



This Frank R. Paul illustration for the masthead of Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* symbolizes how science fiction transports the reader to other worlds of the imagination--strikingly representative of Gernsback and the times almost 70 years ago.

"Who Are We?"

## FOR THOSE WHO WONDER WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT—

Around the Easter weekend in the 1950s a small gathering of old time fans created First Fandom. They met in the home of Dr. C. L. Barrett, avid fan and collector, in Bellefontaine, Ohio on the occasion of a very early MidwestCon. Their fellowship from the 1930s made them a special, closely-knit group and they spontaneously agreed to call themselves "First Fandom", the nucleus for the inclusion of all others deemed part of their fellowship. So, an unstructured society of persons "active" in SF before 1940 came into being with Robert A. Madle of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society as the titular head. Like the veterans of an historic War or a Great Era, they share in union a very special society.

At first no dues, minutes, publications, official meetings or other formalities were established--in all simplicity, the identification of the close bond of shared experiences was sufficient. Over the years certain basic regulations were agreed upon. Informality based on personal relationships determined their uncomplicated association. It was recognized that the group was a "last man" club and over the years, one by one the ranks have been diminished. As long as some veterans still remain, the old spirit thrives and, defiantly they say,

**"First Fandom is Not Dead!"**

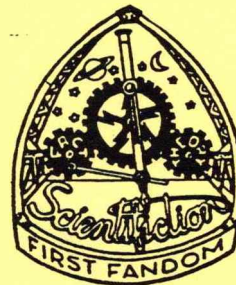
• A MEMBERSHIP LIST identifying the status of members will be available as published in the annual issue of the *First Fandom News Letter* and posted on the First Fandom Bulletin Board and Hall of Fame at all worldcons. The list will include all those both living and dead. Like all veterans' organizations, the fellowship ends with the demise of the last of the original and special members, making this a "Last Man Club" which honors the past ---and recognizes the future when, in the coming millenium, the "dinosaurs of fandom" do indeed become extinct.

**First Fandom has a web site. Visit us at [www.firstfandom.com](http://www.firstfandom.com)**



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# Remembering First Fandom



By DAVID A. KYLE

**W**e hold the future still timidly, but perceive it for the first time as a function of our own action. Having seen it, are we to turn away from something that offends the very nature of our earliest desires, or is the recognition of our new powers sufficient to change those desires into the service of the future which they will have to bring about?

J.D. Bernal  
London 1929

The gray-haired man, standing before thousands of science-fiction fans as he received an award, had a beanie on his head.

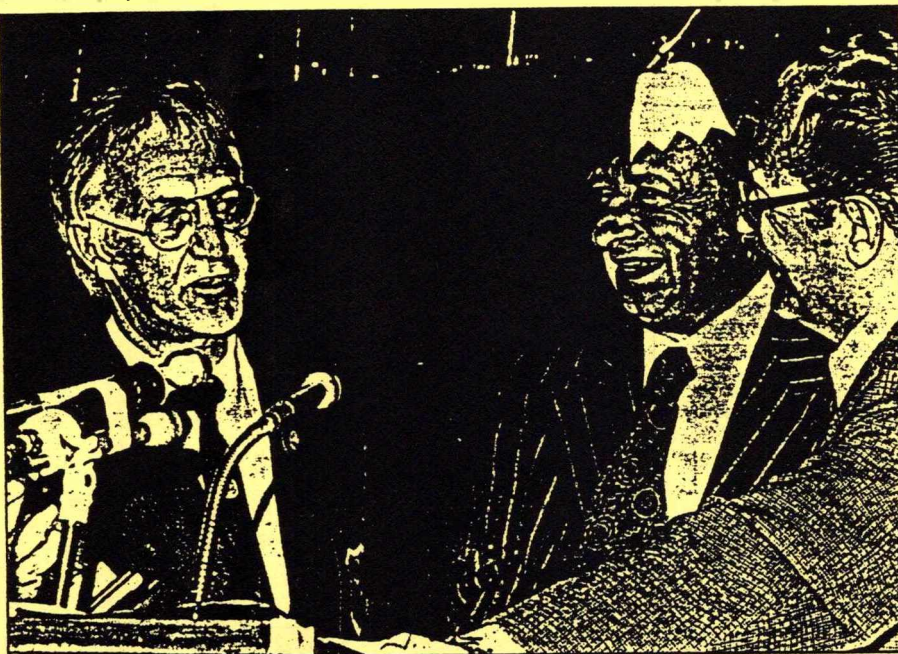
A beanie? What's a beanie? Veteran SF fans know. It's the old droll symbol of themselves. The skull cap with the propeller on top was once the most common caricature of a science-fiction fan.

Under other circumstances, that quinquagenarian—that "First Fandom dinosaur"—might have seemed silly. But that day, at the 1973 World Convention, what he did was humorous and appropriate. Because his award for his "contribution to science-fiction fandom" marked a nostalgic moment, when he clapped a beanie on his head and another on the guest of honor's, the crowd roared approval.

That relatively recent event with the beanie at the 31st World Science Fiction Convention in Toronto tied two worlds of time together. The beginnings of fandom when kids ruled the day was in that instant officially linked with the hyper era of the brave new world when science fiction was a reality and everyone at last knew it.

This year, 1986, marks the 50th anniversary of the phenomenon of the science-fiction convention. The first one ever held was on October 22, 1936. Present were a mere handful of young men. And I was one of them.

On an autumn Sunday, a group of friends in their teens and 20s made a train trip from New York to Philadelphia to meet their fannish counterparts. Correspondence had brought them into a close relationship, so intercity socializing was a natural outgrowth of their mutual enthusiasms. The event was not planned as a serious one. Jack Speer's *Fancyclopedia* described it for fannish history as being "marked with horseplay and camaraderie." This was the first of all STF conventions." How all this has come about,



Enacting the infamous "beanie episode" are David Kyle (left, clutching his Big Heart award), Torcon '73 Pro Guest of Honor Robert Bloch (center, wearing beanie) and award presenter Forrest J. Ackerman (right).

climaxing with the gigantic Worldcons such as this year's 44th being held in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, is right there in the genesis clue of "all STF conventions."

We all know about the beanie, that nonsensical headdress worn in innocent fun or in sophisticated jest. What, however, is STF? Some of us accept the label as a matter-of-fact shorthand for "scientifiction," the semantic precursor of "science fiction." The beanie identifies those at the beginnings of SF fandom: the kids, the youths, the neophytes, the young in heart and mind. The STF term identifies the beginnings of SF when Hugo Gernsback established the first science-fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, in 1926 and labeled the storytelling as "scientifiction" by wedding "scientific" with "fiction."

Most of you, of course, already know this simple history lesson. What is virtually forgotten is this 1936 event of "horseplay and camaraderie." The description is certainly apt. The behavior came naturally from the youths and the times. However, underlying this unpretentious gathering was a certain

serious, even profound, purpose and result. That 1936 convention certainly is the direct ancestor of the Atlanta Worldcon, or the "Confederation" as the naming tradition goes. Attendees in 1986 expect a party and a modest amount of fantastic speculation. There is, though, a significant difference from the past. The emphasis has changed.

To understand the change that 50 years has brought, we have to consider where we've come from. Hugo Gernsback virtually single handedly tried to establish science fiction as a popular literature. That was a long time coming. Most importantly, he created fandom, that amorphous collection of congruous in-

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DAVID KYLE, author of *The Illustrated Book of Science Fiction Ideas & Dreams*, *A Pictorial History of Science Fiction*, and *new adventures in E.E. "Doc" Smith's Lensman series*, was awarded the E.E. Evans Memorial Award for outstanding contributions to science-fiction fandom at the 1974 Toronto Worldcon, and was Fan Guest of Honor at 1983's Worldcon festivities in Baltimore.



dividuals. His magazines printed readers' letters and they appeared regularly, filled with joy, criticism, enthusiasm and passion. Addresses were given and a network of friendships grew out of the backs of magazines and through the mails. When Gernsback lost control of *Amazing Stories* in 1929, he simply accelerated his activities by starting *Science Wonder Stories* and *Air Wonder Stories* and a myriad of other publications. Despite the Great Depression—perhaps even because of it—science fiction firmly took root.

To those of us of First Fandom—"the dinosaurs of SF"—the most incredible decade was between 1926 and 1936. First Fandom is an unstructured society of persons "active" in SF before 1940; their credentials were any proof of devotion to imaginative literature, particularly letters published in the magazines. This dedication to SF's welfare coincided with and was shaped by the Great Depression of 1929-1939. That decade began today's fandom and conventions. The appeal to the readers is still there, but the fans' original goals have shriveled or metamorphosed or even disappeared. There certainly is no longer any need to tell the public that science fiction exists and should receive attention. The uniqueness is gone and the innocence of SF's early days has passed away. That youthful, heady power of idealism of the old times has been, inevitably, diluted. Once fandom was overwhelmingly optimistic and idealistic, perhaps too idealistic, with wild fancies about progress. For contemporary teenagers, there is a disturbing conflict between the visions of the naive past and cynical present.

The first congoers of 1936 didn't wear beanies. In our precocious sophistication, beanies were much too close to childish ways. We wanted to be respected for our beliefs in space travel, in utopia, in superhumankind. We were martyrs to the common charge of being "crazy." We believed in our own creativity—mostly in SF writing, of course. We liked girls, too, if they could be as superior as we thought we were, a rare thing indeed. We were completely under the influence of Hugo Gernsback and the fraternity he had indirectly created by his magazines and then directly created by the formation in 1934, in *Wonder Stories*, of the "Science Fiction League." Of the 10 directors of the SFL, only Forrest J Ackerman is still very much alive and active. Forry himself was the epitome of the fan of the times, a teenager who through his enthusiasm and prodigious letter writing became Fan Number One representing all of Gernsback's readers. Like so many of the very active fans of that decade, he became a professional who has himself contributed to the field's development.

The Science Fiction League stated what fans then really thought with their heads and felt in their hearts. "The founders of the Science Fiction League," Gernsback said, "sincerely believe that they have a great mission to fulfill. They believe in the seriousness of Science Fiction." The term in those days was always capitalized and spelled out and

rarely used in an abbreviated form, such as SF. Even today, the capitalized "SF" instead of the simple "sf" stems from the Gernsback era. "They [the founders] believe that there is nothing greater than human imagination, and the diverting of such imagination into constructive channels. They believe that Science Fiction is something more than literature. They sincerely believe that it can become a world-force of unparalleled magnitude in time to come."

Pretty highfalutin, would you say? Yes, it was. And I believed every word of it. For that matter, I probably still do. I still have "the hope that it" (fandom, if not the League itself) "may blossom into something that will endure in the future and that will fire with enthusiasm future generations."

That's what fandom and its first conventions had which made them remarkable. I



## QUALIFICATIONS FOR FIRST FANDOM

*There are several categories for membership in First Fandom:*

- AN ORIGINAL MEMBER (identified as a **Brontosaurus**) is one who was "active" in science fiction or fannish activities on or before the First World Science Fiction Convention held over the July 4, 1939, weekend in New York city. Any activity for this past period must be documented. Letters in SF magazines, fanzines, club membership, etc.-- any such documentation of "activity" which can be substantiated is necessary.
- A SPECIAL MEMBER (identified as an **Apatosaurus**) is one who was "active" in science fiction or fannish activities (as for a regular **Brontosaurus**) but who cannot document such "active" participation. Followers and readers of science fiction are in this category. A personal claim may be considered as acceptable.
- ALL ORIGINAL AND SPECIAL MEMBERS MUST BE AT LEAST 65 YEARS OF AGE AS OF 1998.
- IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBERS of original and special members are part of First Fandom and are identified as **Dinosaur Spouse** or **Dinosaur Child**.
- Any others who wish to be identified with First Fandom (such as those claiming Associate Membership) are identified as **Friends of First Fandom**. All those who are eligible to be members of Second Fandom are automatically **Friends of First Fandom**. Anyone else can become a **Friend** if proposed by a regular member. Those considered "sponsors" (givers of money and favors) are **Special Friends of First Fandom**.



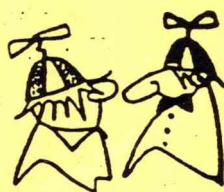
don't find that sort of idealism very much anymore, more's the pity.

Gernsback considered "the furtherance and betterment of the art of Science Fiction" as "the movement... scattered throughout the civilized world." In his May 1934 editorial, he even referred to "SF enthusiasts, the so-called SF fans." Gernsback exhorted "all SF enthusiasts to spread its vogue from year to year" so that "the movement" will "reach the great public." It's particularly enlightening to note that Gernsback refers to "the public" and "many parents" and "the average parent" and "the man in the street" as not having yet "discovered the educational value of SF." "Young men are helped," Gernsback says, "in the school and college room" by "the elevating and imaginary literature of Science Fiction."

How crystal clear is Gernsback's vision! The young are the science-fiction enthusiasts. The young are the ones who appreciate it and learn from it and will build the future because of it. Jules Verne's *voyages extraordinaires* were written for juveniles 100 years ago. Today our kids are crammed full of flashy, trashy modern imitations.

Back in the autumn of 1936, we were motivated by the Gernsback idealism. The travelers "to the con" from New York represented the famous International Scientific Association, the science-hobbyist group which had evolved into a fannish club independent of the SFL. Their hosts were members of the equally well-known Philadelphia Science Fiction Society which is still in existence. That day they named themselves "The First Eastern Science Fiction Convention." The peculiarity of history is that there is a right time for certain things to happen. That was the case for SF cons. Within months, in January 1937, British fans held a more formally prepared convention in Leeds, England. "The Second Eastern" SF con was held in New York in February 1937, a reciprocating visit. "The Third Eastern" was back in Philadelphia over Halloween 1937. "The Fourth Eastern" which became "The First National" was held in 1938 in Newark, New Jersey, and was the launch pad for "The First World Science Fiction Convention" held over the July 4th weekend in New York to coincide with the 1939 World's Fair, from which it picked up the name used ever since.

Six fans came down from New York that day: Donald A. Wollheim, Frederik Pohl, John B. Michel, William S. Sykora, Herbert E. Goudket and David A. Kyle. They were met by other young men: Robert A. Madle, Milton A. Rothman and Oswald Train. Later, John V. Baltidonis and Charles Bert of Philadelphia joined the band. Half of these very young men became more or less famous in the field, all of them made significant contributions to what Gernsback called "the furtherance and betterment" of "the movement." Rothman, in whose home the meeting was held, was elected chairman. Years later, he became chairman of the Fifth World Science Fiction Convention



("Philcon") in Philadelphia in 1947 and again in 1953 for the 11th Worldcon ("Philcon 2"). I became chairman of the 14th Worldcon ("Newyorcon" or "Nycon 2") in 1956. Wollheim (founder of DAW Books), Fred Pohl, Bob Madle and I have all been Worldcon guests of honor. Rothman became a genuine nuclear physicist, as well as an author, and Ozzie Train still publishes a distinguished line of SF and fantasy books.

What did we talk about at the 1936 "convention" which "furthered and bettered" science fiction? We had no program. Was the day merely a friendly outing? No, we had a business meeting, we elected officers, we took minutes. What business? The minutes were never published and were forgotten. So? We planted a seed—and 50 years later, it's still growing. How ironic, too! Earlier that year, Hugo Gernsback was forced out of science-fiction publishing. And, could we believe it? His *Wonder Stories* was reincarnated, not as *Science Wonder Stories* but as, of all things, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*.

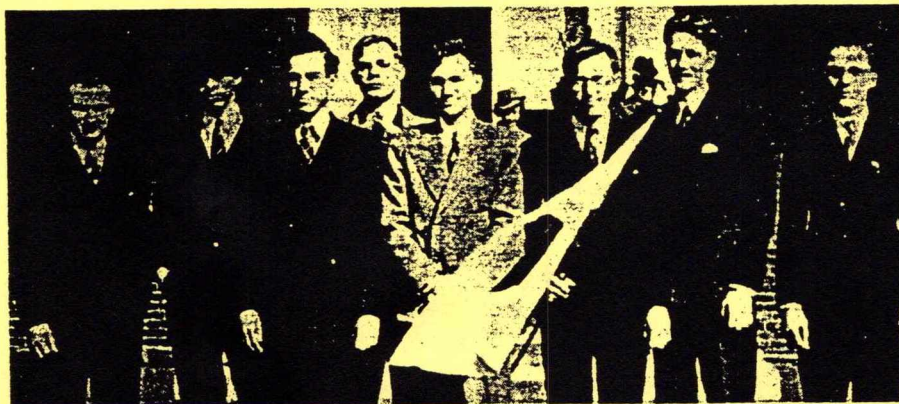
What was going on in our thinking then might best be expressed in the words of Fred Pohl. "Science fiction is the most useful predictive mechanism we have," he comments. "I didn't say 'accurate' or 'theoretically sound' or 'reliable,'" he clarifies. "I said 'useful.'" This is an insightful refinement of the claim at the top of the *Wonder Stories* cover: "The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction." Gernsback—prophet, dreamer with pécadilloes unnoticed or tolerated—inspired us young men. He still does today, whether we admit it or not, with every convention.

What is happening today in this challenging (and frightening) age? Science fiction is commonplace. It's no longer the preserve of the elite. The fannish proselytes of 50 years ago went out into the "mundane" world and

conquered it in the name of Science Fiction. Gernsback would have been pleased. And Gernsback would also have been, perhaps, even more displeased. "The movement" hasn't been notably successful in diverting imagination through science fiction "into constructive channels." It can hardly claim to be the pretentious "world-force of unparalleled magnitude." I'm terribly sorry about that. Science Fiction once had an enormous romantic charm—that's something mighty hard to find in the genre these days. You'll find it mostly in the old stories, even before "the golden years" of the second quarter of the 20th century. Or more often than not, you'll find it in today's fantasy fiction, the rejuvenated soulmate of SF, an SF which harbors so much nonsense, absurdity, and pseudo-science, in order to be entertaining.



To the "old boys of First Fandom," Science Fiction (with those capital letters) was glowing with promise, filled with optimism. Even the pessimistic stories had that redeeming quality of hope. Today, it's popular for writers to be "realistic" and to treat optimism as suspect and to doubt that old-time hope. Science fiction continues to stretch the imagination, but the concerns are now in step with the present world: reflecting our enormous problems, worrying over our uncertain future, disillusioned so often with both science and technology. SF often is more entertaining than ever, but somehow, more often not as pleasant, not as much fun, as it once was.



These are the pioneering fans at their 1936 meeting place in Philadelphia where they held the very first science-fiction convention. Left to right: Ozzie Train, Don Wollheim, Miltie Rothman, Fred Pohl, Johnny Michel, Will Sykora, Dave Kyle and Bob Madle. Herbert E. Goudket was behind the camera.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY DAVID KYLE

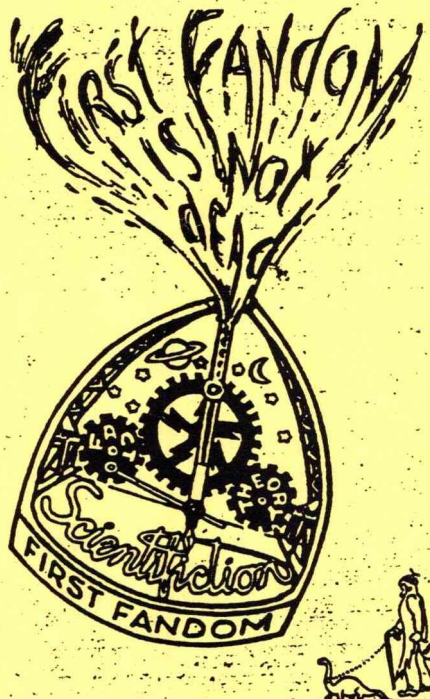


In the issue of November 1985, STARLOG chose Mr. Kyle as "One of the 100 Most Important People in Science Fiction/Fantasy"--and "known as a fighter for positive ideas."

All this leads us to what this personal piece is about: conventions. Sometimes I feel like a Dr. Frankenstein. What monsters have my friends and I created, fed, and unleashed in science fiction and the rest of the world! There are cons proliferating almost daily. (Most fannish get-togethers are called "cons," the useful contraction of the rather misleading idea of a convention.)

There are cons for every purpose, reason and taste. Most are amateur productions, although some are designed to make money or to promote special commercial interests. There are category cons: such as comic cons, costume cons, monster cons, sword and sorcery cons, etc. There are specific cons for *Star Trek*, for *Dr. Who*, for this-and-that author, movie, TV series, character, book, you name it. Most are locally run, some are regional, a few are national or even international in scope and appeal. A World Fantasy Convention is firmly established, straining to control the size of its attendance. In fact, you can attend a "Life, The Universe and Everything" con. That first convention of 1936 has led us around in a perfect circle, back to small, intimate, dedicated groups.

The big one now, however, is the World Science Fiction Convention. Yes, this year it's in Atlanta, over the Labor Day weekend as usual. The nickname "Confederation" uses the traditional identifying "con," another variation of the basic word "convention," such as "Constellation" (Baltimore 1983), "Cinvention" (Cincinnati 1949), "Denvention" (Denver 1941), all of which started with "Nycon" (New York 1939). The first ones,



Kyle prepared this message for an ad in a Worldcon Program book. By adding the "First Fandom" line, Gernsback's original emblem became the badge First Fandom now uses.

before Worldcons, never did get nicknames while establishing the usage of the term "convention."

What's so interesting about "Confederation" is that the three professionals who are featured on the program are all genuine products of fandom. Ray Bradbury, the Guest of Honor, attended the first Worldcon in New York City (the original "Nycon") as a teenager carrying unsold (and unsellable) manuscripts. Ray certainly represents the glory of First Fandom. Terry Carr is the Fan Guest of Honor. As is so often the case with fans-turned-pro, Terry may be one of the best of our many SF professionals, but his greatest impact was made as a hard-working, truly outstanding fan following up the First Fandom era. As for the third personality, Bob Shaw from England is the Toastmaster and is equally prominent today as an award-winning SF writer and an active, dyed-in-the-wool fan. Any one of these three men could be an inspiration to the would-be SF/fantasy writer which seems to be the universal aspiration of most congoers.

It may be too late now with this issue of STARLOG to get information from Confederation (see Fan Network listing), but it's open to all who show up and pay their membership fee. As Hugo Gernsback said over a half century ago: you're part of "a movement." And you can still enjoy "horseplay and camaraderie." Come celebrate the 50th anniversary of SF cons! In any case, at least, be part of "a world-force of unparalleled magnitude in time to come." ☆

**First Fandom has a web site. Visit us at [www.firstfandom.com](http://www.firstfandom.com)**

**We are also at [www.firstfandom.org](http://www.firstfandom.org)**

A Questionnaire is available for anyone interested in Membership. The information requested is: Name and address, phone number, fax number, e-mail address, and birthday date.. You are asked to tell the number of years you have been interested in Science Fiction/Fantasy. You are asked to state what you know about First Fandom and, if you are able, to furnish documentary evidence of interest prior to 1940. If you are a collector, please detail what you have to help our research.

**CONTACT** DAVID KYLE AT 289 ASHTON RD, POTSDAM, NY 13676  
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PERSONAL INFORMATION  
**FIRST FANDOM**

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ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

FAX \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

BIRTHDAY \_\_\_\_\_

I have been interested in Science Fiction and/or Fantasy for 50 - 60 years ☐ YES  
or for \_\_\_\_\_ years:

*examples* (books, magazines, authors etc.)

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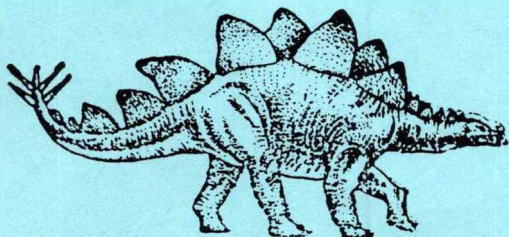
I have been active in Science Fiction/Fantasy Fandom (e.g.: conventions, etc.) since

\_\_\_\_\_

What I know about First Fandom or other remarks:



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