

# NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

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## THIS ISSUE AND THE NOVEMBER ISSUE ARE REPORTS OF THE 2011 TEXTILE STUDY TOUR TO ICELAND AND NORWAY SPONSORED BY VESTERHEIM MUSEUM

**trav-el-ogue. noun. a talk or lecture on travel usually accompanied by a film or slides**

BY SOLVEIG STORVICK POLLEI

Dear Readers,

You'll have to imagine the strains of traditional folk music from Norway courtesy of Honndalstausene and their album "frie former" to help set the mood as you read. To the question of film or slides, enjoy the accompanying photos.

With some of the group coming through New York, Minneapolis and SeaTac, we gathered as a whole near the doors at the Reykjavik airport. Ingebjørg Monsen was there with sign in hand, surrounded by the luggage of those who landed first. And with that smile and greeting, our tour was off to a great start. Luggage was taken to the bus, seats found, greetings exchanged between friends—those already known and those just met. And then began the counting.

The first thing to know about Laurann and her tour guide philosophy is that she does not agree with G.K. Chesterton's famous quote: "The only way to be sure of catching a train is to miss the one before it." Not with Laurann! You realize that her statement of "The bus WILL be leaving at this time" carried the sense of "be on the bus or else." So we were prepared for our first ride to Iceland's Thingvellir National Park. We were given our time frame for a short rest stop and with a bit of grace for jet-lagged passengers, we were on time. First hurdle passed. And I think I saw Laurann's shoulders relax just a bit.

The day was sunny as we drove from the airport to the park. Viking settlers formed Althing in 930 CE. Our guide was very good telling us stories and pointing out

where the encampments would be during the Assembly sessions. Listening to him, you could close your eyes and hear the thrum of voices, animals for transportation and food and the fires crackling as meals would be readied. Volcanic walls would have carried sounds and reflected the lights of the fires as the leaders would debate the issues of their day.

For the first part of the tour, it was a humbling way to spend our time - outside, walking amid some of the oldest history from a geologic and a democratic perspective. As we rode back toward Reykjavik, our heads turned from



**Hallgrímskirkja, designed to resemble lava flowing from a volcano.** Photo by Glenn Skoy.

one side to the other. Flowers, Icelandic horses, the hint of water, perhaps a few were resting their eyes and before we knew it, we were on track for lunch and then a tour of the city. We were able to get our bearings and head to the Handknitting Association of Iceland. Some shopping may have occurred. We explored the Hallgrímskirkja (Lutheran parish church in Reykjavík), took photos and notes as to when the organ

concerts would be held. Others looked though windows

We walked to and from our first dinner in the bright light of the Midnight sun. Thank goodness for blackout curtains! First, though, we were driven to the National Museum of Iceland. Wonderful, creative exhibits and our guide was very informative with a great sense of humor. "We Icelanders are a proud people - born of Viking men and Irish women—women who brought their cats." True story. Apparently the DNA of the cats in Iceland is a match to the DNA of the cats in Ireland.

And the Icelanders have every reason to be a proud people. To see the tools of each decade, the de-



**Thingvellir National Park.** Photo by John Capone.

mands on the settlers and then to look through the windows at a bustling, modern city is a testament to their sense of survival. For those not on the tour but with plans to visit, this museum should be on your list.

Off to the airport for our early morning flight for Bergen. Bergen, which held a few surprises for us. Sunshine! Sunshine for our stay. Bergen is working on their roads. It seems as though they are working all the time on most of the roads. But our driver navigated areas which would seem impassible. Threading a small quilting needle is the picture which comes to mind. Not a problem, and we were soon at the Bergen Museum.

We gasped as we made our way to the conservation level. Covering the tables in front of us were examples from their collection of the weaving and knitting techniques we would soon be learning. With gloves, we were able to touch the textiles and to photograph. Could life be any better for a group of fiber addicts?! I think not. And I would add that the non-textile people of the group were very kind and patient as we tried to take the perfect photograph.

The next morning, each class of students

walked together from our hotel to the studios of the Bergen Husflidslag (Thank YouIngebjørg!)

That we walked past the Husfliden and the tempting window displays at the Oleana flagship store didn't affect our on-time arrival. Not at all. ::cough::



**Nancy Fajman getting a closeup picture.**



**Surrounded by color at the Oleana factory.** Photo by Mary Skoy.

Others will describe the classes. I will only add one tidbit from my teacher, Kari Thue. "It is better to have an achy back than an achy brain." So true. I think it will take a while to process everything learned in our classes.

Our fourth day in Bergen, with looms warped, weavings started and the knitters slowly following their color-work charts, was a day of bus, ferries, food and fiber. Joined by our teachers, we boarded the bus to the Oleana factory. After a wonderful tour and a stop at the factory shop, I was reminded of another quote. "He who would travel happily must travel light." Clearly, Antoine de Saint-Exupery was not a fiber person, nor did he ever imagine the Oleana factory shop!

We were joined by Marta Kløve Juuhl who had taught a class on the warp-weighted loom during a previous tour. She joined us with a sample of *vararfeldur* created in collaboration with a colleague from Iceland. Marta allowed us to pass and photograph the sample through the bus as she talked to us about the collaboration and the history. All this as we found our way to the ferry which would take us to the island of Stord where we visited with Kjersti-



**Marta Kløve Juuhl with her *vararfeldur*.** Photo by Jan Mostrom.



**A demonstration a the warp weighted loom on Stord.** Photo by Veronna Capone.

one of only 20 milliners in Norway, and then saw a demonstration of the warp-weighted loom technique.

Classes resumed with an additional treat: 'Our' newly minted Ph.D., Kay Larson, related to us a part of her



dissertation on warp-weighted loom and double weave. Her work was meticulously detailed and fascinating.

Amazingly, we've come to the last day of our classes and our last day in Bergen. We we walked to our class knowing we had only a few hours to weave or knit before we readied our classrooms for a mini-show and treats—waffles, chocolates, Aquavit, coffee, berries with the occasional camera flash in the background.

Ingebjørg arranged for our farewell dinner to be held at Spisekroken. An uphill walk from our hotel guaranteed to whet our appetite for a meal of local free range veal and strawberries in basil sauce prepared by chef Ingvild S. Bøge. We received certificates from our teachers and then we faced the difficult task of saying good-bye to them. Afterward, we were treated to a view of the Bergen Harbor as we walked downhill to the hotel. I think good-byes are the hardest part of the tour.

An early start - counting of heads on the bus - "Do you have your neighbors?" and we were ready to see Norway "from the Inside"—(think tunnels - lots of tunnels). We traveled through the mists of time to the Hillesvåg Spinnery. One of the owners said "I understand you are more than average interested in yarn," a line which will define this



**Through the mists of time.** Photo by Mary Skoy.

tour and garnered a long laugh from us. The local Husflidslag served a delicious hot soup lunch and — Waffles! Laughter and rain outside set a comfortable scene. But there is always a plan, so we were soon headed to Skei.

During this ride, Ingebjørg shared another wonderful tidbit: "If the snow isn't gone by Midsummer, there won't be an early Spring." Think on this and then imagine our laughter!

During our evening in Skei, Laura Farson, talked to us about *tvandstickning*, twined knitting, and her book *New Twists on Twined Knitting: A Fresh Look at a Traditional Technique*. She had several samples and a project for us to try out the technique.

Another day, another round of bridges, barns, waterfalls, scenery and occasional shops and enough tight turns to please us all. Our drivers are the best! Our first

stop was the Nedreberg farm in Stryn. Wonderful family history, textiles, patterns, maps, waffles (!), and a chance for more photographs.

On to Valbjør with demonstrations of *skinnfell*, a wonderful lunch and the opportunity to wander through the farmstead buildings. The view was stunning, our



**Karen Aakre (foreground) discussing skinnfell at the Valborg farm.** Photo by John Capone.

stomachs were full and I think Laurann had a bit of trouble herding us back to the bus. There were a few skinnfell tempting us with the idea of a quick nap on the farm. But we knew the schedule, so off we went to Bøverdalen and the Elveseter Hotell.

Another night, another breakfast buffet but also the realization that tomorrow would be our last day. How could this be? This is the stage of the tour where a part of you is ready to be home but you know there is still more to see, more to learn and then there is the thought of "Waffle-Withdrawal." ::shudder::

Not 'Waffle-Withdrawal'! But we are all grown-ups so we boarded the bus for the drive to Valdres to visit Marit Anny Tvenge and view her weavings with a musical treat. Then a visit to the Valdres Folkemuseum for more music, bunad displays and an informative lecture on bunads by Torill Thømt.



**Lucy Hansen (right) and Edi Thorstensen with WAFFLES at the home of rosemaler, Eli Saelid (at left).** Photo by Helen Scherer.

Our evening was filled with conversations of favorites of the tour, of wishes for another tour, of projects begun or projects added to the 'to-do' list, of places to see again,

of thanks for our intrepid bus driver who managed all the bends and hills Norway threw at him. Of thanks to Ingebjørg and Laurann for their work ahead of the tour and during the tour. With our last instructions given from Laurann, we were free to load our suitcases and begin our paperwork for re-entry to the US.

Another sunny day dawned in Fagernes. After a tour photo, we boarded the bus for our ride through more wonderful scenery to arrive at Gardermoen Airport in Oslo. More good-byes but many, many more memories to enjoy whenever we have the time.

**Solveig Storvick Pollei** explains: "Someone from your generation will know our crafts and stories" And thus began my summer stays with Bestemor Naess (which became 'Nash' after Ellis Island). Between Miss Fjelde who had an 8 shaft loom in our 3rd grade classroom and my grandmother, my interest in Norwegian textiles was inevitable. Finding others who share my interest has added wonderful dimensions to my knowledge and my passport!

## THE TOUR FROM A FIBER-CHALLENGED PERSON'S POINT OF VIEW:

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JOHN CAPONE

The tour participants in the 2011 tour, many repeat "offenders" of earlier Vesterheim tours, consist mostly of weavers and knitters. However, Laurann Gilbertson, Chief Curator and tour leader, and Ingebjørg Monson, tour guide, are ecumenical and invite the textile artists' non-participating spouses, significant others and friends along. That is where a fiber-challenged person such as me gets into this picture. Now do not get me wrong, I can tell cotton from linen from silk, especially with a little help from the garment's label. I even know the difference between warp and



*Norsk Institutt for Bunad og Folkedrakt.*

weft. I can tell the difference between a loom, shuttle, and warping mill and generally know what they each do. I must admit that knitting mystifies me. To me it is just too many intricate and continuous hand motions, several nee-

dles, and balls of string eventually equaling an item of clothing that seems to occur semi-autonomously from the knitter's conscious self. Clothes are clothes, wall hangings, table runners, and that entire ilk are nice but I like photog-



**Objects on display at the Nedreberg family farm overlooking the Nordfjord.**

raphy, eating, and mostly am a technology geek. Therefore, what was I doing when I signed up for this tour, my second such lapse in two years?

First, there is the trip itself. I mean how often do you get to go to Iceland and Norway? More importantly, the Vesterheim trips not only go to the Scandinavian standards such as Oslo, Stockholm, Bergen, and Lillehammer, but they also go well off the beaten path. How many of you have been able to go to Fagernes, Norway to see the National Council of Folk Costumes in Norway and its ex-



**Miniature costumes at the Bergen Museum.**

tensive collection of bunads? Well, we went there this year. And did you know the Nedreberg family has continuously had a farm near Stryn, Norway since the 1400s and that you can visit this living museum? Yes, the farm predates Columbus' rediscovery of North America; all Vesterheim Vikings know Leif Ericson discovered it much earlier. The family members who guide you through the farm make no apologies that the current buildings "only" date from the 17th and 18th century. Finally, mile for mile there are not many other countries with the scenic grandeur of Norway and Iceland. So going from Bøverdal to Fagernes becomes



a visual delight. Ingebjørg also puts considerable effort in finding traditional Norwegian hotels that are the antithesis of the big box chains; most of the other guests are Norwegians (who are probably saying to themselves “Oh no, the tourist have found this wonderful spot!”).



**Sjonaleister (socks with twined knit cuffs) from the collection at the Bergen Museum.**

Then there is the back door access to museum collections. Sure, Bergen is a great tourist destination with many attractions but how many get to visit the cultural museum’s conservation workshop guided by a senior conservator? On this trip, the conservator presented historic textiles and 18th century dolls that the museum rarely displays. We can get within inches of the items – no touching please, unless you put on gloves. Vesterheim cultivates many museum-to-museum interchanges and contacts; these contacts then become excellent sources for the special behind the scenes tours and access to the various museums’ “attics”.

This access on a carefully planned itinerary coupled with Laurann and Ingebjørg’s commentary turn a sightseeing trip into a pleasant learning experience. Even a self-confessed fiber inept person such as me cannot help



**John Capone’s photograph of the Bergen Harbor, June 2011.**

but notice and marvel at the continuity of the fiber crafts from their earliest history through today. For example, I notice traditional patterns and techniques recur over time and national boundaries. Repeatedly throughout history, fiber crafts people seem to have the desire to transform what is ordinary clothing, created and worn to protect people from the elements, into decorative statements indicating “tribe and status.” The fiber arts are not only a product of the culture but they help form the culture. Necessities of life become works of art and the museums treat us to close inspection of them with expert commentary. You do not have to be a fiber person to enjoy the history and the beauty of these many national treasures. Oh my, I must have learned something about fiber art and craft even if it was just through osmosis!

Another benefit of these trips is that fiber people, let us face it they are mostly women, seem to be delightfully wacky. They really enjoy getting up close and examining the various exhibits; they ask some profound questions, and they take pictures – thousands of pictures. They appear to be very serious about their avocation until one of them will say something funny and laughter spreads like a virus. One minute you will be involved in an intellectual conversation regarding the convergence of religious symbols with traditional weaving patterns and next minute you are laughing over some silliness that somebody throws out on the table. A final observation, fiber people truly seem to enjoy being together with other fiber people and they make good travel companions. That attribute rubs off onto to us non-participating significant others. Eventually you realize you are traveling with real people who enjoy traveling together. They enjoy what they are doing with the people with whom they are doing it. That makes for pleasant travel.

So there you have it. A fiber inept person travels for almost two weeks immersed in a group of fiber-possessed people and enjoys a great time. I meet and get to know people who are decidedly different from me, who know and share stuff I know nothing about, who are interested in what it is I do, and what it is I think—where do you get to do that in today’s busy world. I visit and learn about places that are fascinating and off the beaten path. I stay at historic inns and eat good food. I take thousands of pictures, many of fiber art up close and personal, but also of people and beautiful places. Laurann and Ingebjørg have done all the heavy lifting in the planning department so I just go along for the ride. All of this combines to what I think is perfect definition for a good vacation, “re-creation.” Now admit the truth, you were wondering why I went on this trip in the first place!

**John Capone** says:

I am 100% Italian but really enjoy Scandinavia and all things Scandinavian, even a very limited amount of lutefisk at Christmas! I like Vesterheim’s easy touring/learning approach to fiber crafts and their history.

# A TOUR OF OLEANA

BY HELEN SCHERER

A highlight of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum's 2011 Textile Tour was a trip to the Oleana textile company located outside Bergen. Let's take a look inside...

A walk through the main finishing area of co-founder Signe Aarhus' Oleana sweater factory reveals a pleasant working environment with state-of-the-art machinery that assists in the final touches of applying sleeves, trim, and buttons. Further on is a room filled with large industrial knitting machines. Some machines are a few



**Oleana workroom.** Photo by Helen Scherer.

years old, but new ones are added whenever a new design calls for a more sophisticated structure.

Sweater designs are the creative art of award-winning designer Solveig Hisdal. She works in a corner office with good window light, where photography is not



**Solveig Hisdal in her Oleana office.** Photo by Glenn Skoy.

permitted to reveal the upcoming fashions. Her mannequins display yet more beautiful sweaters paired with flowing, feminine garments. In fact, Oleana also produces a few elegant coordinating skirts, tops, wrist wraps, and even blankets.

Solveig's designs are fresh and stylish. While one might see a foundational root of "Norwegian sweater" in

her use of repeated pattern blocks, she is a true artist who creates new patterns rather than being confined to and limited by the design elements of the past. A particular pattern can be locally inspired by any type of museum piece, or internationally inspired by anything she sees, such as an Italian tile. The yarn is typically fine, so the resulting fabric is lighter weight than traditional Norwegian sweaters. This allows the sweaters to be worn indoors and for a longer portion of the year. It also allows for more complex and delicate patterns. Solveig's use of color combinations is also non-traditional, yet very pleasing.

In a country where a car might cost an American \$360 for a day's rental, Signe knew that it was pointless to try to compete for profits by mass-producing goods as cheaply as possible. Instead, she chose to use the best available yarn, the best designs, the best equipment and the best employees who proudly finish each sweater with care.



**Signe Aarhus holds up a sweater of the "Vesterheim" design.** Photo by Helen Scherer.

Quality, not quantity. So the sweaters will cost more, but there is a market for fine sweaters—as might be indicated by the frenzy that begins the moment our tour group is turned loose in the factory store.

Founded in 1992, Oleana is Norway's youngest textile company. But soon the company will move into the building 10 minutes from Espeland that was previously used by Norway's oldest textile company. That building will provide more space, as they now have 65 employees and are still growing comfortably.

The name "Oleana" was borrowed from Ole Bull's failed American colony, in part because it has a lot of vowels that can be pronounced by anyone in the world. But Norwegian-Americans can think fondly on the name, as it represents the motivated and fearless "can do" attitude that was personified by the beloved violinist. And this "Oleana" certainly does do it.

For more information about Oleana, Solveig Hisdal's pictures of the collection, and a short film about Oleana, see [www.oleana.no](http://www.oleana.no)

**Helen Scherer's** roots are in Gudbrandsdalen and the west side of Lake Mjøsa. She is a weaver and participates in a Norwegian language study group.



# A NORWEGIAN TEXTILE GOES HOME: SKJØLSVOLD ÅKLE HISTORY

BY CAROL JOHNSON

During my World War II childhood, conserving fuel was imperative. On top of the wool blankets on my bed, a densely woven red and green åkle added a layer of comforting warmth during cold, foggy Seattle winters (and some summers) when the thermostat was turned down. I knew that the coverlet was from Norway, the native land of



In Katherine Larson's book, *The Woven Coverlets of Norway*, page 163, there is a picture of a Nordland's-weave Sør-Trøndelag coverlet in an almost identical design. Photo by Carol Johnson.

all my grandparents.

I don't know exactly when it was woven or by whom or when it arrived in the United States. My grandmother, Marit Rasmusdatter Skjølvold, hadn't wanted to bring anything to this country that represented "The Old Country," so I'm sure it was not in her brand new trunk when she left Rindal, Møre og Romsdal, Norway in 1903.

It is my theory that my great grandmother, Gurid Olsdatter Aune Skjølvold, sent it to Marit in Seattle as a wedding gift when she married Magnus Nelsen in 1911. My mother, Thelma Nelsen Oversvee, appropriated it around 1940. It was in constant use in our home, both as a bed cover and an afghan.

My mother thought that Gurid, a skilled spinner and weaver, had made it. She may have, but there were

professional *skilbragd* weavers in Sør-Trøndelag near Rindal, where Gurid's husband Rasmus came from. This piece was so beautifully woven that it likely was done by a professional; the rows lined up precisely and the center seam was nearly invisible. It was very finely woven, with a linen warp ground of 18 threads per centimeter and linen weft ground of 12 threads per centimeter. The red and green have faded slightly, but the wool is still smooth and soft.

In the late 1960s, after it began to split at the center seam and fold lines, Thelma decided to cut the åkle into pieces and remove the worn bits. She hemmed and lined each piece and gave one to each woman in the family and to her youngest brother Donald, a bachelor still living in the Nelsen home in which he was born. When he died in 2006, I received his piece and now had two.

During the 2009 Vesterheim Textile Tour, I visited second cousin, Brynhild Andresen, whose grandmother was Grandma Marit's sister, Beret. Brynhild, keeper of family history and antiques, lives in her grandfather's home in Rindal. In planning to visit her again after the 2011 tour, I wanted to give her something special and decided on a



Carol Johnson, right, with the coverlet she returned to Brynhild Andresen, her second cousin. Photo by Darold Johnson.

piece of the åkle to add to the family treasures she cares for. I wrote a brief genealogy of the owners of the åkle and added a picture of its pieces in Grandma Marit's trunk.

The giving and receiving was an emotional experience for both of us. She was concerned that

I was giving her my dearest treasure and I assured her that I still had a piece of my own. Now, 100 years after leaving Rindal, part of the åkle has returned home.

Carol says, "I inherited a love for textiles from my mother and Norwegian grandmothers. I'm not a weaver, but greatly admire those who are skilled in this art. I have a collection of Scandinavian coverlets, tapestries and other weavings, hand woven linen tablecloths and textile tools."

## A NON-WEAVER'S SIDE TRIP: TRAINS IN NORWAY

PHOTO AND TEXT BY LEE SEXTON

On our recent Textile Tour to Norway with Vesterheim, I decided to take a little detour and visit a couple of places that were not scheduled as part of the tour. I realized that to go on these side trips I would have to line-up my own transportation from Bergen which proved to be very easy. Those trips were to a woodcarving museum in Voss and a steam train museum in Garnes.

There are several means of transportation in Norway—train, bus, taxi, car rental, as well as on foot, or any combination thereof. Transportation is very simple. Every town we visited had either a train station, bus stop, or taxi service.

The first trip to Voss was strictly by train, with a short walk to the museum. All train stations have schedules, with a departing/arriving board just like an airport has. They also have printed schedules with times and days listed. Buying tickets is very simple; a kiosk with a British as well as Norwegian flag on a touch screen, so choose your destination and insert credit/debit card or Kroner to print a ticket. During late hours, tickets may also be purchased on the train from the conductor.

The second trip to Garnes, just the same, taking



A diesel engine that was used to move train cars around and hook them to the steam engine.

the train to Arne, stopping at a 7-Eleven for directions to the museum, and taking a short hike.

All train stations have had an attendant who will usually have a connecting bus schedule available, as well as being friendly and accommodating.

If you're ever in Norway, don't be hesitant to take a side trip. You may never know what you will see.

Lee says "My interest in trains began as a child when I lived near a railroad and saw numerous trains daily."

## LOST IN BERGEN:

### IN SEARCH OF OLE AND LENA BY GLENN SKOY

I'm sad to report that the Norwegians I talked to did not know about Ole or Lena or Sven. They could be excused for not knowing about Sven because he is Swedish. After failing to interest the Bergen Norwegians in the exploits of Ole and Lena, I decided to walk all around Bergen, and got lost. This was a failure too because, as you know, all you have to do is look down at the port, and there you are.

I trust that you will join me on your next trip to Norway to show the Norwegians how their culture has flourished in Minnesota. Here are two Ole stories to tell our Norwegian friends. Ole would be very proud.



Graffiti in Bergen. Photo by Susan Kolstad.

**WHY DID OLE WEAR TWO JACKETS WHEN HE PAINTED HIS HOUSE? THE PAINT CAN SAID "PUT ON TWO COATS."**

**SVEN AND OLE WENT ON AN ICELANDIC FISHING TRIP IN THE NORTH OF ICELAND. SVEN SAID "WE ONLY CAUGHT ONE FISH. THAT FISH COST US \$400." OLE SAID, "AT THAT PRICE, I'M GLAD WE DIDN'T CATCH MORE."**

#### COMING IN THE NOVEMBER ISSUE

Part II of the Textile StudyTour to Iceland and Norway including:

#### CLASSES IN BERGEN

**Beginning Weaving Class** by Mike Mostrom

**Overshot Weaving Class** by Robbie LaFleur

**Rutevve Weaving Class** by Verona Capone, Edi Thorstensen, and Helen Scherer

**Twined Cuff Socks Class** by Jan Mostrom

**HALVARD VIKEN'S WEAVING COLLECTION** by Laurann Gilbertson

**ICELANDIC KNIT INSOLES** by Wendy Sundquist

**REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY TOUR** by Edi Thorstensen

**SKINNFELL AT THE VALBJOR FARM MUSEUM** by Karen Weiberg

**SJONALEISTER AT VESTERHEIM** by Susan Kolstad

**WEAVING INSPIRATION FROM THE STREETS OF NORWAY** by Nan Sexton

**WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO TEACH AMERICANS** by Kari Thue and Hege Nilsen

AND MORE!!!

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Please direct comments, suggestions and ideas for articles to:

Mary Lønning Skoy, editor

7200 York Ave. South #120

Edina MN 55435 USA

952-831-4512

[maryskoy@hotmail.com](mailto:maryskoy@hotmail.com)

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