powers afforded by the company town structure.

- **Worker Experiences and Grievances:** The daily reality for many company town residents was one of hardship and vulnerability. Low wages, often eroded by deductions for rent, supplies, and inflated prices at the company store, left families struggling.[4] Long working hours, often twelve hours a day, seven days a week in industries like steel and mining, were common.[7] Working conditions were frequently hazardous, particularly in mining, which had notoriously high fatality and injury rates, often exacerbated by companies prioritizing production over safety.[7] Textile workers faced risks like brown lung disease.[7] The scrip system and company store monopolies could lead to inescapable debt cycles.[4] Beyond economics, workers chafed under the constant surveillance and paternalistic restrictions on their personal lives, the lack of democratic participation in town affairs, and the suppression of basic freedoms like association and speech.[3] Life was precarious; the entire community's fate rested on the success of the single employer, and job loss typically meant immediate eviction from one's home.[7]
- **Unionization Efforts and Company Resistance:** In response to these conditions, workers sought collective power through unionization. Unions like the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), and the American Railway Union (ARU) aimed to secure better wages, shorter hours, safer workplaces, fair measurement of work (e.g., tonnage rates), the right to shop freely, choose their own doctors, and gain recognition for collective bargaining.[7] Companies, however, fiercely resisted these efforts, viewing unions as a threat to their control and profitability. The closed environment of the company town proved an exceptionally effective structure for blocking unionization.[7] Employers deployed a range of tactics: firing and blacklisting organizers, evicting strikers and their families from company housing, restricting access to the town to prevent organizers from entering, employing spies to infiltrate unions, using company police or hired guards (like the notorious Pinkertons or Baldwin-Felts detectives) for intimidation and violence, and leveraging their influence over local sheriffs and courts.[5] Furthermore, companies sometimes strategically recruited diverse, often inexperienced or marginalized labor groups—such as immigrants from various European countries or Black workers displaced from the South—potentially exploiting language barriers, existing prejudices, and lack of union experience to hinder worker solidarity and maintain lower wage structures.[5] This added a layer of racial and ethnic tension to the inherent power imbalance between employer and employee.
- **Case Study: The Pullman Strike (1894):** This landmark strike epitomized the clash between corporate paternalism and worker demands for fairness. Triggered by George Pullman's decision to cut wages by an average of 25% during the economic depression following the Panic of 1893, while refusing to lower the high

rents in his model town, the strike began in May 1894 when Pullman fired workers who tried to negotiate.[9] The workers, many members of the recently formed American Railway Union (ARU) led by Eugene V. Debs, appealed to the national union for support.[48] The ARU launched a nationwide boycott, refusing to handle trains carrying Pullman sleeping cars.[11] This sympathy action quickly escalated, paralyzing rail traffic across 27 states and involving up to 250,000 workers.[10] The railroad companies, organized as the General Managers Association (GMA), sought federal intervention.[49] U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney, a former railroad lawyer, obtained a sweeping federal injunction against the ARU, prohibiting interference with rail traffic and communication related to the strike, citing the Sherman Antitrust Act and the need to protect U.S. mail delivery (as railroads deliberately attached mail cars to Pullman cars).[11] President Grover Cleveland, overriding the objections of Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld, dispatched thousands of federal troops to Chicago to enforce the injunction.[11] The arrival of troops escalated the conflict, leading to violent clashes, riots, widespread destruction of railroad property, and the deaths of dozens of people.[10] The strike was ultimately crushed by this combination of federal injunction and military force. Debs and other ARU leaders were jailed for contempt of court, and the union dissolved.[11] While a failure for the union, the strike had significant consequences. It starkly demonstrated the power of coordinated national labor action but also established the precedent of using federal injunctions and military intervention to break strikes, significantly tilting the legal balance against labor.[66] A federal commission investigating the strike criticized Pullman's rigid paternalism and refusal to arbitrate.[9] As a political gesture to appease labor sentiment following the strike's suppression, Congress quickly passed legislation making Labor Day a national holiday.[67] The Illinois Supreme Court later ordered the Pullman Company to divest its non-industrial properties, leading to residents eventually owning their homes.[11]

- **Case Study: The Ludlow Massacre (1914):** This tragic event in the southern Colorado coalfields became a potent symbol of corporate brutality and the human cost of labor conflict in company towns. The powerful Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I), controlled by the Rockefeller family, staunchly opposed efforts by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) to organize its workforce.[61] Miners endured extremely dangerous conditions (fatality rates double the national average), low pay often based on disputed tonnage measurements with no compensation for "dead work" like timbering, payment in scrip, and the requirement to live in company housing and use company doctors.[61] The mines were policed by heavily armed company guards.[61] In September 1913, the UMWA called a strike demanding union recognition, enforcement of state labor laws

(including the eight-hour day and fair weight measures), abolition of the scrip and guard systems, and the right to choose their own housing and doctors.[61] Thousands of miners and their families, representing diverse ethnicities (Greeks, Italians, Slavs, etc.), were evicted from company houses and moved into tent colonies set up by the union, the largest being at Ludlow.[61] Tensions escalated over the harsh winter, marked by violence from both sides, including attacks on the tent colonies by company guards using an armored car dubbed the "Death Special".[61] The Colorado National Guard was deployed, but its neutrality was compromised; units included company guards, were sometimes paid by CF&I, and generally sided with the operators.[61] On April 20, 1914, a confrontation between guardsmen and strikers erupted into a full-scale battle. The militia attacked the Ludlow tent colony with machine-gun fire throughout the day.[61] As evening fell, they set the tents ablaze.[61] The exact death toll is disputed, but commonly cited figures range from 19 to 25 people killed. Among the dead were several miners, including strike leader Louis Tikas who was reportedly executed after being captured under a flag of truce, one guardsman, and, most horrifically, two women and eleven children who suffocated in a pit dug beneath a tent for protection as the fire raged above.[61] The Ludlow Massacre ignited the "Ten-Day War," a period of intense guerrilla warfare across the Colorado coalfields where enraged miners attacked mines, killed guards, and destroyed property, resulting in dozens more deaths.[61] President Woodrow Wilson eventually sent in federal troops to disarm both sides and restore order.[74] The strike officially ended in December 1914 with the UMWA failing to achieve its primary demands.[73] However, the public outcry over the massacre was immense. It led to a Congressional investigation whose 1915 report influenced the promotion of child labor laws and enforcement of the eight-hour workday.[61] John D. Rockefeller Jr., facing severe public criticism, initiated the "Rockefeller Plan," a company-controlled employee representation plan designed to preempt independent unionism, though major strikes continued in later years.[71] While court-martials of guardsmen resulted in acquittals or minor penalties, Ludlow became an enduring symbol in American labor history of corporate power, state-sponsored violence, and the struggle for workers' rights.[61]

These conflicts underscore broader human rights concerns inherent in the company town model. The dangerous nature of industrial work was often compounded by company negligence or resistance to safety measures.[7] Freedoms of speech, assembly, and association were routinely suppressed to prevent unionization or dissent.[7] Economic freedom was curtailed by the interlocking systems of company stores, scrip, and debt.[3] Housing security was non-existent, as homes were tied directly to jobs.[7] Furthermore, racial and ethnic discrimination often manifested in

segregated housing and unequal job opportunities.[19]

The history of labor conflict in company towns reveals crucial dynamics. While strikes like Pullman and Ludlow often resulted in immediate defeats for the unions involved, the extreme measures taken by corporations and the state—injunctions, military force, violence—exposed the profound power imbalance and galvanized public opinion.[61] This public awareness and condemnation served as catalysts for long-term legislative reforms that eventually strengthened workers' rights, demonstrating that even failed struggles could contribute to broader social change.[7] Concurrently, these events highlighted the frequent alignment of state power with corporate interests during this era. The deployment of the National Guard or federal troops, often at the behest of companies and sometimes even funded by them, alongside the use of legal tools like injunctions primarily against labor, underscored that the government often acted not as a neutral arbiter but as an enforcer of corporate dominance.[7]

V. The Benevolent Model? Case Study: Hershey, Pennsylvania

Amidst the narratives of exploitation and conflict associated with many company towns, Hershey, Pennsylvania, stands out as a prominent example often cited for its founder's more benevolent and progressive vision.[10] Founded in the early 1900s by chocolate magnate Milton S. Hershey, the town was intentionally designed as an "industrial utopia".[11]

- **Founding Vision and Amenities:** Locating his factory near his birthplace in rural Pennsylvania provided access to the abundant fresh milk crucial for his milk chocolate production.[11] Recognizing the need to house workers in this relatively remote location, Hershey constructed a model town reflecting his belief in providing a high quality of life for his employees.[11] Unlike the often barebones housing in mining or logging camps, Hershey offered a variety of affordable, modern homes—available for rent or purchase—equipped with amenities like indoor plumbing, electricity, and central heating, with company-maintained lawns.[10] The town, with street names like Chocolate Avenue and Cocoa Avenue, was designed with extensive community infrastructure, including a public trolley system, schools, social clubs, a bank, a department store, recreational facilities, an amusement park (initially for employee picnics), a zoo, golf courses, and later, a community center, hotel, and sports arena.[11] Hershey, who was childless, also established the Hershey Industrial School (now the Milton Hershey School) in 1909, an institution for orphaned boys endowed with his fortune.[11] During the Great Depression, Hershey launched a major building campaign ("Great Building Campaign") that constructed many of the town's landmark structures, providing

vital employment during the economic crisis.[11] From the outset, Hershey also encouraged tourism, aiming to showcase the "sweetest place on Earth" where happy, prosperous workers produced his famous chocolates.[10]

- **Undercurrents of Control and Conflict:** Despite Hershey's apparent altruism and the town's many amenities, life was not entirely free from the characteristics of company control. Efforts were made by Hershey and his executives to police employees' behavior outside of work hours.[11] Some workers accused managers of favoritism in wages and hiring practices.[11] The paternalistic structure, even if well-intentioned, still placed significant power in the hands of the company. This underlying tension eventually surfaced in 1937 when Hershey chocolate factory workers, facing discontent possibly related to Depression-era austerity measures like reduced hours and stopped bonuses [15], organized the company's first labor union and went on strike. The strike turned violent, involving clashes between strikers and loyalist workers and farmers, marring the town's idyllic image.[11] Milton Hershey was reportedly deeply affected by the strike, recognizing the end of the purely utopian vision.[72] Furthermore, modern criticisms have arisen regarding the Hershey Company's later practices, such as relocating jobs overseas and concerns about child labor in its global supply chain, raising questions about adherence to the founder's original values.[95]
- **Legacy and Survival:** Unlike many company towns that faded with the decline of their core industry or the death of their founder, Hershey has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Following Milton Hershey's death in 1945, the town and the company continued to thrive.[11] Chocolate production remains a central economic activity, but the town has successfully leveraged the amenities and infrastructure built by its founder—the amusement park, hotel, gardens, arena—to become a major tourist destination.[1] The Hershey Trust Company and the Milton Hershey School continue to play significant roles in the community's governance and identity.[94]

The Hershey experience suggests that even in company towns founded with genuinely benevolent intentions and offering superior living conditions, the fundamental power imbalance inherent in the model could still lead to worker dissatisfaction and conflict, particularly when workers sought greater autonomy or challenged company authority regarding wages or union representation. The owner's definition of utopia did not always align with the workers' aspirations for agency and economic fairness.[11] However, Hershey's long-term success compared to many other company towns might be partly explained by its early and intentional diversification. By developing tourism, entertainment, and hospitality alongside chocolate manufacturing, Hershey built a more resilient and multifaceted economic base, less

vulnerable to the boom-and-bust cycles that doomed towns reliant solely on resource extraction or a single manufacturing product.[10] This diversification provided a foundation for adaptation and survival long after the traditional company town era waned.

VI. Forces of Change: The Decline of the Traditional Company Town (Early to Mid-20th Century)

The dominance of the traditional company town model began to erode significantly in the first half of the 20th century. This decline was not attributable to a single cause but resulted from a convergence of technological, social, political, and economic forces that collectively undermined the foundations upon which these communities were built: isolation, worker dependency, and unchecked corporate power.

- **Increased Worker Mobility (The Automobile):** Perhaps the most transformative technological factor was the rise of the automobile. By the 1920s, widespread car ownership became increasingly accessible, even for lower-wage earners, thanks in part to installment buying plans.[9] This newfound mobility fundamentally altered the relationship between work and residence. Workers were no longer geographically tethered to their place of employment.[5] They could live further from the factory or mine and commute, access employment opportunities in neighboring towns, and escape the direct oversight and control associated with living in company-owned housing.[7] The automobile, along with mass communication like radio, effectively broke down the physical and social isolation that was crucial for maintaining the company town's closed system.[9]
- **Rise of Organized Labor (Unions):** The growing strength and influence of labor unions presented a direct challenge to the unilateral authority of employers in company towns.[7] Unions fought for and increasingly won collective bargaining rights, demanding better wages, safer working conditions, shorter hours, and an end to exploitative practices like the scrip system and mandatory patronage of company stores.[57] The significant wage gap observed between unionized and non-unionized sectors, particularly in industries like coal mining, provided a powerful incentive for workers to organize despite fierce company resistance.[7] As unions gained power, particularly under the New Deal, they successfully pushed back against the mechanisms of company town control.[7]
- **Government Intervention (The New Deal):** The administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt marked a pivotal turning point. New Deal legislation fundamentally reshaped the landscape of labor relations and social welfare in ways that directly undermined the company town model.[7] Key policies included:
    - Establishing minimum wages, which impacted companies relying on

depressed wage structures.[9]
    - Actively encouraging and legally protecting the right to unionize and bargain collectively through laws like the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), the Wagner Act (National Labor Relations Act), and the Guffey-Vinson Coal Act.[7] This led to a surge in union membership and power.[7]
    - Explicitly criticizing employer ownership of housing as "feudal and repugnant" (in the NIRA's Cotton Textile Code) and actively promoting eventual employee homeownership.[7]
    - Reforming housing finance to make independent homeownership more accessible through lower interest rates and deposit requirements.[9]
    - Outlawing the use of scrip for wage payment under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.[41] This assertion of federal authority into labor relations and social provision significantly curtailed the autonomy corporations had previously enjoyed in their towns.
- **Economic Shifts and Increased Affluence:** The period following World War I, particularly the 1920s, saw a rise in national affluence and material well-being for many workers, despite persistent inequalities.[9] Increased purchasing power, facilitated by installment buying, allowed workers to acquire consumer goods like radios and automobiles independently.[9] Simultaneously, the expansion of public services (schools, libraries, parks) and infrastructure meant workers were less reliant on company-provided amenities.[9] As alternatives became available, the "welfare capitalism" offerings of companies began to lose their appeal, with some workers viewing them as demeaning and preferring higher cash wages instead.[9] The subsequent economic hardship of the Great Depression further strained company resources, leading some to abandon costly welfare programs.[9]
- **Deindustrialization and Industry Decline:** Many company towns were intrinsically linked to a single industry, often resource extraction (coal, timber) or heavy manufacturing (steel, textiles). As these industries faced decline due to resource depletion, technological obsolescence, shifting markets, or foreign competition, the towns dependent on them suffered devastating economic consequences.[9] The closure of the primary employer often meant the collapse of the entire town's economy, leading to mass unemployment, loss of property value, and out-migration as residents sought work elsewhere.[9] This process of deindustrialization, particularly pronounced in the "Rust Belt" regions of the Northeast and Midwest from the mid-20th century onwards, transformed former industrial powerhouses into landscapes of abandoned factories and shrinking populations.[83] Automation also played a role, reducing the number of workers needed even in operational factories.[83]
- **Decline of Paternalism:** The philosophy underpinning many company towns also

evolved. The backlash against George Pullman's excessive control led later industrialists to adopt more professionally designed towns, moving away from overt moralizing.[8] Increasing affluence and modernization lessened the perceived need for companies to impose middle-class values or provide basic amenities that were becoming more widely available.[9] Paternalism came to be seen by many as outdated or even offensive ("a dirty word").[58] Companies increasingly decided to divest themselves of municipal-type responsibilities like maintaining streets, water, and sewage systems, turning them over to actual city governments as towns grew or were annexed.[58]

In essence, the traditional company town model withered because the conditions that created it—isolation, labor scarcity and powerlessness, lack of public infrastructure, and a laissez-faire regulatory environment—were fundamentally altered by the technological, social, political, and economic transformations of the 20th century. The New Deal, in particular, represented a crucial shift, establishing a new framework for labor rights and social welfare that directly challenged the corporate autonomy central to the company town concept.

VII. The New Company Towns: Silicon Valley and Beyond

Just as the traditional company town seemed relegated to history books and museum exhibits, a new iteration began to emerge in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, driven by different industries and motivations, yet raising familiar questions about corporate power and community life. This resurgence is most visible in the tech sector, centered in high-cost regions like Silicon Valley and Seattle.

- **The Rise of the Corporate Campus and Tech Enclaves:** The precursor to the modern phenomenon was the development of the suburban corporate campus, beginning as early as the 1930s and accelerating after World War II.[5] Companies like Bell Labs and IBM moved headquarters and research facilities out of urban centers into park-like suburban settings.[5] While not true company towns in the traditional sense (lacking company-owned housing and stores for all employees), these campuses concentrated large workforces in specific locations.[5] In recent decades, tech giants like Google (Mountain View, CA), Facebook/Meta (Menlo Park, CA), Apple (Cupertino, CA), and Amazon (Seattle, WA) have created massive campuses that increasingly incorporate elements reminiscent of company towns, including extensive on-site amenities and, significantly, direct involvement in providing employee housing.[3] Similar trends, though perhaps less concentrated, can be observed internationally around major corporations.[11]
- **Motivations for Modern Corporate Communities:** The drivers behind this trend

differ from historical precedents but share an underlying logic of corporate interest:

- **Addressing the Housing Crisis:** A primary factor, especially in tech hubs, is the acute shortage of affordable housing—a crisis partly exacerbated by the high salaries and rapid growth of the tech industry itself.[3] High housing costs make it difficult to recruit and retain employees, increase wage pressure, lead to long commutes, and negatively impact worker productivity and satisfaction.[56] Companies are stepping in, framing housing provision as a solution.[26] This dynamic suggests that corporations are, in part, filling a vacuum created by the failure of public policy and urban planning to adequately manage the consequences of rapid economic growth in these regions.
- **Talent Attraction and Retention:** In the highly competitive market for skilled tech workers, lavish campuses and housing assistance serve as powerful recruitment and retention tools.[5] On-site amenities—free food, gyms, childcare, healthcare clinics, dry cleaning, nap pods, recreational facilities—aim to create an attractive, convenient environment that caters to employee well-being and makes the company central to their lives.[5]
- **Productivity and Subtle Control:** While less overt than historical methods, these amenities and housing initiatives can subtly encourage longer work hours and deeper entanglement with the company.[3] The "casino philosophy" of keeping people on-site by meeting all their needs can blur the lines between work and personal life.[30] Tying housing, even indirectly, to employment increases the friction and potential cost of leaving the company, potentially reducing worker mobility and bargaining power.[3] Modern surveillance technologies also offer new avenues for monitoring.[46] These contemporary perks, while framed as benefits, can function as sophisticated tools fostering loyalty and dependence, echoing the objectives of historical paternalism in a modern guise.
- **Community Relations and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** Facing criticism for contributing to housing crises and inequality, companies often present their housing projects as contributions to the broader community, sometimes including mandated affordable housing units or public spaces.[26] These initiatives can enhance corporate reputation and potentially generate goodwill, though critics may view them as "greenwashing" or PR efforts.[111] Tax incentives or credits for providing affordable housing might also play a role.[3]

- **Forms of Modern Corporate Housing and Communities:** The approach varies:
  - **Extensive On-Campus Amenities:** Creating a self-contained ecosystem within the workplace.[5]

    - **Direct Housing Development:** Planning and constructing large residential complexes, often mixed-use, near headquarters. Examples include Facebook's proposed Willow Campus/Village (1,500 units, retail, grocery store) and Google's plans for thousands of units in Mountain View.[3] Google also experimented with modular homes.[106]
    - **Financial Assistance:** Offering stipends, subsidies, or loans to help employees afford housing near work, such as Facebook's reported $10,000-$15,000 relocation incentive or Addepar's monthly credit.[26]
    - **Investment Funds and Partnerships:** Committing large sums to regional housing funds or collaborating with developers and foundations to preserve or build affordable and middle-income housing, like Microsoft's $500 million pledge in the Seattle area or Facebook's involvement in the Partnership for the Bay's Future.[26]
- **Governance and Community Integration:** Unlike isolated historical towns, modern corporate housing projects are typically situated within or adjacent to existing municipalities.[26] This creates complex interactions with local governments regarding zoning, infrastructure, taxes, and public services.[89] The potential for large corporations to exert undue influence on local politics is a significant concern.[89] Governance within these corporate-influenced communities is evolving, sometimes drawing on principles of shared governance seen in academic institutions, involving multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes, particularly around technology and resource allocation.[112] However, the balance between corporate objectives and public interest remains a critical issue. There exists a fundamental tension between the corporate desire for control and efficiency in shaping these environments and the often more complex, inclusive, and sometimes slower processes of democratic public governance.
- **Criticisms and Ethical Concerns:** The resurgence of corporate involvement in housing and community building faces numerous criticisms:
    - **Exacerbating Inequality and Gentrification:** Large-scale developments catering primarily to high-paid tech workers can further inflate housing costs in already expensive areas, displacing long-term residents, lower-income workers, and small businesses.[90]
    - **Corporate Control 2.0:** Linking housing security to employment status creates vulnerability for workers, especially given the prevalence of at-will employment. The threat of job loss becomes synonymous with the threat of eviction or loss of housing subsidies, potentially chilling dissent or making it harder for employees to leave for better opportunities.[3] Concerns also exist about workplace surveillance extending into living spaces or company control

over community life.[30]
    - **Lack of Transparency and Accountability:** Major development decisions with significant public impact are often made within private corporations, potentially lacking public input or oversight.[89] Companies may engage in "greenwashing" or use CSR initiatives primarily for public relations.[111] Issues like corporate tax avoidance raise questions about whether companies are fulfilling their broader civic responsibilities while shaping local communities.[104]
    - **Monopsony Power:** In areas dominated by one or a few large employers, these companies can exert downward pressure on wages and working conditions across the local labor market.[57] Modern company towns represent extreme examples of this labor market concentration.[82]

VIII. The Musk Enigma: Snailbrook, Starbase, and the Future

Elon Musk's ventures in Texas represent a distinct and potentially more radical evolution of the company town concept, moving beyond the integrated campus model towards the creation of entirely new, company-centric settlements, complete with aspirations of formal incorporation and governance.

- **Musk's Texas Expansion:** Driven by a desire for a more favorable regulatory and tax environment compared to California, and citing disputes related to COVID-19 restrictions, Musk has aggressively relocated the headquarters and operations of his major companies—Tesla, SpaceX, The Boring Company, Neuralink, and X (formerly Twitter)—to Texas, primarily concentrating development in the Austin and Brownsville areas.[28] This strategic shift has been accompanied by massive land acquisition, with Musk and his entities purchasing thousands of acres, particularly in Bastrop County near Austin and around the SpaceX launch facility in Boca Chica.[28] His stated vision includes creating self-sustaining communities, sometimes termed a "Texas utopia," to house the rapidly growing workforce needed for these expanding operations.[28]
- **Snailbrook (Bastrop County):** Located east of Austin, adjacent to facilities for The Boring Company and SpaceX's Starlink satellite division, Snailbrook is envisioned as a planned community primarily for employees of these companies.[28] The name playfully references The Boring Company's mascot and its goal of out-tunneling a snail.[28] Early planning reportedly involved input from figures like Grimes and Kanye West.[28] Initial plans ("Project Amazing") called for 110 homes with company-themed street names like "Boring Boulevard" and "Cutterhead Crossing".[28] Development includes modular homes, amenities like a pool and sports courts, and a Montessori school that opened in August 2024.[28] A public-facing "Boring Bodega" also exists.[121] While some reports suggested

development had stalled pending connection to local wastewater infrastructure, Bastrop city officials indicated in early 2025 that the project is ongoing and could eventually encompass thousands of homes, given the vast land holdings.[122] Critically, reports surfaced that employees renting homes in Snailbrook (at potentially below-market rates, around $800/month) might be required to vacate within 30 days if their employment is terminated.[28] This specific detail, linking housing directly and precariously to employment, echoes the most criticized control mechanisms of historical company towns.

- **Starbase (Boca Chica):** At the remote coastal site of SpaceX's Starship development and launch facility near Brownsville, Musk pursued a more ambitious goal: formal political incorporation.[29] Musk first publicly floated the idea of creating the "City of Starbase" in 2021.[29] The area, formerly known as Boca Chica Village, has been transformed by SpaceX's presence, with a population now consisting almost entirely of SpaceX employees and their families living in company-provided or facilitated housing (including Airstream trailers and prefabricated homes).[29] SpaceX argued incorporation was needed to manage community growth and provide adequate housing, having faced county rejection for some housing plans.[127] In May 2025, residents voted overwhelmingly (212-6) to incorporate the 1.45-square-mile area as the City of Starbase.[29] The newly elected mayor and city commissioners were all current or former SpaceX employees who ran unopposed.[127] This move grants SpaceX significant influence over local governance, including zoning, building permits, and potentially emergency services.[127] Concurrent legislative efforts sought to transfer authority over closing the nearby public highway and Boca Chica Beach for rocket launches from Cameron County to the new City of Starbase, a move strongly supported by SpaceX but opposed by county officials and environmental/community groups concerned about public access and corporate overreach.[29] Environmental concerns also persist regarding SpaceX's operations, including wastewater discharge.[29]
- **Analysis:** Musk's projects arguably represent a significant departure from the prevailing modern corporate campus model and signal a potential return to a more direct and encompassing form of company town. Unlike tech giants integrating housing into existing urban fabrics, Musk is creating new settlements from the ground up and, in the case of Starbase, actively seeking formal political control through incorporation.[28] The reported Snailbrook eviction policy [28] directly links housing security to employment in a way reminiscent of historical practices that created worker precarity.[7] The successful incorporation of Starbase, with an electorate composed almost entirely of employees electing company officials, raises fundamental questions about democratic accountability and the potential

for corporate interests to supersede broader public concerns like beach access or environmental protection.[29] These developments suggest a desire for a level of control over the physical, operational, and potentially political environment surrounding his enterprises that goes beyond the subtler influences seen in Silicon Valley. Furthermore, the choice of Texas as the location for these ambitious projects underscores a strategic leveraging of a perceived business-friendly regulatory environment to pursue large-scale, potentially controversial developments with potentially less public friction or oversight than might be encountered elsewhere, particularly California.[28]

IX. Comparative Analysis: Continuity, Change, and Ethical Considerations

Comparing historical company towns with their modern counterparts, including corporate campuses and Musk's ventures, reveals both striking continuities and significant transformations in structure, control mechanisms, and ethical implications.

- **Structure and Ownership:** Historically, company towns were often characterized by near-total ownership by a single company—land, housing (typically rental-only), stores, and basic services—and were frequently geographically isolated to access resources or control labor.[1] Modern iterations present a wider spectrum. Corporate campuses offer extensive on-site amenities but typically exist within larger metropolitan regions.[5] Housing initiatives range from financial subsidies and partnerships with developers to direct construction of large, mixed-use communities integrated into existing areas.[3] Musk's projects, however, lean towards creating new, potentially isolated settlements (Snailbrook) or even formally incorporated towns dominated by the company (Starbase), representing a closer structural parallel to historical models.[28] While modern transportation and communication reduce physical isolation [9], the concentration of work, housing, and amenities can create a form of social and economic enclave.
- **Control Mechanisms:** Historical control was often overt and coercive: mandatory company housing with the threat of swift eviction, the scrip system fostering debt peonage, restricted mobility, direct bans on union activity, and intrusive regulation of social and political life.[4] Modern control mechanisms appear more subtle, often framed as benefits or conveniences. Comprehensive on-campus amenities and proximate housing encourage longer hours and deeper integration into the corporate ecosystem.[3] Tying housing access or affordability to employment status, even through subsidies or preferred access, can still create precarity and discourage mobility.[3] Digital surveillance technologies offer new potential avenues for monitoring.[46] While modern labor laws offer greater protection than in the past [30], the fundamental power imbalance persists, particularly in areas with high labor

market concentration where one employer dominates.[57] Musk's reported Snailbrook eviction policy and the Starbase incorporation represent potentially less subtle forms of control, echoing historical precedents more directly.[28]

- **Ethical Considerations:** The ethical landscape has shifted, but core dilemmas remain:
  - **Paternalism vs. Perks:** Historical paternalism, mixing moral uplift with social control, is largely disavowed.[9] Modern companies offer extensive perks and amenities, framed as enhancing well-being and convenience.[110] Yet, the ethical line blurs when these perks foster dependence, potentially limit choices outside the corporate sphere, and serve primarily to maximize productivity and retention.[3] Is the "warm-nest feeling" of a tech campus [5] simply a more palatable form of control?
  - **Dependency and Autonomy:** Both historical and modern models raise concerns about worker dependency. Historically, this was enforced through debt, lack of alternatives, and direct coercion.[4] Today, dependency can arise from the entanglement of housing, healthcare, social life, and career prospects with a single employer, particularly in high-cost areas with limited outside options or for workers in precarious employment situations.[3] The reported Snailbrook housing terms starkly illustrate this potential vulnerability.[28]
  - **Community Impact and Equity:** Historical company towns often imposed a monolithic corporate vision, sometimes involving segregation and disregard for the environment.[19] Modern corporate community-building occurs within complex existing ecosystems. Large-scale developments can strain public infrastructure, inflate housing costs for non-employees, and lead to gentrification and displacement, raising issues of equity and fairness.[89] The creation of quasi-private enclaves or company-controlled municipalities like Starbase challenges principles of public governance and equitable access to resources.[29] Questions arise about who benefits, who pays the costs, and whose vision shapes the community's future.

Despite significant changes in economic context, labor laws, and technology, the fundamental power imbalance between a dominant employer and its workforce/community persists. Whether through overt control in isolated 19th-century mining camps or through the subtle entanglement of life and work in 21st-century tech campuses, the company town concept continues to test the boundaries between corporate influence and individual autonomy, economic efficiency and social equity. The ethical dilemmas surrounding control, dependency, and the responsibilities of corporations to the communities they shape remain remarkably consistent across

time. The long-term sustainability of these modern corporate communities is also uncertain; historical towns often declined with their industries [9], and while cities tend to be resilient due to diversification and innovation [139], communities overly reliant on a single corporate entity remain vulnerable to economic shocks and company failures.[9]

X. Conclusion

The history of the company town in America is a complex narrative of industrial ambition, social engineering, worker resilience, and the enduring tension between corporate power and community life. From the early textile mills of New England like Lowell, born of necessity and paternalistic ideals, to the often harsh realities of coal and lumber camps, and the meticulously planned, sometimes autocratic, environments like Pullman, these communities were instrumental in shaping the nation's industrial landscape.[1] They offered solutions to the challenges of accessing remote resources and securing labor, providing housing and amenities often superior to what was otherwise available.[1] However, this provision frequently came at the cost of worker autonomy, facilitated by mechanisms of control such as company-owned housing and stores, the scrip system leading to debt peonage, the suppression of unions, and the absence of democratic governance.[4]

The inherent power imbalance often led to conflict, epitomized by violent struggles like the Pullman Strike and the Ludlow Massacre.[11] These events, while often immediate setbacks for labor, exposed the harsh realities of corporate dominance and the frequent alignment of state power with capital, ultimately contributing to public awareness and long-term reforms that reshaped labor relations in the United States.[61] Even seemingly benevolent models like Hershey, Pennsylvania, were not immune to conflict when paternalistic control clashed with workers' desires for agency.[11]

The decline of the traditional company town in the mid-20th century was driven by a confluence of factors—the rise of the automobile increasing mobility, the empowerment of unions, transformative New Deal legislation establishing worker protections and facilitating homeownership, growing national affluence, and the eventual deindustrialization that hollowed out many single-industry communities.[7]

Yet, the concept has proven remarkably persistent, resurfacing in new forms in the 21st century, particularly within the tech sector and through the ambitious projects of Elon Musk.[1] Modern motivations often center on addressing housing affordability crises in tech hubs (crises the industry itself helped create), attracting and retaining talent through convenience and extensive perks, and enhancing productivity.[26] While the overt coercion of the past is often replaced by the softer power of comprehensive

amenities and housing linked to employment, fundamental questions about dependency, worker precarity, the blurring of work and life, corporate influence over local governance, and community equity remain.[3] Musk's Snailbrook and Starbase ventures, with their potential for direct housing control and formal political incorporation, suggest a possible return to a more encompassing model, leveraging favorable regulatory environments for maximum corporate autonomy.[28]

Ultimately, the journey from coal mines to Elon Musk reveals that the company town, in its various guises, serves as a microcosm of the evolving relationship between capital, labor, and community. While the specific forms of control and provision change with economic and social contexts, the core dynamic of concentrated corporate power shaping the lived environment and autonomy of workers endures. As corporations increasingly step into roles traditionally occupied by public institutions—providing housing, amenities, and even shaping governance—the historical lessons of the company town serve as a crucial reminder of the need for vigilance in protecting worker rights, ensuring democratic accountability, and fostering equitable, diverse, and resilient communities where prosperity is shared and human dignity is paramount. Balancing the legitimate needs of businesses with the fundamental rights and well-being of employees and the broader public remains a central challenge, whether in a 19th-century mining camp or a 21st-century tech enclave.

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