

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #87 - Side A

Subject: Robert E. "Rube" Blair

Place: Andrews, Oregon

Date: May 10, 1973

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

PAULINE BRAYMEN: This is Pauline Braymen; I interviewed Rube Blair on May 10th, 1973 at his home near Andrews. Well to get started off, I know that the Blair's and the Shulls and the Smyth's are all related, but how, I mean, what is the tie?

RUBE BLAIR: Well John Smyth married Grace Blair.

PAULINE: Okay. So Grace is your niece?

RUBE: Grace is my sister.

PAULINE: Grace is your sister.

RUBE: Marjorie is Johnny's sister.

PAULINE: Marjorie Shull?

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: Okay. Well that helps me a lot. I knew that you were all, you know, tied there someway. Well is Ray Blair your son?

RUBE: No, he's my nephew.

PAULINE: He's your nephew. I went to school with Ray.

RUBE: Oh, you did?

PAULINE: Yeah.

RUBE: He is down at Nevada now, running a ranch down there below ...

PAULINE: I haven't seen him for a long, long time. Well how did your family happen to

come to this part of the country? Did your mom and dad come here?

RUBE: Yeah, they come here in the early days, 1913, or '12, I forget now which.

PAULINE: And what were their names?

RUBE: Blair.

PAULINE: But their first names?

RUBE: Robert.

PAULINE: Robert.

RUBE: And Louise.

PAULINE: And where did they come from?

RUBE: Visalia, California to here.

PAULINE: Do you remember them ever saying why they came?

RUBE: They were getting tired of the dairy business. They was really got run out of the dairy business. Got so shaky and all. They was in the dairy business there in Visalia for about 11 years.

PAULINE: So they decided to get away from it all?

RUBE: Yeah. Well this is an open country, a free country. Just like this country now is crowded --- our country is ruined --- too bad to see things go like it is. Crowds is taken it --
- I seen a time down here when, well I seen while I skinned a coyote, I seen 492 antelope within 200 yards of me. I seen more bunches out there that I couldn't count. They was around there.

PAULINE: You don't see so many anymore.

RUBE: None.

PAULINE: None?

RUBE: No, there's a little bunch that comes in here in the alfalfa. I don't know where the rest of them --- they claim there is a lot more in different places, but I never see them.

PAULINE: Well did your folks homestead this place then?

RUBE: No, we bought it.

PAULINE: You bought it.

RUBE: Yeah, in 1921 or '22. I had a chance to buy this place over here for \$5,500 and they wouldn't loan me the money.

PAULINE: And now it's worth ---

RUBE: Well you know what they sold it for? \$350,000. Juan Redon place, I was dealing on that for \$5000, no, \$6000. That belonged to Juan Redon, the Mexican.

PAULINE: What was his name again?

RUBE: Juan Redon.

PAULINE: Juan Redon.

RUBE: J U A N R E D O N. He had the Carlton, the place over where the house is now. And Bill Huffman had this place here.

PAULINE: Now it's Wildhorse Ranch.

RUBE: Yeah, and they bought Penland out, and then he bought, Rankin bought a lot more land around here.

PAULINE: Well I was thinking that John Henry (Penland) used to live around here.

RUBE: Yeah, he lived down there where that Cantrell lived.

PAULINE: Well that sure looked familiar to me. We went too far and I was on that road instead of this one up here. And I stopped there and asked Mrs. Cantrell where you lived. You know how to get --- I knew you lived up here, but I didn't know how to get there.

RUBE: I made a mistake, after you hung up, in not telling you how to come. I didn't think you'd been here.

PAULINE: Well I hadn't, but I knew that your name was on the mailbox. So, and I knew you were up this canyon, so I didn't think I could miss you too far, so I stopped there and

asked to be sure that I was on the right road. And I'm glad I did, because I wasn't. She said the culverts are out on up the road.

RUBE: They're pretty bad.

PAULINE: Well I thought when I stopped there that that looked like John Henry's place, because I was there once.

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: Well where was Juan Redon's place then?

RUBE: That's this place right back ...

PAULINE: Right back here. And Huffman had ---

RUBE: Huffman had this part.

PAULINE: You always run cattle, or do you run sheep too?

RUBE: No, I run cattle.

PAULINE: Run cattle.

RUBE: Run horses most of the time up until '47. Sold all the horses I had, so I quit. And the Bureau of Land Management put me out, tried to put me out of the cow business. I got 600 acres on top of the mountain they won't let me use. Everybody else can use it, but I can't.

PAULINE: I've heard this story from more than one person.

RUBE: Yeah, I expect.

PAULINE: I don't always understand just what's behind it all.

RUBE: Well it's the government. Like everything else, it's run by the government. It's deteriorating.

PAULINE: Well the community of Andrews used to be quite a community with a store and school.

RUBE: I run the store down here when we had as high as 6 or 7 pack strings, sheep

outfits, come in there and load up with \$600, \$700 worth of groceries and go out once a week. And Fields the same way. I run the Fields Store for two years. That is, worked there for Mrs. ... And they'd be 6 and 7 of them pack strings come in there a week and take out \$400 to \$500 worth of groceries.

PAULINE: Take them out to the sheep camps?

RUBE: Yeah. Lauserica and Garay had a lot of sheep on the mountain. I forget how many now, 36,000 I think. And when the BLM come in, I think, they put 96,000 sheep off the mountain.

(NOTE: According to John Scharff, Joe Lauserica and Pete Garay were partners in the sheep business on Steens Mountain. In 1928 they had 16,000 sheep and \$75,000 in the bank, and didn't owe anyone. When the banks in Nevada, where they had their funds on deposit were closed, they lost their money and were not able to get operating loans because they had no debt. In 1935, ewes, old ewes, were selling for \$2 a head. The local Burns bank had taken 2,000 head on some kind of a deal and turned them over to Lauserica and Garay, and they were able to make a financial comeback. They owned only a few small parcels of land in the Steens, in the Big Indian, and Dry Creek areas. Garay, whose name was changed from something less pronounceable, died in Burns of a cerebral hemorrhage, and Lauserica returned to Spain in the mid-1960's.)

PAULINE: They put that many off of the mountain?

RUBE: Off the mountain, yeah. Made them sell out sheep. Frank Kueny bought a lot of them, the homesteads. As you go out the ---they told me he had 42 sections of land on the mountain that he owned. Mrs. Kueny, did you read that piece in the paper she put in?

PAULINE: Yeah, was that pretty well true?

RUBE: Well, it's true, yes. But I don't know about the roads that they're talking about, the wagon trails. Because there is more than one. There's a network of roads around here,

you might say. One of them goes the old ridge, and the military trail goes over Whiskey Hill down here and over ... around that way. And then it goes across the desert, down through the Kueny place. Now this is what old man Currey told me. The roads were there; marks were there. He showed me. Old man Currey was here. He was one of the scouts for the government in the early days. He told me this was Fort Alvord. A lot of them told me it wasn't. Alvord was up above, well, I know better now.

PAULINE: It was here?

RUBE: It was here, yes. Fort Alvord was right down here about 200 yards below the house.

PAULINE: Have you ever found any evidence of ---

RUBE: Oh, I've got a whole can of shells over there I plowed up here in the garden. And bullet molds. And the rocks were there until Barrington tore the building down here four or five years ago. And there's old indications of houses all the way down the creek here. That place of mine down there is one of the original places, where you cross the bridge on the other side of the road. That's the Riales place.

PAULINE: Riales?

RUBE: Riales, yes. Mrs. Kueny said in her paper that it was abandoned when she was there. Well I bought the place in '36 from John Smyth. They took it on a grocery bill. I don't know what time. But I moved on there, I lived there in '21. A cousin and I moved in there and was trapping.

PAULINE: What kind of things did you trap for? Mink?

RUBE: Coyote, wildcat.

PAULINE: Coyote, wildcat. Did you sell the coyote hides then?

RUBE: Yes.

PAULINE: Did you get a pretty good price for them?

RUBE: Oh, we got as high as \$18 a piece for them. That was the way we made our living, you might say. When we first come to this country I shot as high as 2,800 jackrabbits a week, a month.

PAULINE: There were a lot of them around then?

RUBE: Oh, yes. There at Garrison Lake in Catlow Valley we sat there on the doorstep of the house and shot 82 rabbits when they came in to water.

PAULINE: Oh, for heavens sakes.

RUBE: Right there within an hour, hour and a half's time in the evening. We'd, Dad and I, would make a trip with packhorses, and camp wherever ... took us. We was trapping. We'd go down through south Catlow, down to the Nevada line, and back around to Fields. Around the hotel there in Fields. I had a barn, too. I had as high as 75 horses there in one night.

PAULINE: That's a lot of horses. Now was this the livery barn there at Fields?

RUBE: Yes.

PAULINE: Is that the one that still is ---

RUBE: It's the same barn, yes. I had to corral ...

PAULINE: Well most of the people around this area then were cattlemen and sheep men and ---

RUBE: Yeah, and trappers.

PAULINE: Trappers.

RUBE: We'd trap most of the time, a lot of jackrabbits. We'd take a team and wagon and go out across the valley and hunt jackrabbits all day. And get as high as, oh I've got as high as 125 rabbits in one day with a 22 rifle.

PAULINE: That's a lot of rabbits.

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: Well I can believe it because I was down here; oh 15 years ago when the rabbits were real bad again, and watched them come out across the fields. I never saw so many rabbits in my life, so I can believe it.

RUBE: Yeah. Well I seen over in Catlow Valley around Home Creek, or in there some place --- I forget the fellow's name now but there's a whole bunch of them --- built a corral and got 5,000 in one night by driving them. That's a pile of rabbits. Just get out through the sagebrush, and old Bass Haines, he lives down there in the west side of the valley, built a little corral and put a wing out about a quarter on one side, and about 200 yards on the other, and him and his wife, and granddaughter went out a foot and drove in 500 in one night. Get in that corral and kill them. That's when they was 5 cents a piece, bounty.

PAULINE: Did you have to take the ears into Burns?

RUBE: Yeah, you cut the ears. Yes, you cut the ears off and took them into Burns. I think it was 1914 they voted that bounty on there at Blitzen. They never voted it off, it's still on, but they won't pay no bounty.

PAULINE: They won't honor it?

RUBE: No. Down here at Fields, walking from my mines, I had some quicksilver mines down there --- down to Fields --- I would take a 22 and I would make enough to pay for the groceries at four and a half cents a piece.

PAULINE: Well this is what I'd heard, that people would take the ears to the grocery store and pay for the groceries, and then the grocery man would haul them into Burns and collect the bounty on them.

RUBE: Four and a half cents a piece. He got a half a cent.

PAULINE: Made a little profit on it.

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: Well it probably just about paid for hauling them in. A little more.

RUBE: Well, I don't know. Wouldn't much more than pay for it. But then you take several thousand rabbit ears, it counts up.

PAULINE: Well \$40 worth of groceries in those days was a lot of groceries.

RUBE: Oh yes. Well I was walking about four miles, I'd probably get 100, 125 rabbits, and that's pay for my groceries while I was walking there. That's about, saving a lot of work.

PAULINE: Yeah. Well when did people sort of, you know, the two communities, of course there are still a few people at Fields, but Andrews is just practically --- there is no store there or anything anymore. But I mean what happened, and when did the people start moving away?

RUBE: When the Bureau of Land Management come in. That's what crowded the people out.

PAULINE: No more free range. And people couldn't make it.

RUBE: No, they couldn't make it. So when Marjorie left there, Craig and his wife came in, she blowed up and tore up that store. The old store building foundation is there, across the road. John used to have an awful trade there. Why he had the sheep men, cattlemen. And these ranches, they had as high as, Whitehorse had 25 men working for him, and Alvord had as high as 50 working then. And they all used to come down here and traded. Serrano Point had 5 or 6.

PAULINE: Now where was Serrano Point?

RUBE: Right straight across from Andrews, right straight across the valley.

PAULINE: That way?

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: I've never heard of that.

RUBE: It's east.

PAULINE: S E R A N A? (Corrected to Serrano)

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: And that was a ranch?

RUBE: S E R A --- I can't spell it now. It's Serrano.

PAULINE: Serrano, with an O on the end.

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: And that was a ranch?

RUBE: Yeah, it belonged to the PLS Company. Belongs to the Kueny place now. I started to work there when I was 13.

PAULINE: What did you do?

RUBE: Built fence, done chores. First one thing and another. Started at the Alvord and worked up there most of the time from then on. After school Cliff would come down and get me, take me out to the ranch and put me to work.

PAULINE: Did you go to school in Andrews?

RUBE: No, I never went to school in Andrews. I went to school down below McLean's. They had a schoolhouse down there.

PAULINE: Are they between here and Fields?

RUBE: No, they are south of Fields.

PAULINE: South of Fields. Well you had to go quite a ways then.

RUBE: About six miles.

PAULINE: Six miles.

RUBE: When I was at Long Hollow at the homestead we had a schoolhouse up there. That was in '14, I think.

PAULINE: Well now Long Hollow is between Fields and ---

RUBE: Catlow.

PAULINE: Catlow.

RUBE: Our old house is still standing over there. Beginning to fall down. Built out of rock.

PAULINE: You homesteaded over there? Your folks homesteaded over there?

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: Well that's where they went first then.

RUBE: That's where we went first.

PAULINE: And then came over here later?

RUBE: Come up here in '21 or '22.

PAULINE: Well have McLean's been down here in this part of the country then for many, many years too?

RUBE: Oh yes, they were here before we was. Warren and ... they passed away. Warren was born here, and Ollie was born here too. Ollie Heinz, she was born here.

PAULINE: Is she a McLean?

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: I didn't know that.

RUBE: She was Warren's sister.

PAULINE: Yeah. Well I didn't know that. The Ollie that works at Home Drug now?

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: I've known her all my life and I didn't know that.

RUBE: She could tell you quite a bit about ... too.

PAULINE: Yeah, well I ought to interview her. She's one that I just never --- I don't ever think about her as being an old timer either, I don't know why.

RUBE: Well probably wouldn't around Burns there.

PAULINE: Of course her daughter is just a few years younger than me, and I just never

thought about her. I didn't know that she grew up down here or anything.

RUBE: Yeah, raised here. Well now ... boys pulled out. I don't know if they are alive yet or not ...

... (Unrelated)

PAULINE: Were the winters pretty severe down in here when you were a boy?

RUBE: Used to be.

PAULINE: I've heard some tales about Long Hollow as it being a really bad place to get caught in a storm.

RUBE: Yeah, there was a lot of them that never got through, but we pulled them over the hill with a team. They trailed sheep through there in the wintertime too. They made V's, put the team on some-thing to pull on. ...

PAULINE: Take two poles?

RUBE: Yeah, and make a V out of boards. Trail it, so you could get the sheep over to hay. There'd be three feet of snow in there. I pulled lots of cars over. Pulled them up on top of the mountain, and then after they got on top, they could make it all right. Get down the other side.

PAULINE: Yeah, getting up the one side. Mrs. Urizar was telling me about she and her husband getting caught in a storm down there. I guess they had, he had her and the two little boys, or something with her, and she didn't think they were going to get out of it alive ...

RUBE: Well I don't know whether it was before he was married, or afterwards, but I seen him come down the canyon one time, and he had a Model-T Ford, brand new one, both doors open. They had three doors, all three doors open. And he goes out through mud, the mud flying and everything.

PAULINE: Oh dear! Sounds like he just drove.

RUBE: Oh, he was driving. But that used to be a pretty bad road. But they are changing it now, so if we ever get snow again they won't get through there at all. Moving all that hillside, coming around under the hill, see. The snow will drift in there and fill the road through. There will be a job there for somebody all winter long.

PAULINE: Well maybe that's what they had in mind. Create a little employment.

RUBE: Kind of looks like it.

PAULINE: Yeah. Well the weather has changed so much. Things are so different.

RUBE: Oh it has, yes. I've seen 18, 20 inches of snow right here in this valley all winter long. I left my car down here many a time at the Kueny place, and along the road down here because I couldn't go.

PAULINE: And now you don't really get any that stays on at all, do you?

RUBE: Oh no, it don't stay on at all. There's no snow to tell. Four or five inches and it's gone in 24 hours. That snow we had night before last ---

PAULINE: Did you have snow night before last?

RUBE: I think it was the night before last, three or four nights ago. It was snowing here when I went to bed, the ground was white. Next morning there wasn't a bit of snow on the ground. It looked like it hadn't even rained.

PAULINE: Well what about the Borax Mine, now? Where is it from here?

RUBE: Right down the valley here, about 6, let's see, about 12 miles I guess. Down the main road, then you turn off and go out into the valley.

PAULINE: Is the road marked so that you --- in any way?

RUBE: No.

PAULINE: You just have to know which road to go on. Do you remember when they were still mining there, and hauling borax out?

RUBE: No, I don't know. I know that ... cooked for 35 Chinamen there, and he was telling

me --- When he was cooking at the Alvord, I was driving stage then, he was telling me about it. They was building up little houses; about all gone, I guess. I got a picture of one, my sister's; I had a picture of Fort Smith. Only picture of it there is, I guess, but I can't get them. I took one up here to that photograph ... in Burns. And they claimed they lost the picture.

PAULINE: Oh no.

RUBE: Yeah. I got two copies of it though.

PAULINE: Well where was Fort Smith?

RUBE: On Willow Creek, over here on Whitehorse Ranch. It moved from here to Whitehorse or Willow Creek, now I don't know which place they moved to. Old man Currey never said.

PAULINE: That's the one they call Fort B. F. Smith?

RUBE: C. S.

PAULINE: C. S.

RUBE: C. S., I believe. It would be interesting for you to look at that.

PAULINE: Yeah, it would.

RUBE: The Fort is gone; the county tore it down and built a bridge out of it.

PAULINE: Well that's a ---

RUBE: That's the county for you. But there is buildings above there. I don't know how they are; I haven't been up there since the '30's. '34-'35, I guess when I was in there. But there is buildings up there that the plaster on the inside is just as good as the day they put it up there. Plaster was made out of that adobe mud and antelope hair, and you couldn't tear it apart. You take a piece of it, and you couldn't pull it apart.

PAULINE: Now this is at what used to be Fort Smith?

RUBE: Yeah, C. S. A little ways above the Fort, probably 2 miles, mile and a half.

PAULINE: And they used adobe mud and antelope hair?

RUBE: Antelope and deer hair, yeah.

PAULINE: Well that's interesting.

RUBE: It's a plaster that lasts now I'll tell you, because it was a building that was pretty badly tore down when I was over there. It was made out of sod. And where it was on the wall again, you couldn't tear it apart. That is after you tore it off the wall you couldn't break it; pull it apart. I think two or three buildings over there. There is a lot of those old sod buildings, rock buildings in the Whitehorse field.

PAULINE: Yeah. Now where is Whitehorse from here? You go further, don't you?

RUBE: Right straight across the valley. To get there now you'd have to go around by Trout Creek, back up that way.

PAULINE: Now that was where John Devine settled, wasn't it?

RUBE: Yeah. That's where Devine settled. Well he had Alvord too.

PAULINE: Then the name Wildhorse Ranch isn't an old name. That's just ---

RUBE: ...

PAULINE: That's a new name.

RUBE: Yes.

PAULINE: Well I thought it was a new name, but I couldn't ---

RUBE: ... out there.

PAULINE: Well this is Wildhorse Creek that comes down?

RUBE: Yeah, Wildhorse Creek. Lot of roads --- if people had time I could take them and show them these roads, and old forts and things. And that photograph gallery in Juntura, where they moved to, you know, from Burns, they have got the original picture that I did have, but they don't want to send it to me, or they claim they can't find it. The same way with that here newspaper office, they claim they can't find it.

PAULINE: Well I can understand things getting lost there, because I know enough about that place. Its there if someone could just find it, but finding it would be another thing.

RUBE: Well I told him, when he took them he put them in an envelope. They was looking through the open pictures. I don't want to lose them. I got a lot of pictures I'd like to hold onto, like World War II and World War I pictures.

PAULINE: You said you drove the stage for a while. Where did you drive, between here and Burns?

RUBE: Crane.

PAULINE: Here and Crane.

RUBE: Denio and Crane.

PAULINE: Everyday?

RUBE: Everyday on the road, yes. Some days I didn't get through. I shoveled mud out here between here and Fields, push it up in front of the front axle. I'd shovel it out and go until it'd pile up again, maybe 50 or 100 feet. Over the top of that Anderson grade. Wintertime go down there the mud would ball up and be that big around, and you'd come back the next morning and you'd have to break them up with sledgehammers to get through.

PAULINE: Yeah, when that dries, it'd just dry like cement, wouldn't it?

RUBE: Well it froze.

PAULINE: Froze?

RUBE: Yeah. It would freeze up at night see. You had big mud balls, either roll them out of the way if you couldn't get them loose, why you'd break them up with sledgehammers.

PAULINE: Did you carry passengers a lot, or just freight type of things, mail?

RUBE: Mostly mail.

PAULINE: Mostly mail.

RUBE: Oh, we did have people over the top of the mountain, too. In wintertime we went from that old barn up there at Tudors, you know ... maybe. We drove over to Anderson Valley with a team and wagon. I've been up there when the snow was so deep if you got off the beaten track you couldn't get back on again. We had four-horses on the buckboard with the mail on it. That was when I was driving. But when I went over there in the wintertime, going to Burns, taking in furs to sell. I don't know how deep the snow was, but it was more than axle deep on the wagon.

PAULINE: That's pretty deep. How long did it take you to go from Bend to Burns, not from Bend to Burns, but from Andrews to Burns?

RUBE: Well in the summertime, we usually just went to Crane.

PAULINE: You just went to Crane?

RUBE: Yeah.

PAULINE: Well how long did it take you?

RUBE: Two days.

PAULINE: Two days in the summertime. And in the wintertime?

RUBE: Well we went from Crane to Alberson, and from Alberson down. Once a week they'd change cars. They'd take this car over to Crane to have it serviced. That's why they went over that mountain. You know where that road goes back towards, goes south there after you come out this side of Crane, this side of Skinners?

PAULINE: Yeah.

RUBE: The road goes to east.

PAULINE: Yeah, back towards Venator and Malheur Cave? Yeah.

RUBE: Yeah. We made it that far one day with the stage from Crane.

PAULINE: Now this is a car?

RUBE: Yeah, a Ford. ... We had a car all the time. I had to walk back to Crane that

night, back to ... I got stuck down here with a Ford, Model-T Ford, twisted the axle off. Was three days getting out. Got out and put in a new axle before I got on to Denio.

PAULINE: Now how far is Denio from here?

RUBE: Well about 40 miles.

PAULINE: About 40 miles.

RUBE: Yeah, I think about 40. Yeah these roads, it would be interesting for somebody to know.

PAULINE: Yeah, it would, but you would need to have a pickup or ...

RUBE: Well you'd need a saddle horse.

PAULINE: Or a saddle horse.

RUBE: That's what you'd need.

PAULINE: Well that would let me out, because I couldn't ride a horse far enough to get out of the yard.

RUBE: ...

PAULINE: Well it would have to be pretty gentle and know what it was doing, because I sure --- Yeah, I'm a Harney County girl that doesn't know how to ride. I was raised here, but I don't know how to ride a horse.

RUBE: The original road from Trout Creek, it come down Trout Creek, turned out there somewhere along Culp's, by Culp's place. Comes out over the hills this way, and then swings down around Trout Creek. They couldn't get out of the canyon, so they went out over the hills. I've seen ... place or two, but I don't know too much about it. But that road that comes out Trout Creek, I suppose the canyon was too rough and they couldn't get down. And then there's a road that comes across from Trout Creek, right straight across here. A big spring out there in the valley. ... What's the man that used to run the PLS Company over there? Do you know him?

PAULINE: Oh, I should, but I don't.

RUBE: Out at the Agency.

PAULINE: Yeah. I never have got this PLS Company business straight. I know it was Miller and Lux Company to start out with, and then it changed.

RUBE: Well it was Miller and Lux most of the time till it sold out to individual people. You could get on a team and buggy at the Mexican border and camp on a Miller and Lux Ranch every night until you got to the Canadian border.

PAULINE: Yeah. Well they owned a lot of property then.

RUBE: Yeah, and he started out with a hamburger stand. One of Miller's boys died on this desert.

PAULINE: Oh, he did?

RUBE: Froze to death, got drunk. Going from Whitehorse to Alvord. And I don't know, there was one or two times, froze to death out there.

(END OF TAPE)

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