

Interview with Mike Mooney ~ Founder of Pacifica's Liberty Garden

Written by Jean Bartlett, October, 2017
(A Pacifica Historical Society Project)



Jean Bartlett photo

Mike Mooney and Dolly in the Liberty Garden, 2008.

"So many people came on board in the beginning because everybody wanted to do something and that included Pacifica's Beautification Committee. All those people went to work on 9/11 and they didn't come home. We are going to remember them here."

On May 26, 2002, Congressman Tom Lantos and Pacifica Mayor Barbara Carr dedicated Pacifica's Liberty Garden.

Since then, Mike has tended his garden mostly seven days a week, though recently he whittled it down to six days so he can take his wife Joyce to church on Sunday.

"It's three gardens now and 2,000 square feet. I didn't really plan all this which is how things often get done. I remember in the beginning and for many years there were secret helpers. Someone donated a sign that said 'Imagine' and another sign that said 'Hope.' Figurines suddenly began to dot the garden fence posts: a rabbit, birds, a squirrel, elves, an owl. The Forget-Me-Not Lady, as I call her, donated the forget-me-nots. I put a bird feeder up and Herb the Bird Man filled it. If Public Works can help out, they do."

"When September 11th happened, I was walking my dog Dolly where the garden is now (along the Quarry bike path nestled against Calera Creek)," Mike Mooney said. "I heard about it and I went home and watched it on the news. I always tell people, you can only harbor one big feeling at a time and I was angry and sad. The only way you can heal anger is do something about it or talk about it. Then I saw a sign that said, 'We shall never forget.' I talked to our Public Works Director at that time, Scott Holmes." (Scott retired in 2007).

"Scott gave me the greenlight to install a bench I had in my backyard that was doing nothing. 'Keep it back three feet from the path in compliance with the code,' he said. Then he said, 'Maybe we should plant some native plants,' and with the help of the habitat restoration company Go Native, we got the native plants going." (Mike then added a lot of plants with color.)



Jean Bartlett 2008 photo

With flying flags sometimes disappearing, Mike's son Andy, who is in the granite and marble business, placed this flag in the garden.

"I also added a tribute to my schnauzers in the garden." (Schnauzers have been the Mooney family dog since Mike and Joyce went to a dog show at San Francisco's Cow Palace in 1960.)

On September 11, 2011, Pacifica's Liberty Garden was featured on HuffPost.

"Pacifian Linda Jonas gave me the Commemorative Flag. (The flag was created from the names of those who perished on 9/11.) Her son had gone to New York and bought a flag. We unveiled the flag in a special ceremony on Memorial Day in 2014 which was officiated by Rev. Tom Nibbe of Pacifica (Holy Cross Lutheran Church)."

"I tend the garden 9 a.m. to 11 a.m., Monday through Saturday. Sometimes I start at 8 a.m. I don't stay more than two and a half hours. You've got to pay attention to your body. I always tell people that just like an automobile, we've got red lights and green lights. When the red light comes on, stop and wait for the green light. When the red light comes on in your car you run into the gas station to get it fixed. We're the same as the car.

"I still do 90 percent of the work here. The plants just grow wild. I've never seen calla lilies grow so tall. I think that's because everything is fed by recycled water. Plus the green thumb is in my genes. I got that from my mother, though you've got to cultivate it which you can do even if it isn't in the genes. People go to the plant shop, where the plant has been living in the finest hotel pumped with steroids, and they bring

it home and stick it in the ground and it dies. People then say, 'I don't have a green thumb.' You learn from that. You didn't take care of it properly. Start digging, start working on it, success comes from failure and you'll do better. That's how you cultivate a green thumb."

Michael Francis Mooney was born at home, 4 New Road, Inchicore, Dublin, Ireland officially on July 13, 1928 to John and Bridget (Stanley) Mooney. Inchicore is a small suburb 15 miles outside of Dublin.



"Here's the story about my birth that was handed down in the family. I was actually born on the 12th of July, but my mother said to the midwife, 'Put him down for the 13th. I don't want his birthday on Orangemen's Day.' Something that happened in 1690, can you believe it, 1690, and they are still celebrating it today in Northern Ireland. In fact on the eve of Orangemen's Day in Northern Ireland, they burn the Irish Tricolour."

In July of 1690 on Ireland's east coast – 30 miles north of Dublin near the town of Drogheda and across the River Boyne – Protestant King William of Orange defeated Catholic King James II of England at the Battle of the Boyne. It marked a turning point in the country's Protestant history.

"My mother was born in Boyerstown, County Meath and my father was born in Dublin. I don't know what years they were born because in Ireland we didn't celebrate birthdays. My father lived to be 58 and died in 1951, so my guess is he was born in 1893. My mother died in 1978 and I know she was in her eighties, so she was probably born in 1894 or 1895. I am the seventh of their nine children and we were all two years apart. First born was Thomas, then there was Paddy (short for Patrick), Julia, Jack (John), Nellie

(Ellen), Bridey (Bridget), me, Eddie (Edward) and Nancy. Five boys and four girls and there are just three of us left: my sister Bridey, me, and my sister Nancy. Both my sisters live in Dublin.

"From what I heard, my dad was a school teacher when my parents got married and even then there was no money in teaching. So he decided to go to work for the City of Dublin as a laborer. He worked in the housing department of the Dublin Corporation. They maintained all the public properties/public housing that people lived in. My dad did maintenance. With nine children at home, my mother was hard at work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

"I was born in the gaslight era, the horse and buggy era. It may have been more modern in America but that's where we were in Dublin. Everything was delivered by horse and buggy and you had to put a penny in the gaslight to make the light work or the stove work. (Once you put the penny in the slot, you then turned a metal flange all the way around until it dropped and then you had gas for a while.)

"We had Willy The Lamplighter. Do you know who that is? He would come around at night and light the street lamps. There's a song about him."

"The old lamplighter of long, long ago, he made the night a little brighter wherever he would go, the old lamplighter of long, long ago," Mike sang. (You'll find a full version of this song, sung by the American folk music vocal trio/siblings The Browns, on YouTube. "Now if you look up in the sky, you'll understand the reason why, the little stars at night are all aglow. He turns them on when night is here, he turns them off when dawn is near, the little man we loved of not long ago. He made the light a little brighter, wherever he would go, the old lamplighter of long, long ago.")

"I remember to this day that the first time I saw electricity I was 11 years old. I went over to the wall and put the switch on and I couldn't believe it."

In 1935 or 1936, the family moved to 175 Leighlin Rd. in Dublin. It was a new development. Built by the City, there were 10 houses to a block.

"We got a two-bedroom house: one bathroom upstairs, a kitchen downstairs and a parlor. Nobody got to go into the 'Parlor,'" Mike laughed. "What a waste. My mother had a parlor and we were all crowded together upstairs – though I never had cold feet in bed. We had four in a bed: two up in the front, two at the bottom. The boys were in the backroom and the girls were in the front room with my parents. I'm sure that created problems for my parents."

Mike said he never knew a hungry day during the Depression.

"My mother could make meals out of nothing. She would go down to the market and buy three piglets and she would feed them for six months. We had a little area, like a plot, away from the house, vacant land that was given to the local people. We built a pigsty for the pigs and when they became good-sized pigs, my mother sold them and we got a big chunk of money because of her doing that. We were subsidized by the pigs.

"We had two seatings for breakfast and I was in the second seating. That really had to do with what everyone was doing in the morning but my older siblings would be sitting around reading the paper. 'Are you near finished?' We all had supper together, around 6 or 7 p.m. My mom was a good cook. One of my favorite meals that she used to make was leg of lamb. Corned beef and cabbage? That's an American invention. We had pork, lamb and tripe. We never heard of corned beef.

"I remember how WWII affected us like it was yesterday. In Ireland we had, up until the War, snow white bread. There was a loaf and a turnover. There was no sliced bread. I was born before sliced bread. We imported a lot of grain from America and that was cut short when the War broke out and we had to make due with dark bread.

"We had a song, 'Bless us all, bless us all, the long and the short and the small. Bless de Valera and Seán McEntee, for giving us the black bread and the half-ounce of tea.'"

Eamon de Valera was Ireland's Prime Minister during WWII and McEntee was appointed Minister for Industry and Commerce when the War broke out. The Irish policy of neutrality was brought about and enforced by the Prime Minister.

"The tea was rationed! Tea! That was the backbone of the Irish people. No matter when you went to a house, the teapot went on. The bread and the butter were rationed! I still have a ration book. You used it for eggs, butter and tea. You had to have coupons. Eggs in an agricultural country! But they were shipping the eggs over to England. Still, I never went hungry. My mother somehow fed us all. She grew cabbages and potatoes in that garden and we also had a goat for milk. That was our survival garden during the War.

"When the War came to Europe in 1939, Jack joined the British Army and was shipped to India. Thomas was still in school. Paddy was in college. My father was working but he had a drinking problem. I don't have memories of him because he wasn't around me like my mother was and he wasn't a great communicator.



The Mooney kids: Top row, l to r: Nellie, Julia and a friend. Middle row, l to r: Bridey, Nancy and Thomas. Bottom row, l to r: Mike and Eddie. Missing: Paddy and Jack. Taken in 1939, following the start of WWII.

"Paddy was in Belcamp College when the War broke out. That's the Oblate Fathers and they are a missionary order. When I think about it, they took Paddy out of high school to send him there. Too young, he was only 14. He spent seven years in college and was in fact, the only one of us to go to college. He did not become a priest. He married a Protestant woman and they had many children.

"The rest of the siblings all went to work when they were 14 or 15. My brother Thomas went to work for Becker Brothers Tea Company. They were a famous tea company. Then he worked for the CIE (Córas Iompair Éireann), Ireland's national public transport provider. It's Gaelic. The Irish government runs the trains and the buses. My sister Julia worked for a clothing company then she got married and had kids. Julia got Nellie a job at the same company then Nellie went to England and got married and so we've got family in England. Jack, of course, during the War joined the British Army. Bridey went to work for Wills Tobacco Company. She made cigarettes, believe it or not. Eddie worked at Wills also. They got 50 cigarettes complimentary to smoke. He'd be alive today if he hadn't smoked although he did live past 80. Nancy went to work for the clothing company and she married a Protestant as well. That was a big deal in

those days and all hell broke loose. I remember as a young kid thinking that the problems the Catholics and the Protestants had marrying each other was a crock of bull."

After graduating from primary school, Mike went to work. He was 15.

"Some years before I graduated, my mother decided she wasn't satisfied with one priest in the family and thought she'd push me into it. I was taken out of the school that was 10 minutes away and sent over to the Oblate School that my brother Paddy went to that was an hour away. We had a teacher from Kerry and he was dead nuts on English. When we would go on the schoolyard at our 10-minute recess, we were told not to speak English in the schoolyard. After recess we'd come back into the classroom and Master O'Shea would say in Irish, "Any boy speaking English, stand up." I don't know why he asked. He had a stool pigeon out in the yard and his name was Paddy Boshuel. So he already knew who broke the rules and was speaking in English. Paddy Bosheul was a little guy and I knew he was the stool pigeon and I could have beat him up but I didn't. I don't resort to violence. Anyway, everything was in Gaelic. You had to pass English, Irish and Arithmetic to graduate. Our National Anthem is in Irish. I only know that in Irish.



Mike's mother Bridget drops potatoes in the family plot. When she finished, Mike, in the background, "covered the potatoes in." Circa 1946.

"I wasn't cut out to be a priest. That was obvious. Once I graduated my mother said to me, 'Carpentry is a nice clean job.' During the War there was a scarcity of lumber. A friend of my mother's was a contractor of small jobs and he hired me. I was making cement, mixing concrete, plastering and painting. Carpentry didn't come in for a long time until after the War when Ireland began importing lumber again.

"I learned construction. What I don't know about building, is not worth knowing. I learned from the ground up. I don't need a mixer to mix cement. I can do it manually. It wasn't hard work, because I was able to do it. I rode my bike to and from work, every day. I became an apprentice, an improver and a journeyman. I was a carpenter at 21 and I was getting good money at 21, eight pounds eight shillings a week, cash. I was working for the City of Dublin. I was giving my mother more money than my father was giving her, though that was only when I became a carpenter.



Mike, age 21, works for the City of Dublin as a carpenter.



Mike's folks, Bridget and John. Circa 1950.

"Weather was one of the reasons why I decided I would leave Ireland. I didn't have a permanent plan here as far as leaving. But I saw all these places with pretty pictures of the sun and it got me thinking. In addition, even though I was making excellent money, it was a struggle in Ireland to buy a house. I looked at all my brothers and sisters who were older than me, struggling to buy a house. Then a friend of mine wrote me from Canada about all the money he was making as a carpenter. My mother was a widow but she was doing okay and I just got the urge to travel. I figured I could go to Canada, work two years in the trades and come back and buy Dublin!

"The Canadian government was trying to populate the country at the time and the deal was they would pay your fare over. However, if they did that, then you had to work for them for so many years. I went over in 1954 and paid my own fare.

"When I got to Canada it was overcrowded. They called us Displaced Persons, DP, from the War. I was called that one time."

Mike arrived in Toronto in February. Construction slows down in the winter. A friend told him there was so little work that if Mike told someone he would work for nothing, there still wouldn't be a job.

"I paid my union dues and I couldn't get a job. I'm walking around for three weeks in Toronto, unemployed. So I took a job with the Toronto Transit Company – which is like Muni – driving streetcars and buses."

In 1956, Mike said he was "packing it in to go home," when this friend that he met in Canada, Neal McLaughlin of Donegal, Ireland, mentioned he was going to go to the States, to California. Mike went to the U.S. Embassy, got his visa approved and the two friends bought a Chevy for \$600 and headed out to California.

"In July of 1956, we came across the Bay Bridge and when I saw that and all the nice houses, I knew this was where I was going to stay. The weather is great. The biggest disappointment was that I couldn't swim in the ocean out here like I could in Ireland. But I can live with that, no problem!"

Once they landed in San Francisco, they flipped a coin to see who could keep the car and Neal won the toss. "That's how you did things then." Mike's first residence was on Third Avenue, near the University of San Francisco. His first job was for Macdonald, Young and Nelson, a construction firm. He worked as a carpenter. He was and still is a member of San Francisco Carpenters Local Union No. 22.

"I was paid \$3.00 an hour. Coffee was only 5 or 10 cents. Gas was 25 or 26 cents. I used to say a carpenter's work per hour could buy six dozen eggs in San Francisco. In Ireland you might get one or two dozen. You got three times your return on your earnings. Food was dirt cheap here. A working person could really make a life here."

Mike moved to 26th Street in San Francisco's Mission District. Through his union he got a job with builder/developer Henry Doelger. Doelger, who had built tract developments in large areas of San Francisco's Sunset District, had bought 600 acres of land at Daly City's westerly edge (now Daly City's Westlake District) and converted what had been hills and sand dunes into affordable tract housing. The developer was also putting in tract housing in Pacifica's Fairmont Neighborhood.

"I worked for Henry when he was building in Westlake and in the Pacifica section of Fairmont. It was good steady work and I was lucky to be part of the skeleton crew which means I worked for Henry even through the winter months. I worked for him for more than ten years. I became his lead carpenter."

It was in the early days that Mike was working for Doelger that he headed over to the Ali Baba Dance Hall in Oakland. This was late 1958 or early 1959.

"The romantic hub of the Bay Area," Mike laughed. "It was a beautiful ballroom. Sid Hoff was the bandleader and he was particularly famous for his version of Irving Berlin's 'Alexander's Ragtime Band.'"

"Come on along, come on along, come on and hear Alexander's Ragtime Band," Mike sings.

Mike as it turns out is a good dancer. In fact in Ireland, he had once danced six days a week and was a dance promoter. He stopped promoting dancing when his father died because, "It wasn't proper at that time to be involved in all that dancing."

"I remember the first time I saw Joyce like it was yesterday. In those days the ladies sat on one side and the guys on the other, and the guy has to go over and ask, 'May I have this dance?' I'm sitting there. I wasn't shopping. Then I saw my wife go by. Wow! She was beautiful, just like she is now. Then I see her dancing with this guy and suddenly I am filled with this fear of rejection and I wasn't in the mood to be

told 'no.' But I'm looking at this guy and he was no George Raft (an American film actor). So I thought, 'If she's dancing with him, she'll dance with me.' I watched where she sat down and I went over and asked her to dance. I only just got her to the dance floor and they called an "Excuse Me Dance." That means if you didn't get a partner, tap on someone's shoulder and say "Excuse Me," and the guy who thought he had a dance, has to sit down so you can dance with the lady he asked to dance. I got tapped and I had to sit down. I am watching them go around and then there is intermission. Normally if you are interested in someone, you ask them if they would like to go upstairs for some refreshment.

"Then I saw a tug of war going on. I saw this guy holding her hand and I saw her trying to get away from him. To this day, I can tell you this was not planned. I went straight over and I said to her, 'Did you say you wanted to see me after the dance?' I tell our kids, 'I stalked your mother!' And she said, 'Yes.' She lied to get away from him. Then I took her upstairs for some refreshment."

That was the introduction. Joyce, a nurse, was working at French Hospital in San Francisco and going out with a doctor who worked there. Mike wasn't sure he had a chance and while they exchanged numbers, he couldn't get a date with her. But then she phoned him.

"She phoned and I said, 'I'm going to Westlake Bowl tonight, would you like to join me?' And she said, 'Yes!' We had a short engagement. We married July 25, 1959 at Mission Dolores Basilica.

"Joyce converted to Catholicism. We used to go to St. Cecilia's out on 17th Avenue on Sundays. When we decided to get married I went to the priest, Fr. Collins, at St. Cecilia's and said, 'My fiancé is a convert and she likes this church and we would like to get married here.' He said to me, 'You have to be a resident in the parish to get married here.' That's so stupid. Well I was resident in the Mission Dolores Parish. I could have just lied. But where we were married was beautiful. None of our family was able to come out. Joyce is Canadian and her family was in Nova Scotia and of course my family was all in Ireland except for my one sister and her family who lived in England. I asked the guys I worked with, 'You want to come to my wedding?' We had 25 people there."

For their honeymoon, they headed up north up to Humboldt County. They returned to San Francisco and then flew to Canada to visit Joyce's family.

"We bought our first home in Westlake for \$17,950," Mike laughed. "Unbelievable! I didn't build it. We were the second owners: two bedrooms, a full basement and one bathroom upstairs. 1136 So. Mayfair Avenue, Daly City.

"Mike Jr. and Andy were both born when we lived in Westlake. We decided to buy in Pacifica because every time Joyce took Mike and Andy over for swimming lessons at the pool at Terra Nova High School, the sun was shining in Pacifica and Westlake was in the fog."



Joyce and Mike, at their Westlake home with Andy, Mike Jr. and their first schnauzer, Dolly I. Circa 1967.

They bought the home they still live in now in Pacifica in 1968. Their third son Eric was born that year and Mike also became a citizen.

"I'm still very sentimental about Ireland, but I do love this country. I took my three sons to Ireland when I was 80. I wanted to show them where I went to school. They were tired of listening to me saying, 'When I was your age, I used to walk six miles uphill to school and six miles uphill on the way back, in the rain, sleet and snow! I wasn't able to get back to Ireland much, though Joyce and I went in 1978. My mother had fallen and broken her hip and never recovered. We were able to visit but she died that same year."

"After Henry Doelger, I went to downtown San Francisco and worked for Dinwiddie. I worked on the high-rises downtown. I worked on Pier 39 from the ground up. On Pier 39 you will see the cupola, the hexagon room. I built that. I was up there for three months on top of that roof. I got to know the seagulls. Of all the work I've done in San Francisco, that's the only work I've done that is visible. I cut the timbers for the big hexagon roof. I was the lead carpenter on the roof.



Mike and Joyce in Dublin, Ireland, 1978.



Joyce and Mike celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary at the old Moose Lodge on Hickey Blvd., with their sons, Andy, Mike Jr. and Eric, in 1984.

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"Next I worked for Design Workshop, oh for five or six years. I always stayed with my union. That's where I got my jobs from. Doelger was the longest job because he kept building and building. I retired in 1986."

In 1992, Mike met his friend, the late Dan Minkler. Both were involved with the Committee to Recall four of five Pacifica City councilmembers, following the Council's adoption of an unpopular Landscaping and Lighting Assessment. The four councilmembers were subsequently recalled.

In 1995, Dan and Mike adopted Highway 1 to remove graffiti, from San Pedro Road up to 35, North and South, a 6-mile stretch. Mike still does this. He has an encroachment permit from Caltrans (California Department of Transportation). He's notified when there is graffiti and he's there with his brush and his pail of paint.

"A former Merchant Marine, Dan was a man of action not words. He used to go around and put up flags. He would say, 'I can't see how anyone would pay \$300 or \$400 for a flagpole and not fly a flag.' Dan would spring the 20 bucks for the flag and get the job done. When the rope on the Taco Bell flagpole broke, Dan spent his own \$200 to put the rope back on and run the flag."

Mike's buddy also fought to put a flag along the Sharp Park Promenade near the Pacifica Pier with Mayor Barbara Carr stepping in to help Dan win that battle.

"Dan had a saying which he learned in the Marines, 'Acta non verba'/'Action not words.' Dan paid \$8,000 for that flag – to install it and the pole. I dug the ditch."

When Dan died in 1999, Mike put in a memorial bench dedicated to Dan near the Pacifica Pier flag. Mike also became involved in helping others put their own memorial benches along the Promenade.

"Action gets reaction. That's something I live by. I do believe in rules and regulations but sometimes they are just a way to say, 'No!' To put in a bench today, the Coastal Commission has to get involved and you have to jump through the hoops and it doesn't happen."

In 2009, Mike and Joyce celebrated their 50th anniversary at Nick's Restaurant in Pacifica's Rockaway Beach.



At home with Joyce and Mike. Circa 2009.

"We had a big celebration at Nick's and I planned something that I didn't tell Joyce about. I got up and said, 'The most asked questions people hear on their anniversary is where did you two meet and how did you meet?' Then I told everybody the story and I looked at Joyce and I said, 'Would you marry me again?' And she said, 'Yes.' And I said, 'Is there a preacher in the house?' And that was the clue for my buddy Rev. Nibbe to come in. He'd been hiding outside. And he came in all dressed up and we renewed our marriage vows. Not many people get to do that, but I'd renew those marriage vows today in a heartbeat."

"Joyce and I have been really been blessed. First of all we found each other and we have three great sons and their wonderful families. We just love being grandparents. We've got four grandkids: three granddaughters and one grandson. We also have four granddogs, all schnauzers of course, and with my schnauzer Stanley, that makes five. I have loved every one of my dogs but I'll tell you, when the dog I had before Stanley, her name was Lucky, died way sooner than anyone could have imagined, I nearly died of a broken heart. But here's what I have to say.

"Stanley is the first male schnauzer I've had and he was a surprise gift from my son Eric who named him Stanley. Now before Eric came to the house with Stanley, I had been thinking a lot about my mother and you know now, because I've mentioned it, that her maiden name was Stanley. That's something I never thought to mention to the kids. So all of a sudden in walks Eric with a dog that he 'randomly' named Stanley. Stanley was born the day after my birthday. I believe that sometimes things happen because they need to and one of the reasons I tell this is because it is hard to lose a pet. Sometimes it's so hard you think you can never have a pet again because when they die it's too sad. I would never have wanted to miss knowing Lucky or any of our dogs. But the love and joy of having Stanley outweighs that sadness. So if you're reading this and you've lost a pet, now you know what to do."



Jean Bartlett photo

Stanley and Mike, 2014.

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The story of Mike Mooney (page 14)

As one walks through the Mooney house, among the many family photographs there are a number of awards and commendations that dot the walls. Mike is the recipient of the Keep Pacifica Clean and Green Award. His give-to-Pacifica volunteer efforts have been recognized by the California State Assembly, the California State Senate and several Pacifica mayors. In 2002, he received the Pride and Beautification Award from the Pacifica Chamber of Commerce. In 2001, San Mateo County named him "Volunteer of the Year – Environmental Category." One particular source of pride is a 1968 letter from President Ronald Reagan congratulating him on becoming a U.S. citizen.

"Pacifica reminds me of Ireland, it does. There's a song: 'Where the Mountains of Mourne Sweep Down to the Sea.' We have a million dollar view coming down from Fairmont as long as people pull weeds, don't litter, pick up litter and keep things clean. Oh, and let me second the late Shirley Drye's words of wisdom, 'Pull your pampas grass.' Also, consider adopting Highway 1 for cleanup or to plant vegetation. Action gets reaction."



Jean Bartlett photo

Mike Mooney in his Liberty Garden, 2008.

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