lowercase history

micromapping the past

minh nguyễn • state of the map u.s. 2024

Hi, I'm Minh Nguyễn. I don't know why they put me on this giant stage, this is going to be a rather personal talk.

Open<mark>Historical</mark>**Map**

So first of all. Sometimes I get to thinking OpenHistoricalMap is really special, something truly unique. After all, it's the next frontier of OpenStreetMap, the most mappy map in the world.

(disambiguation)

Open History Map

OldMapsOnline

OpenHistoricalMap

TimeMap   Omniatlas

Histo Atlas   Running Reality

Well we're not *that* special. We're operating in a crowded playing field, competing for mindshare with established academic initiatives, slick commercial products, and even some weird alt-history projects. All the good domain names have been taken so we've resorted to the blandest, most functional name possible.

nutrition facts

- collaborative

- crowdsourced

- usable and reusable

- openly licensed

- worldwide

- local

But when I think about what makes OHM OHM, all these other projects only tick some of the boxes. The academic project is really about getting academics to share their work, but the rest of us are just spectators. The slick commercial product doesn't want you to notice their terms of service. And none of these other projects cares about local knowledge like we do.
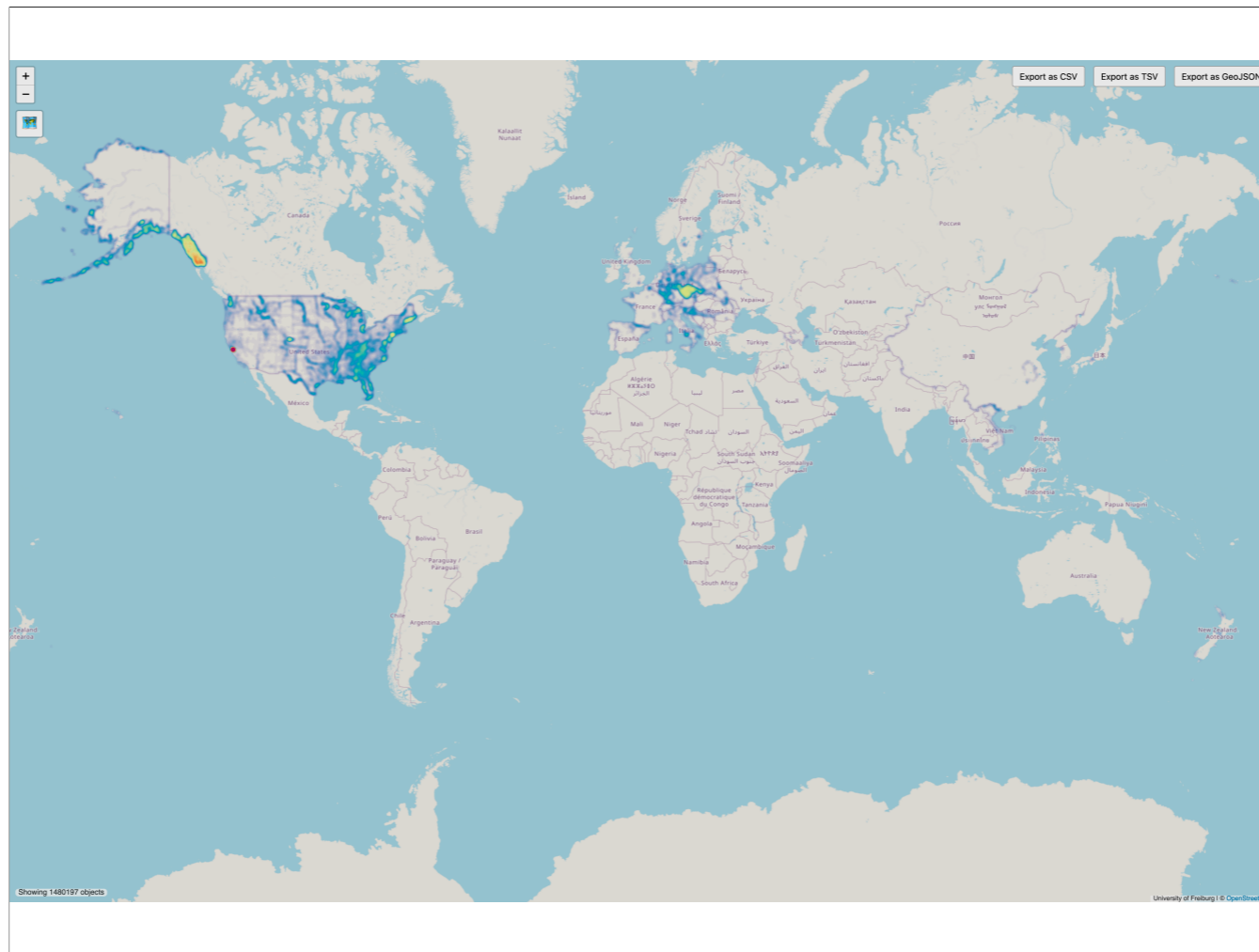
To be fair, we've still got a long way to go too. Yes, technically, we have a world map. But our data is concentrated into a stereotypically small part of the world. You might in fact notice a resemblance to OSM's areas of strength: central and western Europe, plus a United States that looks suspiciously like someone imported it.

And if you dare to zoom way into an area you're familiar with — no, don't adjust your television set. This is the average OHM coverage in most of time and space: nothing. This is what it means to be an early adopter, a pioneer.

where are you from?

But enough about OHM, time to talk about me. I've gotten this question a lot: where are you from? These days I usually say San José. You may have heard of a smaller town to the north called San Francisco. But sometimes that isn't good enough—

where are you <mark>from</mark>?

—No I mean, where are you *from* from?
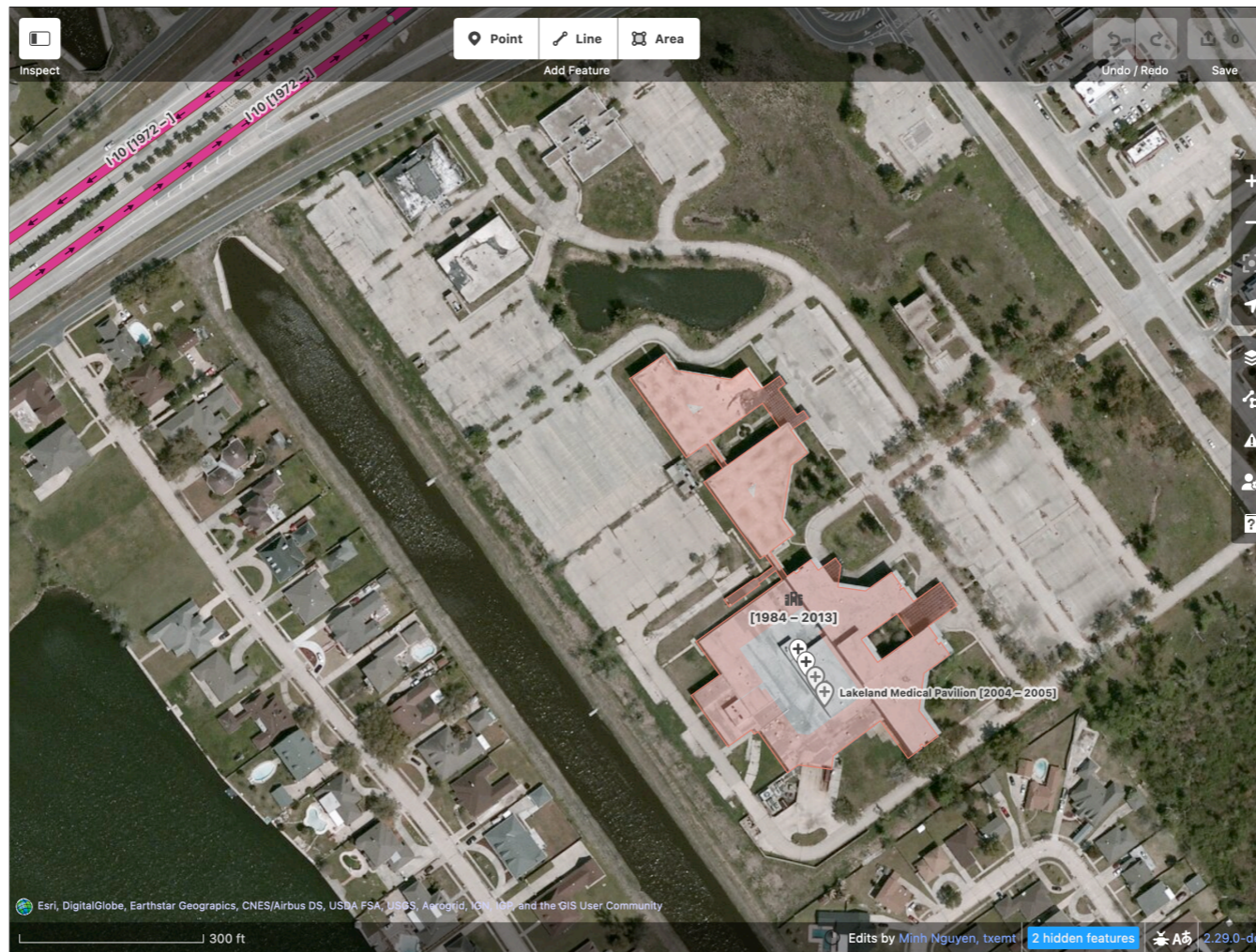
Well, if you insist, I was born in the parking lot of a Walmart. Well no, actually, I was born in this hospital. But then it changed names and ownership a bunch of times, Hurricane Katrina swept through, the hospital was abandoned, and Walmart took over. So, I was born in the parking lot of a Walmart.
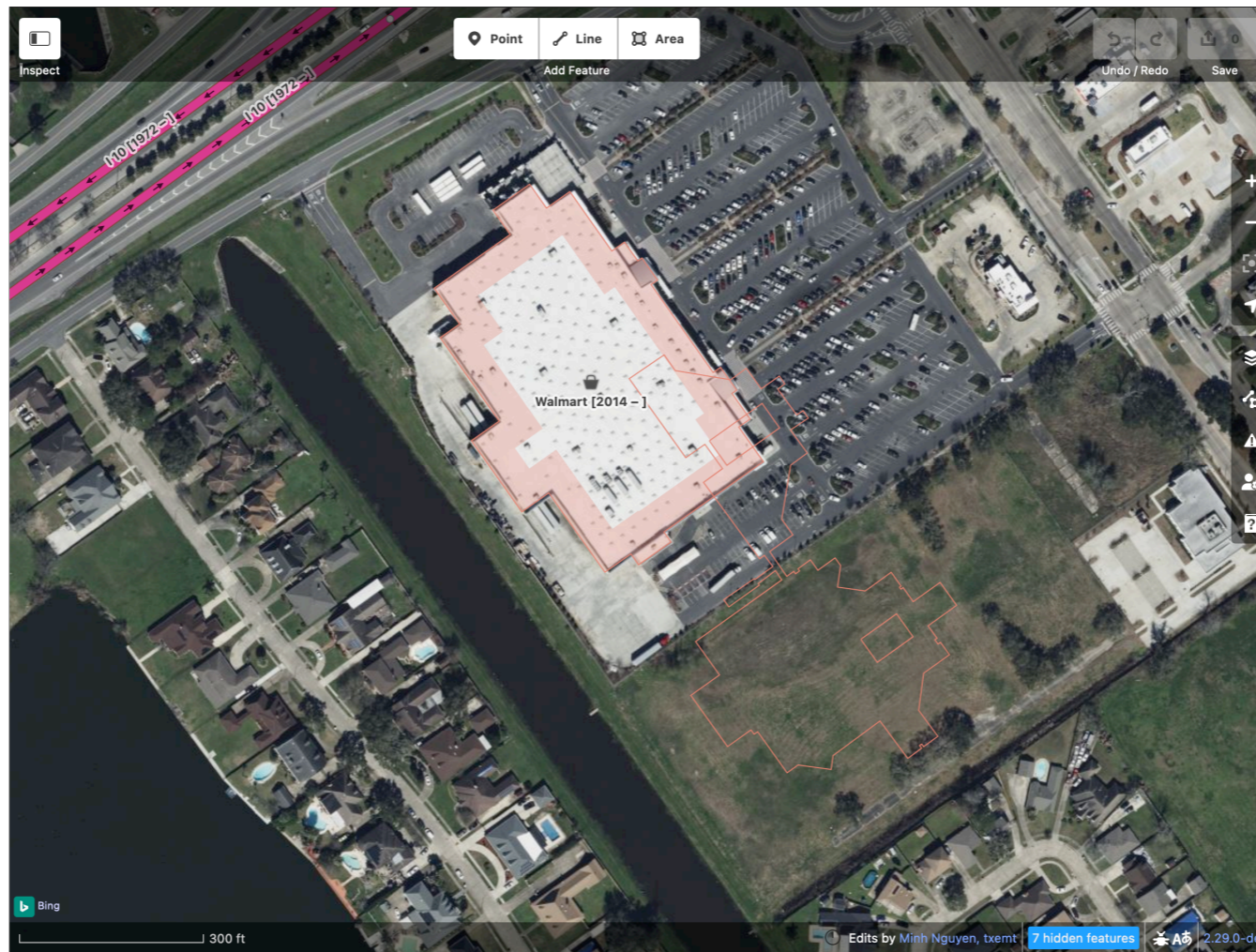
Today, there's no trace left of the old hospital in New Orleans East. There's no trace of it online, either, except in OHM. I only care because I have a connection to this place, and you only care because you're stuck in this room listening to me.

If you'll indulge the life story a bit more, I grew up in a small town of about 10,000 called Loveland. True to the name, this town has more houses of worship than traffic lights. (I counted them.) I got my start in OSM by mapping them all – all the churches, all the traffic lights. After many years, I felt that I had just about run out of things to map there, other than the minutiae of roof shapes and mailboxes.

who?
what?
when?
where?
why?

I don't know about you, but for me, mapping has always gone hand in hand with a certain curiosity about the world. You know this slide, this is the critical thinking skill they teach in first grade. OSM is very good at the what and where. Yes, there is the thing and the thing is here—

who?
what?
when?
where?
why?

—But why is it here? Why is it like that? Who put it there? OSM leaves the rest of the W's to the imagination.

My school bus used to go down the main drag every day, and as a kid I'd notice that the little alley in front of this green building is named Grear Millitzer Place. What an odd name, who names their kid Grear?

Millitzer name part of Loveland

Businessman memorialized via alleyway

BY SHEILA McLAUGHLIN
The Cincinnati Enquirer

LOVELAND — For more than 70 years, the "place between the tracks" was George "Grear" Millitzer's turf.

He was born above the dry goods store his family founded in 1917, next to what is now City Hall.

Until 1985, the shop Mr. Millitzer took over from his parents was a place where Lovelanders could expect a firm handshake, friendly chatter about family and baseball, and a fair price on clothes and shoes.

Now, four years after his death and 11 years since he closed the doors to Millitzer's Dry Goods Store, Mr. Millitzer's name will again have a prominent place in historic downtown Loveland.

On Sept. 28, council will dedicate the unnamed alley between the former dry goods shop and City Hall as Grear Millitzer Place. City officials aren't sure that a street sign will be ready for the occasion. If not, one will be erected later this year, Councilman Rob Weisgerber said.

The 10:30 a.m. ceremony is part of the Heritage Celebration, Loveland's biggest bicentennial

Heritage Celebration

Heritage Celebration, Loveland's biggest bicentennial bash, opens at 9 a.m. Sept. 28 with a model train show at City Hall, sponsored by the Lionel O Gauge Society.

Most activities will center on Nisbet Park, off Taylor Street, although the Greater Loveland Historical Society Museum, 201 Riverside Drive, will be the setting of a noon ceremony to dedicate the restored 1797 Rich log cabin.

The celebration closes after a ceremony at 4 p.m. to dedicate the bridge on West Loveland Avenue, between Taylor Street and Riverside Drive, to Lt. Col. Thomas Paxton, the city's founder. U.S. Rep. Rob Portman, R-Cincinnati, will be a guest speaker.

Other highlights that day include:
► Art Affair, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. sponsored by the Loveland Artist Club, Nisbet Park.
► Model A Ford display, noon to 3 p.m., Fraternal Order of Eagles parking lot, Taylor Street.
► Dedication of Grear Millitzer Place, 10:30 a.m., in front of City Hall, 120 W. Loveland Ave.
► Music by the Dorff Family, 11 a.m., Nisbet Park stage.
► Miniature Loveland village and train artifact display, noon to 4:30 p.m. at the museum.
► Senior Citizens Kitchen Band performance, 1 p.m. at the museum.
► Re-enactment of the first Loveland wedding of Elizabeth Paxton and John Donnells, 2 p.m., Nisbet Park dance floor.
► Air Force Band of Flight concert, 2:30 p.m., Nisbet Park stage.

event. Mr. Millitzer's widow, Jeanne, of Symmes Township, and two of three sons, Andy of Terrace Park and Tom of Zwingle, Iowa, will attend.

The Loveland Downtown Council suggested the alley dedication. Mr. Millitzer also helped found the Loveland Kiwanis Club.

"To me and many people who lived and worked down here, he was kind of the spirit of downtown Loveland at its best," said Downtown Council President Joseph Schickel, whose mother suited him in clothes from Millitzer's.
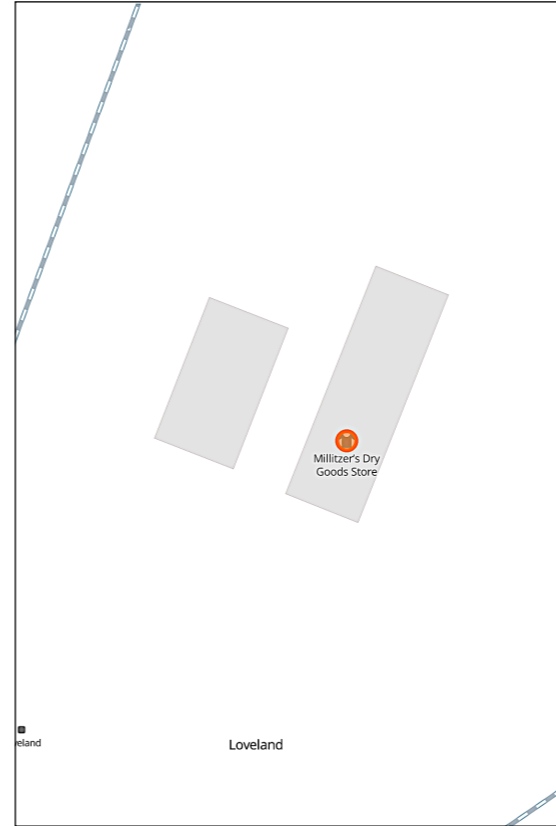
Mr. Millitzer's relatives ran several businesses around the turn of the century in downtown Loveland, including a bakery and confectionery on Broadway Street and a saloon at Railroad Avenue, where Tequila Jack's Saloon now operates.

Andy Millitzer said his family is honored that Loveland would **(Please see LOVELAND, Page B4)**

The Cincinnati Enquirer, 19 September 1996, East ed., p. B3

I had to know more about this person and why they have an alley named after them. Looking through old archives of the local newspaper in Newspapers.com, I found that George Millitzer ran a clothing store upstairs at this building, overlooking city hall for many years. Grear was his nickname. He was remembered fondly for his charity. And now his store is on OHM, another breadcrumb for the curious.
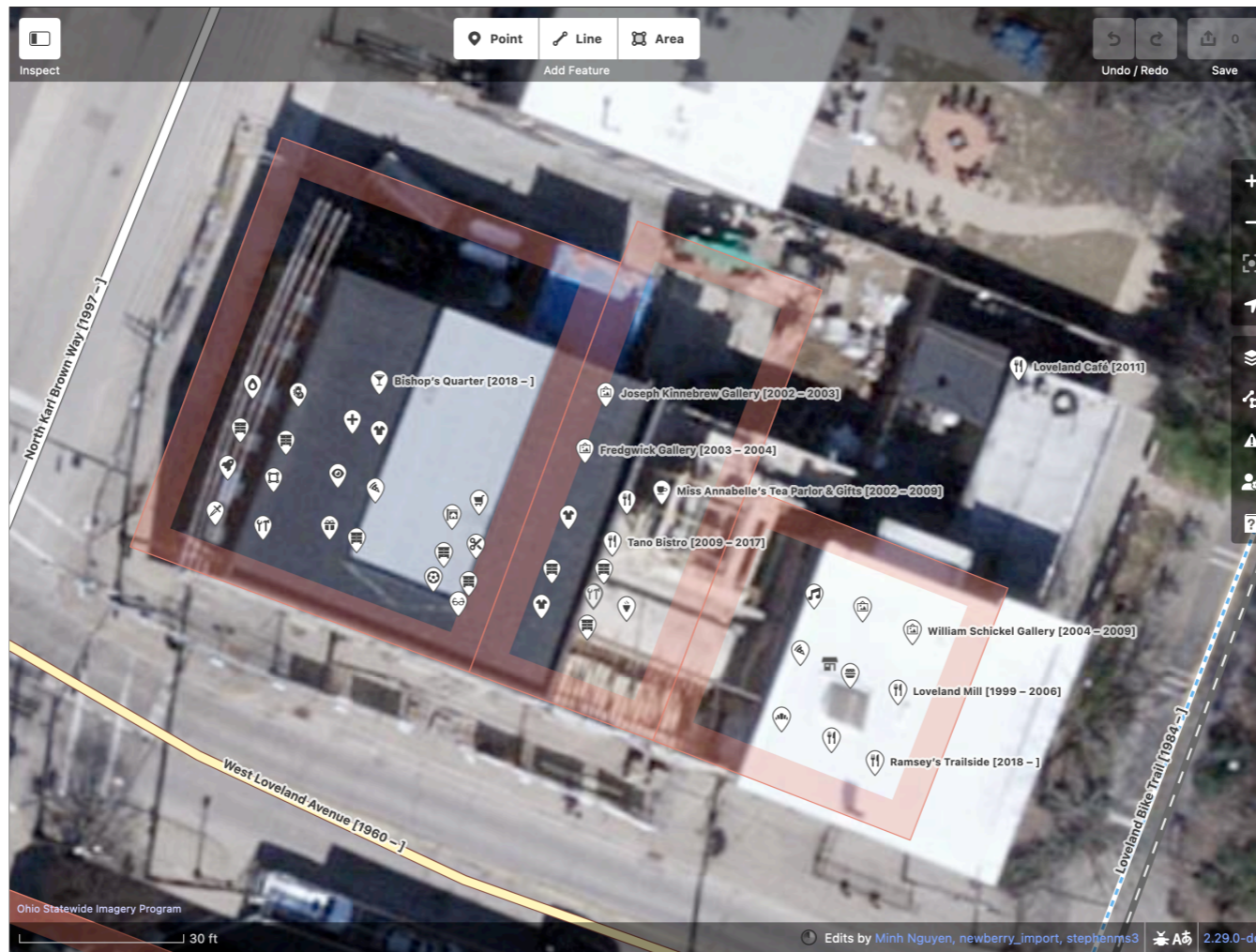
Well I can't just add one shop. If I'm going to add shops, I'd better commit to it. So I searched Newspapers.com for the addresses along the block and found references to loads of shops that have come and gone over the years.
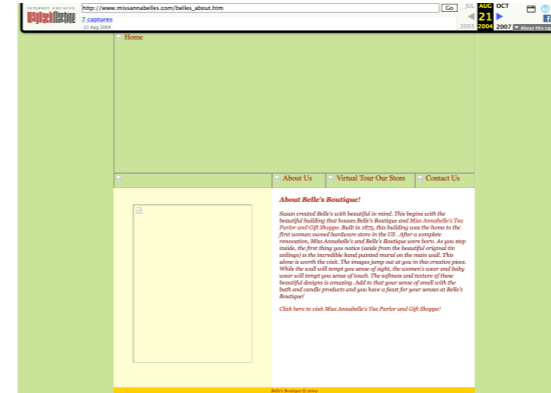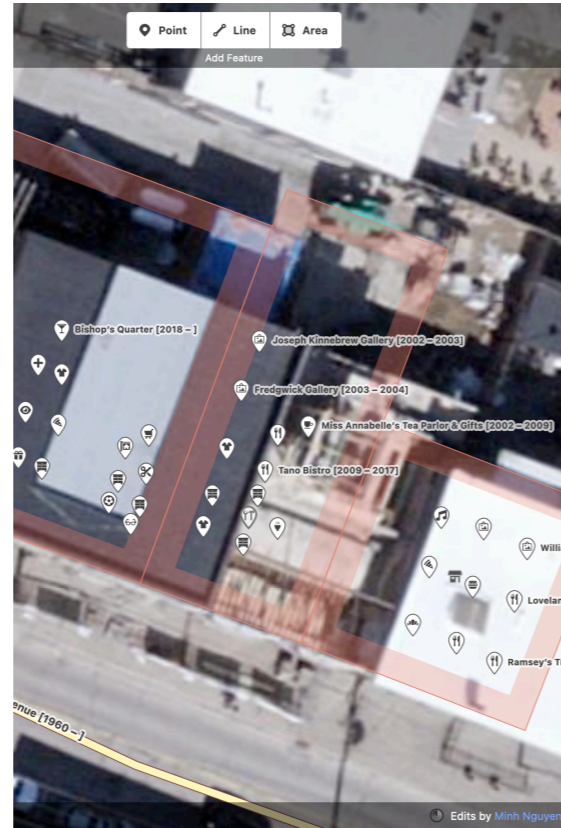
The Cincinnati Post & Times-Star, 1 February 1971, p. 17

Here's the website for one of those shops, preserved in the Wayback Machine. It gives a tantalizing clue to yet another shop that came before it: Sparks Hardware, the first woman-owned hardware store in the United States. Despite living in Loveland for many years, I had no clue about that, it was pure serendipity.
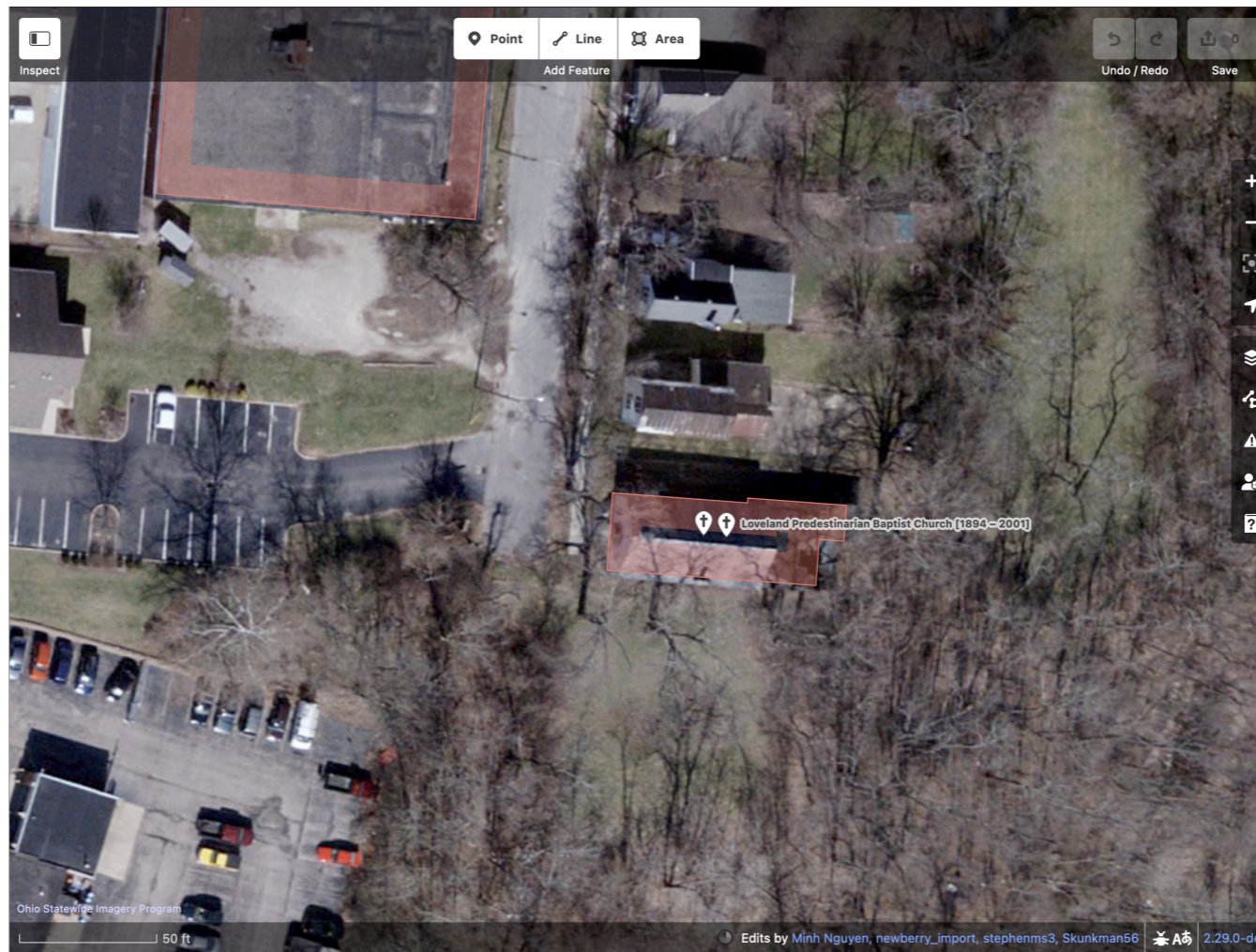
As I went through mapping the churches, like I had in OSM, there was this one church that always intrigued me – at the end of Chestnut Street, on the other side of the railroad tracks. I could never tell if it was still an active worship space; it looked abandoned.

Public domain (1926)
Courtesy of *Loveland Magazine*

In fact, the city took it over and left it to rot with the intention of demolishing it. In its defense, a local magazine published an oral history, noting its importance as the focal point of what used to be a significant Black community here. This was surprising to me – I knew of Loveland as a town that had always been lily-white, where someone like me stuck out and that's just how it's always been. But my side of the railroad tracks used to be a Black community? Where did they go? Sometimes, mapping history turns up more questions than answers.

people
places
things

You see a pattern here: if I had just stuck to mapping OSM in increasing detail, I would be able to regale you with the roof shapes of these buildings, the opening hours of their shops, but I'd miss the most important thing about them – the people and their stories.

If a small town like Loveland still has a lot of unanswered questions, imagine what I face now that I live in San José, a city of almost a million with a more dramatic history.

六街唐人埠
1887-1931
SIXTH STREET
CHINATOWN
HEINLENVILLE

Back in January at Mapping USA, I told you about a new park in my neighborhood and the story behind it, of the Chinatown that racist neighbors burned the ground, and the courage of a German immigrant who built them a new "San José Chinatown".

散那些
"SAN-DOY-SAY"

唐人埠
"TONG YUN FOW"

After that talk, the OSM China community accused me of fabricating the Chinese name for San José in "San José Chinatown". In their reckoning, the three characters at the top here mean "throw them away", a most unlikely name for a city. I don't speak Chinese, but I believe they missed a subtle point, that the residents here didn't speak Mandarin. They spoke Toisanese, a once dominant dialect in North America that today is in decline. This is such a minor detail on the map, yet it surely mattered a great deal to the people who lived there at the time. Like OSM, OHM excels at little surprises, invitations to learn more.

No group's history should be defined only by the awful aspects of its past, […] however deeply rooted in History with a capital *H*. If the scale is taken down a notch to the neighborhood or family level, […] other stories can be found—life-affirming stories of how sometimes in the midst of what seems to be national craziness, individuals step forward and quietly work for good.

Praetzellis, Mary; Praetzellis, Adrian (2011). "*Cultural Resource Management Archaeology and Heritage Values*". Historical Archaeology. *Society for Historical Archaeology.* **45** *(1): 86–100.*

The reason we remember Heinlenville today is not because something bad happened there, but rather because there people were able to live out normal lives. The mundane history with a lowercase *h* is also important to document. Without it, we cannot relate as well to history with a capital *H*. This is an excerpt from a paper in the journal *Historical Archaeology*, about the need to document lowercase history using the methods of archaeology.

You too can be an amateur archaeologist. On any given day, you might find me roaming the streets of San José in search of more clues to add to the map. This is the traditional way of contributing to OSM, and it's equally valid for OHM. There are historical clues everywhere if you look closely enough. For decades, anyone building a sidewalk would've stamped it with their name and the year. They literally made their mark on the city.

In a residential area, these sidewalk marks help us ascertain not only when the sidewalk was built, but also the age of the houses along the street, something that can be difficult to find another data source for.
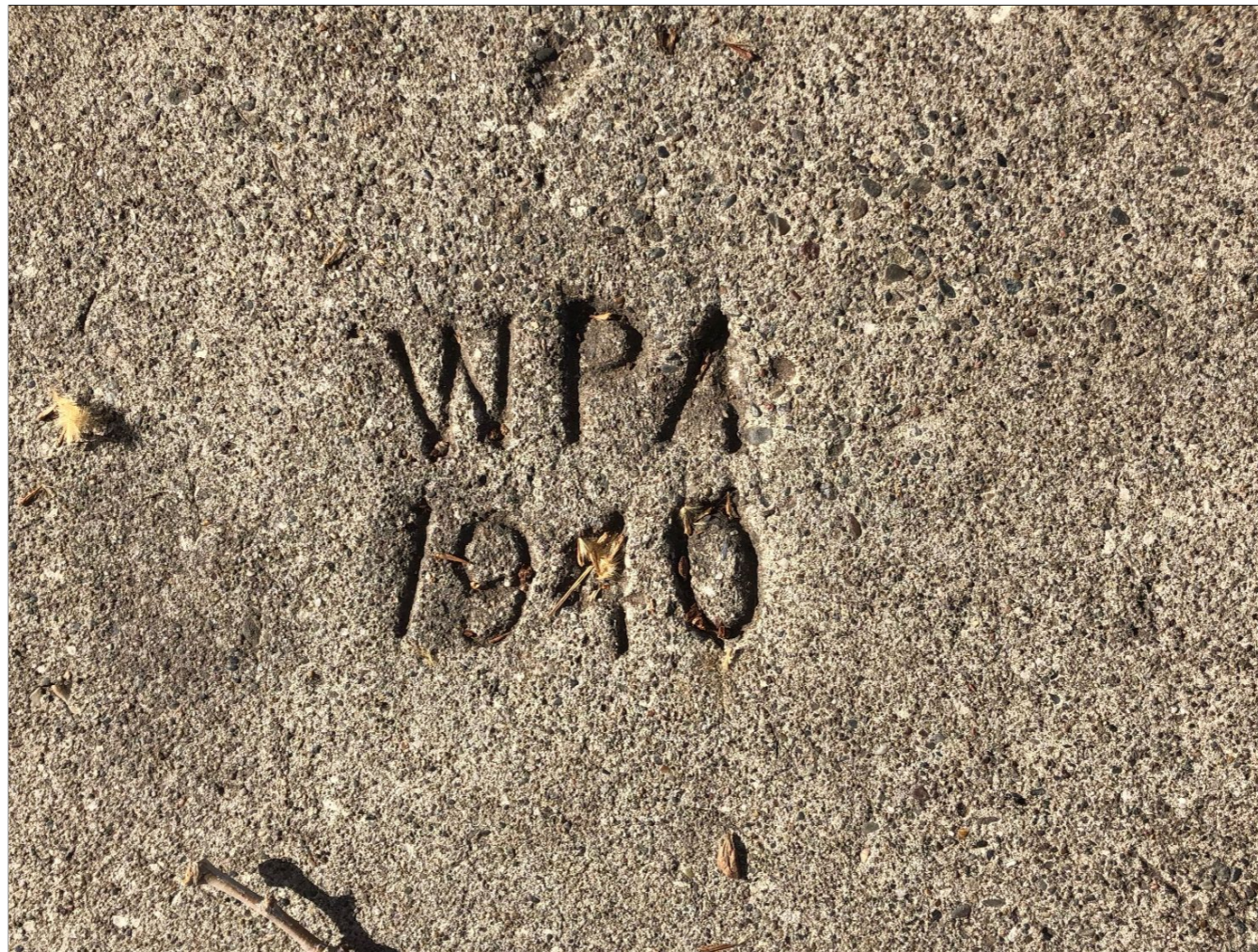
This mark should be familiar to students of American history. The Works Progress Administration built this sidewalk and the park it's in.

Now just to be clear, you don't need to be a city or federal contractor to leave hints for historical geographers. This sidewalk was apparently marked by a kid in '97. Cute, huh? It's etched in stone; that's good enough for the on-the-ground rule and for me!

how long have you
been around?

These days, whenever I patronize a mom-and-pop restaurant or some other small business, I always make sure to ask how long they've been around. They're always eager to tell you that and their whole life story. Because they are lowercase, the little guys, insignificant in world history. No one bothered to map their story – until OHM.

Some of you saw me slip into this sandwich shop on Thursday after the social. Start date? March of last year.

putting it all together

- prior art
    - historical atlases
    - topo maps
- other published works and media
    - books
    - academic journals
    - newspaper archives
    - NRHP submissions
    - phone directories
    - Wayback Machine
- observation
    - ground truth (field surveys)
    - remote sensing (aerial imagery)
    - oral histories
    - nostalgic Facebook groups
- data exhaust
    - city permit database
    - property records
- inference

This is just a small slice of the sources you can pull together in your research to make a historical map. Yes, you can copy prior art such as old maps. But you can also leverage any of the sources that you'd cite for a research paper on the subject. Throw in a field survey like I do, corroborate it with an oral history or someone reminiscing on social media.

There's a fourth category that we can call "data exhaust" – records that are gathered for completely non-historical purposes, but if they have timestamps and addresses, that's what we need. And finally, sometimes we're able to fill in the blanks by inference without compromising the map's credibility.
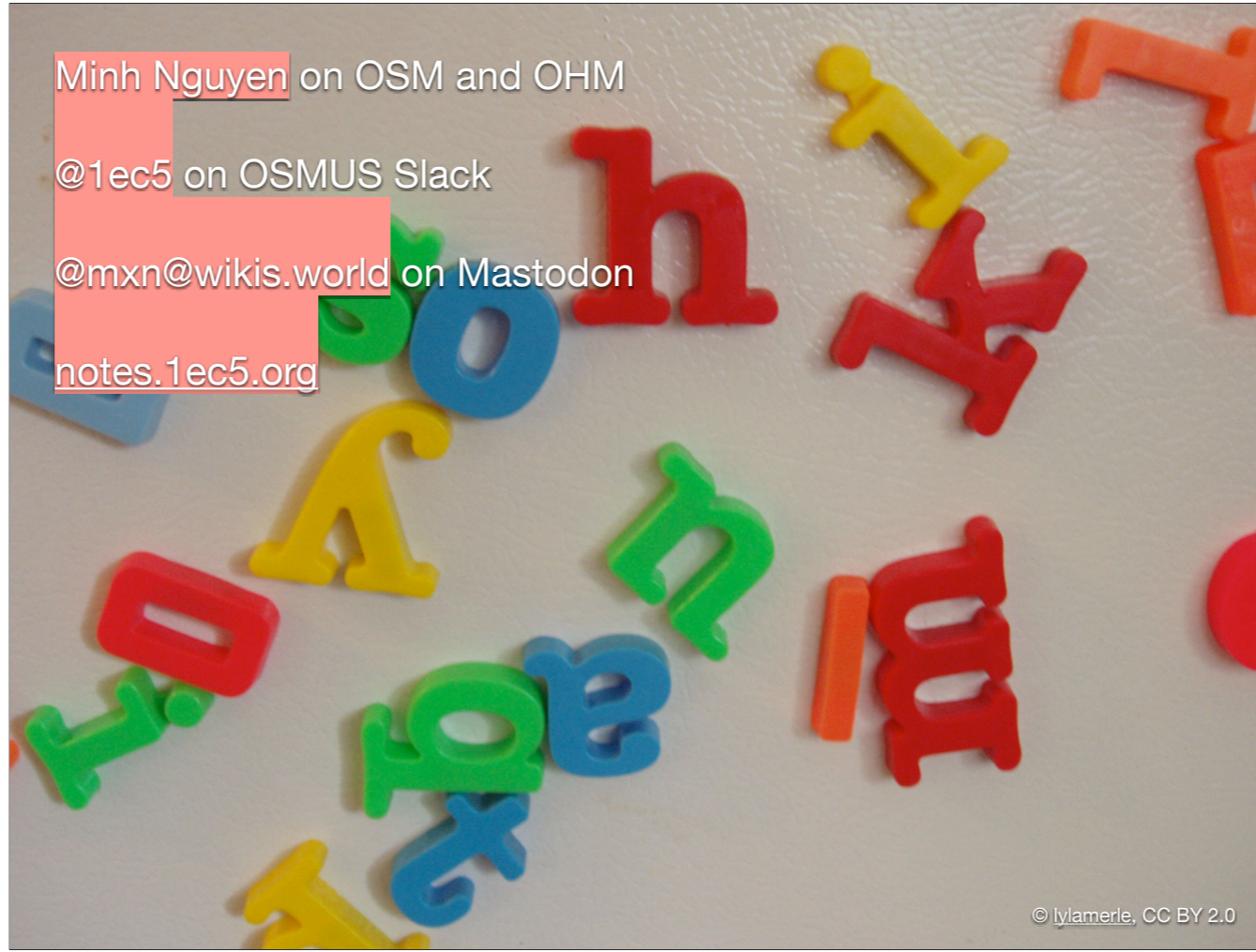
Here's 229 years of Loveland history flashing by. It's woefully incomplete, but already it's more than anything anyone has ever done to visualize the town's history.

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Thank you!