

MILWAUKEE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION MEDICAL CENTER, BUILDING
NO. 40
(Milwaukee Veterans Administration Medical Center, Greenhouse)
500 West National Avenue
Milwaukee
Milwaukee County
Wisconsin

HABS No. WI-303-C

HABS
WIS
40-MILWA,
42C-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MILWAUKEE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION MEDICAL CENTER
BUILDING 40 (GREENHOUSE)
(~~National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers,
Northwestern Branch, Building 40~~)

HABS
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40-MILWA
42C-

HABS No. WI-303-C

Location: Milwaukee Veterans Affairs Medical Center
5000 West National Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53295
U.S.G.S. Map Quad: Milwaukee, Milwaukee County
U.T.M.: Zone 16, Easting 420441, Northing 4763900

Present Owner: Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Present Use: Greenhouse and Storage

Significance: Building 40, Greenhouse and Storage, was constructed for the Northwestern Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in 1924, with two additions in 1928 and 1936. It is significant as 1) a utilitarian building type closely related to the park-like landscape planning of the Home branches, 2) a center for occupational, educational, and recreational activities for Home members and Veterans Administration patients, and 3) a support facility for therapeutic and laboratory activities of the hospitals of the Home branch and the Veterans Administration. The building's use spans the last years of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, the establishment of the Veterans Administration, and the creation of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

PART I: HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

A. Historical Context

The National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, called the National Asylum from 1865 to 1872, was established through Congressional legislation on March 3, 1865. The National Home was intended to be a facility which would provide domiciliary care for disabled Union veterans (*Cetina, passim*). In its initial form, the National Home provided only minimal medical care and was more concerned with saving the destitute and dependent disabled veteran from the degradation of the poorhouse. In 1866-1867, the National Asylum was organized initially in three branches: the Eastern Branch at Togus, Maine; the Northwestern Branch at Milwaukee; and the Central Branch at Dayton, Ohio. Additional branches were created as the number of veterans increased due to legal changes in eligibility requirements, and the

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overcrowding of original facilities as the needs of veterans changed with age and as population increased in the western states. The National Home was eventually expanded with the addition of new branches, including the Southern Branch, Hampton, Virginia, 1870; the Western Branch, Leavenworth, Kansas, 1884; the Pacific Branch, Los Angeles/Santa Monica, 1887; the Marion Branch, Marion, Indiana, 1889; the Danville Branch, Danville, Illinois, 1897; the Mountain Branch, Johnson City, Tennessee, 1901; and the Battle Mountain Sanitarium, Hot Springs, South Dakota, 1902.

The Bureau of War Risk Insurance was created on October 6, 1917 to provide for the administration of veterans' compensation, medical and hospital services, rehabilitation, and insurance (Weber and Schmeckebier, 4). As veterans' claims increased at the close of World War I, the responsibilities of this organization were divided with two other agencies: the United States Public Health Service to provide medical and hospital services, and the Federal Board for Vocational Rehabilitation for rehabilitation programs. In March, 1921, funds were appropriated for the Secretary of the Treasury to construct more government hospitals. In April, 1922, the United States Veterans Bureau, formed in 1921, assumed responsibility for fifty-seven hospitals operated by the Public Health Service; nine hospitals being constructed by the Treasury Department were transferred as well (Weber and Schmeckebier, 16-17). On July 21, 1930, the National Home, the Veterans Bureau, and the Bureau of Pensions (formed in 1833) were consolidated as the Veterans Administration.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the only major buildings erected at the Milwaukee complex were the Hospital (Building 70, 1922-23) and the Hospital Annex (Building 43, 1932); five double quarters buildings were built to house additional staff for the new medical facilities. All other structures constructed during this period were utility buildings, such as garages, garbage can houses, pump houses, tool sheds, and the new greenhouse.

The Greenhouse (Building 40) was built in three stages: 1924, 1928, and 1936. The Greenhouse relates to the original site design concept and the purposes of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers as well as those of the Veterans Administration.

When the first three branches of the National Home were laid out in 1866 and 1867, selection of a site in the vicinity of the designated cities was a major concern (Milwaukee Sentinel, June 7, 1867). The Board of Managers wanted the branches located three to four miles outside cities on sites with rolling wooded terrain and views of the surrounding countryside. In effect, they were thinking of the sites as "parks." The first site that was selected at Togus, Maine, for the

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Eastern Branch, actually was a park, having been a spa resort which went bankrupt during the Civil War (Mollenhoff, "Eastern Branch"). Both the Central Branch at Dayton, Ohio, and the Northwestern Branch at Milwaukee, were laid out by Rev. Thomas Van Horne, a chaplain in the Union Army of the Cumberland who had planned the military cemeteries at Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Marietta, Georgia, in 1864 (Gobrecht, 28).

In the development of parks in the 18th and early 19th century, particularly in England and then in the United States, the desire to provide year-round floral and plant displays was of major concern. The first half of the 19th century saw the development of a structure which would permit such displays: the glass conservatory or greenhouse (Hyams, 283-93). A form of greenhouse had been built by Romans to produce vegetables all year, but the greenhouse as a building type did not begin to develop until the 17th century. In the second half of the century, European kings and princes began to collect exotic plant specimens from explorers traveling to the New World. To maintain and propagate these plants, landscape architects developed the orangery, a tall, well-heated building with large, operable windows; Louis XIV's orangery at Versailles is an example. In the American colonies, George Washington, at Mount Vernon, and Thomas Jefferson, at Monticello, built limited versions of the orangery for their horticultural collections.

Major developments in the design of greenhouses occurred in England in the first half of the 19th century in the work of Joseph Paxton at the Great Conservatory at Chatsworth (1840), and the Crystal Palace, outside London (1851). Paxton's achievement came in combining large panes of glass and small prefabricated metal framing members, resulting in a building with maximum glass and minimum structure. In the United States, the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing (Treatise, 386-92) included descriptions of conservatories and greenhouses which were considered "embellishments" in the design of the rural or landscape park. The concept of the landscape park, which took advantage of natural settings enhanced by human intervention, was realized in Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's design, based on Downing's original scheme, for Central Park in New York (1858). For several decades, Central Park was the standard against which all other parks were measured. In 1877, one Wisconsin writer declared that the National Home at Milwaukee had achieved the stature of Central Park (Centennial Records, 72).

Due to the close association between the National Home grounds and parks, conservatories and greenhouses were among the structures built at the branches. Conservatories were considered more formal, architectural buildings, intended primarily for display purposes;

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plants were placed in beds at floor level instead of in pots set on benches. The greenhouse was a less formal, more utilitarian structure, intended to be used for propagation and cultivation rather than display.

In the "Sanitary Reports" of the National Home branches in the Annual Reports, in the Proceedings, and in the branch histories (Gobrecht, 86-89; Wheeler File, 7; Cobb, 111), the association of the greenhouse with the beauty of the grounds is repeatedly mentioned. Typically, the greenhouse was identified as the place where "thousands" of plants were kept and propagated during the winter in order to beautify the grounds in summer.

The Greenhouse (Building 40) was the third greenhouse/conservatory built at the Northwestern Branch. The first conservatory was built in the mid-1870s, and was located on the south side of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St Paul tracks, directly north of the Governor's House and east of Ward Memorial Hall. A formal flower garden was located in the open space between the three buildings, planted with the products of work in the Conservatory. Based on historic photographs, the first Conservatory was replaced between 1889 and 1908, probably in 1903 (Annual Report 1914), on the same site. Based on a review of site maps in the Engineering Service files, this building was demolished between 1916 and 1928 (probably between 1926 and 1928), and its material used in the construction of Building 40. This new greenhouse was built on a different site, located between the original hospital building and the 1923 hospital (Building 70).

The Annual Reports and the Proceedings of the Board of Managers of the National Home detail the dates, construction costs, repairs, and value of the conservatories and greenhouses found at all branches. In 1910, the Annual Reports began to include appraisals of all facilities belonging to the National Home. These accounts document the presence of conservatories and/or greenhouses at nine of the ten branches.

Greenhouses also served occupational, educational, and recreational purposes at the National Home branches. The intention of the early Boards of Managers was to provide for the disabled veteran until he was able to leave the National Home and care for himself. To this end, the managers developed occupational programs which hired National Home members for limited work, allowing them to keep busy and earn extra money. Many of the members at each branch had been gardeners in civilian life, and were employed on "extra duty" to work in the greenhouses and gardens. In 1901, the occupation of gardener ranked 23rd out of 119 occupations represented among the National Home members (Annual Report 1901, 23). For those without work skills or those who needed to learn new skills because of the physical and

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mental limitations brought on by disability, the National Home offered work as occupational training. Work in the conservatory or greenhouse and in the gardens provided such training. Several of the branches sold flowers and plants grown in the greenhouses to visitors, with revenues added to the Post Fund for the benefit of all the members. Flowers were provided for burials in the National Home cemeteries as well.

Working or strolling in the gardens provided recreation during the summer; in winter, the conservatory or greenhouse was an alternate interior space to the library, billiard room, wards, or canteen (Downing, Treatise, 387).

Greenhouses served as support facilities for the therapeutic activities for the National Home and Veterans Administration hospitals. One of the principal tenets of domestic arrangement in the 19th century was the incorporation of natural objects, flowers, and plants in the home, based on the belief that the beauty of nature would enhance the home's influence on the moral character of its inhabitants (Stevenson, 5). Nature was intended to elevate moral sensibilities, of which a principal one was patriotism. The National Home, populated by courageous veterans, and made more beautiful through flowers and plants, would thus inspire a heightened sense of patriotism.

Much of the organization and activity which lead to the establishment of the National Home, and in particular the Northwestern Branch, came from women's groups, such as the Ladies Aid Society and the Lady Managers of the Wisconsin Soldiers' Home (Hurn, passim). Women participated in the U.S. Sanitary Commission work at the battlefield, and were commended for bringing the comforts of home to the sick and wounded, in what one scholar has called the "opening of a branch of the American Home at the front" (Wood, 202). The intended purpose of the National Home was to be a "home" for the needy veteran. In 1872, the original name, National Asylum, was changed to be in keeping with that purpose. Flowers and plants were essential to the "home-like" quality of the National Home branches.

Nature not only improved morality, but flowers played a role in countering the foul odors associated with sickness and death. A popular belief in the 18th and most of the 19th centuries held to the theory of miasmata as the cause of disease. Communicable disease were believed to be transmitted by bad odors. Flowers limited such odors, and were routinely placed in the domiciliary and hospital wards (Annual Report, 1901, 199). Flowers and plants were also used in the preparation of medicines for various illnesses.

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The use of horticulture as a means of therapy in the treatment of mental illnesses had been advanced by Dr. Benjamin Rush in the early 19th century in his Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind (1812). The concept of milieu therapy developed out of the 19th century connection between nature and moral philosophy. Programs of the Veterans Administration for neuro-psychiatric treatment continued to be based on activities involving nature, including working in vegetable and flower gardens and in greenhouses (Morris, 28). The Greenhouse (Building 40) is located midway between the 1922-1923 hospital and the 1932 hospital annex, easily accessible to patients for therapeutic activities.

The 1936 addition to the Greenhouse (Building 40) included an "Animal Room." Site plans from the early 1940s refer to the entire 1936 addition as the "Animal House," the replacement for an earlier guinea pig house. In 1900, a guinea pig house had been erected on the grounds for breeding laboratory animals. This building was demolished in 1939.

B. Building History

1. Date/s of Construction: 1924, 1928, 1936

Building 40 was built in three stages. In 1924, a large three-gabled greenhouse with a frame work/storage structure on its north side was built. In 1928, an addition of a small, two-gabled greenhouse with an attached brick work/storage room was constructed on the west end of the original portion of the building. In 1936, a long, narrow brick work room/animal house/root cellar was built on the north side of the earlier greenhouse portions. An airlock entry was added to the east side of the frame portion of the original part of the building sometime after 1936.

The construction of Building 40, as a new greenhouse, is related to the demolition of the second conservatory/greenhouse at the Home in 1926-1928. Construction drawings for the 1928 addition to Building 40 call for "part of the old greenhouse to be used and erected on west side of the new greenhouse." The conservatory does not appear on site plans after 1926.

2. Designer/Supplier: Foley Greenhouse Manufacturing Co., Forest Park, Illinois, 1924

The drawings for the large 1924 greenhouse section were prepared for the Northwestern Branch by Foley Greenhouse Manufacturing Co. Feature stories in the Forest Park Review (November 19, 1926; August 23, 1956) identified the owner of the company as Philip J. Foley, a leader in greenhouse construction in the United States, who had originally

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established a millwork business in Chicago in 1887. This company manufactured window and door units as well as greenhouses until the Chicago factory burned in 1922. At that time, Foley moved to Forest Park, a suburb of Chicago, where he could build a larger plant and expand the greenhouse business. The company's clients for glass enclosures included park districts, sewage treatment facilities, and estates of wealthy Chicagoans such as Philip Armor, Albert Lasker, and the McCormick family. Foley Greenhouse Manufacturing Co. was known as the first manufacturer to use California redwood in the production of greenhouses.

Typically, from the mid-19th century on, greenhouses were sold as prefabricated building components with construction drawings supplied to the client. The Foley Greenhouse Manufacturing Co. supplied the components and the drawings to the Northwestern Branch. Construction may have been done by the Foley Co., by the National Home engineering personnel, or by a separate contractor.

The drawings for the 1928 and 1936 additions do not identify the designer/supplier. Drawings notes and the materials of the additions suggest that construction may have been done by National Home personnel. The reuse of material from another building was a longstanding practice at the National Home branches. Civilian employees and members on extra duty may have done the construction work.

3. Building Use: Greenhouse, Storage, and Workspace, 1924-1990

A comparison between the original plans and the present condition of the building indicates that the structure remained in use as a greenhouse from 1924 until it was taken out of service in 1989/1990.

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural Character

Building 40 is an astylistic utilitarian structure which conforms to the standard definition of a greenhouse. The building has maximum glass surface and minimum framing, and is sited to achieve maximum exposure to sunlight and protection from wind. The greenhouse sections have low foundation walls and glass upper walls and roofs. Each of the greenhouse sections has an attached structure which serves as a work/storage area. These attached work/storage rooms have no distinguishing stylistic features. The 1936 brick addition with attached concrete root cellar has no distinguishing stylistic features.

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The original section of the greenhouse is a long rectangular building, consisting of three connected, gabled units facing east. A small frame work/storage structure is attached to the northwest corner of this greenhouse section. Entrances to the greenhouse are centered in each of the three units on the east elevation. The entry of the middle unit is framed by two cast concrete, unfluted Doric columns which originally supported a wood trellis for vines. The horizontal trellis has been removed.

The cast concrete columns are additional examples of reused materials. The impost block above the abacus on each column is detailed to abut another building component or feature; the columns have been cut down above the necking to reduce their height; and the concrete of the column foundations does not match that of the columns.

The greenhouse addition built in 1928 is a narrow rectangular building with its narrow end comprised of two connected, gabled units facing south. The north end of this addition is a brick work/storage area.

The 1936 addition is a narrow brick structure oriented on a east-west axis off the west side of the brick work/storage portion of the 1928 addition. The building is L-shaped with the broad leg at its western end where the root cellar is attached to the north side of the brick structure.

2. Condition of the Fabric

The overall condition is poor. The foundations walls are cracked in both greenhouses sections. Many glass panes are broken, and paint on the wood framing has deteriorated, exposing the bare wood to the weather. Mechanical and electrical services require replacement.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall Dimensions

Building 40 consists of two principal portions: a rectangular greenhouse, roughly measuring 126' (east-west) x 77' (north-south), and a series of work/storage rooms on the north side of the greenhouse, roughly measuring 106' (east-west) with widths (north-south) varying from 15'-9" to 25'-3." A 14'-6" x 28'-0" root cellar is built off the northwest corner of the 1936 addition.

1924 greenhouse section:

100'-8" (east-west) x 77'-4" (north-south) with a 15'-9" x 24'-8" wood structure on the north side of the northwest corner

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1928 greenhouse addition:

24'-10" (east-west) x 58'-9" (north-south) with a 24'-10" x 25'-3" brick structure on the north end

1936 brick addition:

56'-6" (east-west) x 25'-1" (north-south) with a 14'-6" x 28'-0" concrete root cellar on the west end of the north side

2. Foundations: concrete footings under walls and columns

3. Walls:

1924 greenhouse section:	lower - concrete block upper - glass panes set in wood framing
1924 frame work/storage:	wood 2 x 4 studs with wood drop siding
1928 greenhouse addition:	lower - reused cream brick upper - glass panes set in wood framing
1928 brick work/storage:	reused cream brick
1936 brick addition:	reused brick, predominately cream with red and brown
1936 root cellar:	concrete

4. Structural System:

The concrete block and brick greenhouse walls are supported on concrete foundations; the wood framing of the glass walls rests on the block and brick walls. The wood frames of the glass-paned greenhouse roofs are supported by two rows of 1-1/2 inch diameter pipes placed every 10 feet running lengthwise in the 1924 greenhouse, and a single row of pipe columns under the roof ridge in the 1928 greenhouse addition. The brick portions are load-bearing masonry walls with wood truss roofs. The root cellar is concrete wall construction.

5. Openings:

All doors and windows are in wood with various combinations of glazed and raised wood panels. The south side of the 1936 addition has seven openings from east to west: paired eight-light windows, paired doors with eight-light upper panels and wood lower panel, paired eight-light windows, paired doors with eight-light upper panels and wood lower panel, paired eight-light windows, paired eight-light windows, and single eight-light windows. On the west side of the 1936 addition, there are an infilled door opening and one set of paired windows; on the north side, four sets of paired, four-light windows. Entry doors are found in the east elevations of the frame and brick work/storage

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rooms on the north side of the greenhouse sections.

6. Roofs:

The greenhouse sections have gabled roofs made of glass panes held in wood frames. The frame section has a gabled roof covered with roofing paper. The brick sections have gabled roofs covered with standing seam metal. The root cellar has a flat tar and gravel roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plan:

The building has a total of approximately 12,068 square feet on one level on grade. The original section of the building was constructed in 1924, and additions were made in 1928 and 1936. The 1924 greenhouse section has a rectangular plan with a rectangular frame work/storage room on the west end of the north side of this greenhouse section. The greenhouse and brick work/storage room addition built in 1928 is rectangular in plan with its long dimension attached to the western end of the original greenhouse section. The plan of the 1936 brick addition is a long, narrow rectangle which extends off the west side of the brick portion of the 1928 addition. The root cellar is square in plan on the west end of the north side of the 1936 addition.

The original greenhouse section is entered through three doors centered under the three gables of the eastern elevation. The interior has no partition walls. Two walkways run the length of each section, divided by benches which supported plantings at the level of the top of the exterior foundation walls.

At the west end of the 1924 greenhouse section, three doors open into the 1928 addition. A door in the northwest corner allows access to the frame work/storage room. A toilet facility is located in an enclosure in the southeast corner of the work/storage room. An airlock entry has been added to the original exterior door in the east wall.

The 1928 greenhouse addition is entered from the exterior on its west elevation. Pipe columns, walkways, and plant benches run the length of the interior. A door in the northeast corner gives access to the brick work/storage room. From the work/storage room, three doors give access into 1) the frame portion of the 1924 section, 2) a tool room in the northern half of the space, and 3) the work room in the 1936 brick addition.

The 1936 brick addition is a long, open work room with a potting bench along the north side. The southwest corner was the animal house and

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the northwest L-section was the root cellar.

2. Flooring: The greenhouse floors are concrete and gravel with brick walkways. The wood and brick portions have concrete floors.

3. Walls and Ceilings: The greenhouse walls and ceilings are glass panes set in wood frames. The walls and ceiling of the 1924 frame work/storage room are interior wood paneling. The walls of the 1928 and 1936 brick work/storage rooms are brick and the ceilings are wood.

D. Site:

The Veterans Affairs Medical Center site is roughly square in plan. A wide, shallow valley runs east-west through the site along a line approximately a third of the distance from the southern to the northern boundary. The original buildings of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers are located on the high ground on the north side of this valley. The 1923 and 1966 hospitals are located on the south side of the valley along the southern boundary of the site. The greenhouse (Building 40) is located in the western portion of the valley, adjacent to the creek bed which runs through the valley. Building 102 (Laundry, 1955) and Building 119 (Incinerator, 1973) are located to the northwest and north of Building 40.

A culvert runs on the south of the building. This concrete-bottomed, open culvert is the remains of the creek which originally flowed west to east through the south half of the Veterans Affairs site. The sides of the culvert are random-coursed stone work. At the midpoint of the south side of Building 40, the culvert runs underground. Off the southwest corner of Building 40, a narrow steel-beam, wood-deck traffic bridge crosses the culvert. The south side of the culvert is densely lined with deciduous trees.

Building 40 is approached on a gravel road which runs west off Flower Drive, a paved roadway which joins Lake Wheeler Drive to the east. Lake Wheeler Drive is a secondary street connecting the area of the buildings of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers and the main hospital complex. Decorative flowering trees have been planted on the east side of Building 40, where there are remains of former flagstone-trimmed planting beds. A gravel turnaround is located on the west side of the building.

The land rises steeply immediately north of the building. The placement of Building 40 with high ground to the north reduces the impact of north winds on the greenhouse, lowering fuel consumption. The root cellar is partially built into this rise.

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PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings:

Engineering Service, Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

- 1) As-built drawings, Foley Greenhouse Manufacturing Co., 1924, dated 2/16/24
- 2) Greenhouse addition, dated 5/27/1928
- 3) Brick addition, dated 8/21/36

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PART IV: PROJECT INFORMATION

The Department of Veterans Affairs is intending to construct a new Cemetery Administration/Service Building on the site of Building 40. To accomplish this construction, it will be necessary to demolish Building 40, a contributing structure in a historic district that has been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Therefore, Building 40 is being documented to satisfy stipulations in a Memorandum of Agreement between the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, to provide the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) with documentation of the building so that there will be a permanent record of its history and appearance.

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Date: September 1, 1992

ADDENDUM TO:
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5000 West National Avenue
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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