Cades Cove, Tennessee,
on an early fall morning.

THE LONG ROA

The roof of the Tennessee Aquarium, in Chattanooga, as seen from the city's Walnut Street Pedestrian Bridge.

AD HOME

On a tour of his native state, **Kevin West** finds the Tennessee of his youth has become affluent and forward-looking—a place where history, music, and food are being celebrated in new and thrilling ways. Just buckle up and enjoy the drive.

Photographs by Houston Cofield

WE

got to Tennessee early, around 1830. The first of my ancestors to arrive was Robert Burchfield, my fifth great-grandfather on my mother's side. He settled in a pioneer community called Cades Cove, on land taken from its Cherokee owners in the 1819 Treaty of Calhoun, and his offspring have been in Blount County, East Tennessee, ever since. Cades Cove is today a popular scenic destination and outdoor museum of Appalachian history, with a group of historic buildings at its heart. It's the crown jewel of the Great Smoky Mountains, America's busiest national park.

My mother was having a ball as she recounted our family history from the passenger seat. It was a fine fall day in "the Cove," where the two of us have been going for as long as I can remember—it's our pilgrimage into the Smokies' natural temple of wildflower meadows and baptismal streams. On this day, sourwood trees glowed ember-red in the woods and pale blue asters dusted the hay fields like they'd fallen from the sky. My mother had recently recovered from a frightening brush with COVID, and the shadow on her routine chest X-ray had not yet been diagnosed as cancer. It was exhilarating to be alive.

On the spur of the moment, we exited the park and followed a poem of country roads—Rocky Branch to Laws Chapel to Butler Mill to Butterfly Gap—across the landscape of her memory. This, she said, pointing out of the window, was where she first saw a hummingbird. That was where her family lived when the house caught fire. Up there stood the log cabin where my great-grandfather was knifed to death in a dispute over a hog.

I hadn't heard some of the stories before, and it occurred to me why: I'd never driven this particular stretch of road with my mother. "What?" she said in disbelief. "Then you missed half my life." Family lore is like that: some stories get repeated, but others are left unsaid. The same is true of history. Every point on the map is storied. Place speaks. But to hear what it says, you have to go yonder, where the stories are told. Travel is the teacher.

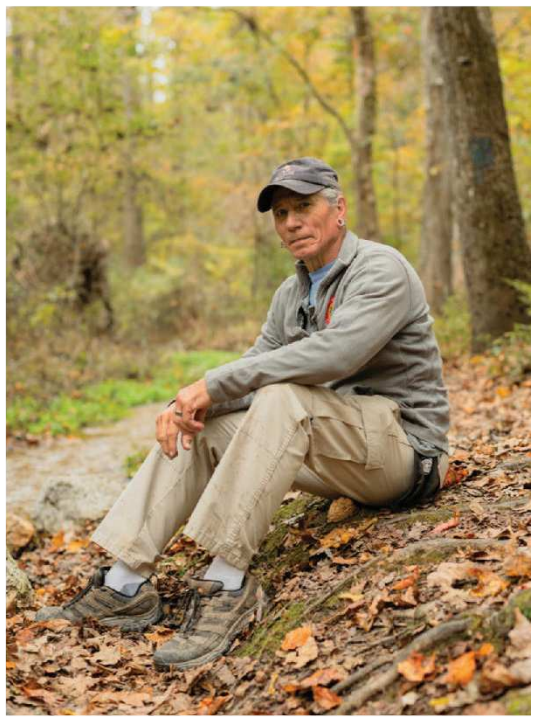
I SOMETIMES JOKE that Tennessee is three different countries. The state's distinctive outline—long and skinny, laid out like a moonshiner with his head against the Smoky Mountains and his toes in the cool Mississippi River—contains a trio of distinct regions. East Tennessee, centered at Knoxville, is threaded by the Tennessee River and went Union in the state's 1861 vote on secession. The Middle Tennessee plateau has Nashville, the seat of both political power and the business of country music. And West Tennessee, with its river port at Memphis, is marked by cotton, blues music, and the Civil Rights Movement. The three stars on Tennessee's state flag symbolize these so-called Grand Divisions. It's easy to underestimate the differences until you've explored Tennessee end to end.

The Tennessee I knew as a child has been transformed by a long economic boom stoked by the lush Sunbelt climate, favorable business environment, low cost of living, and nonexistent state income tax. To cite one small but telling data point: Tennessee was the top state for inbound U-Haul rentals in 2020. Anecdotally, the transformations I've witnessed in Blount County, also home to my father's farming family, the Wests, since before the Civil War, defy belief. On my grandparents' former farm, cornfields now grow houses. Amazon is building two supersize distribution centers, and next year gunmaker Smith & Wesson will relocate its headquarters from Massachusetts. The dinky country roads I once knew have swollen into four-lane highways.

No less surprising, Blount County has also gone foodie. I grew up around capable farm wives and good country cooks who knew how to make the most of a backyard vegetable garden; now, there is a food scene. Hypothesis: rural gentrification follows chefs the way urban gentrification follows artists. One crisp Saturday

◂
Pork chop, kale, squash, and barley at the Appalachian restaurant, in Sevierville.

Below: Jamie Russell, a staff member at Red Clay Historic State Park; storefront signage in Leiper's Fork; Mary Alford sells bouquets from her garden at the Maryville farmers' market.



▾
Sean Robinson outside his grandmother Desiree's Memphis restaurant, Cozy Corner.

▲
A view of the Tennessee River as it passes through Chattanooga.

morning, I went to investigate the proposition at the Maryville Farmers' Market. Across from a produce stand run by an older gent in a John Deere cap, customers lined six deep for crusty bread, farmhouse cheese, and preserves from Blackberry Farm. The resort behind the farm stand opened on the edge of the Smokies in 1976 and has introduced countless visitors to the mountains of the South.

It has also helped codify a modern version of traditional mountain cooking. The underlying culinary foundations are "corn bread, pig, lard, and vegetables," according to Amy Campbell, host of the *Tennessee Farm Table* podcast and radio show on WDVX. In an accent as thick as sorghum syrup, Campbell explained that mountain winters historically placed an emphasis on preserving—tomatoes, pickles, wild blackberry jam, and all that smoked pork. The result was a plain but sturdy cuisine designed to keep body and soul together—poverty cooking, or, as she put it, "a way of getting by."

The Blackberry Farm diaspora, mostly male, has elevated the farmhouse cooking of generations of anonymous women to the status of "foothills cuisine." Among the recent alums, Trevor Stockton showed a talent for seasonal vegetables during my supper at RT Lodge, in Maryville. Over at the Appalachian restaurant in Sevierville, Dave Rule's meatier offerings came off the wood-fired grill with a campfire tang.

Back at the Maryville Farmers' Market, I watched millennial shoppers with their baby-packs and eco-shoes, and noted Teslas in the parking lot—signs of affluence unimaginable in my childhood in the 1980s, when Maryville reached its low ebb and its small businesses fell to the new mall. Ceramist Leanne McQueen, a downtown pioneer who came to Tennessee for college 18 years ago, has lived through the revival. She credits not just corporate investments but also the economic return on sweat equity paid by folks who, like herself, opted for small-town life. "When people want to stay, they invest in their community," McQueen explained, as she packed dozens of newly fired bowls, part of an order for Blackberry Farm. "And if you don't have it, what do you do? You build."

Colleen Cruze is another entrepreneur with the stay-and-build-it mindset. She took the reins of her family's at-risk dairy farm and, with her Nashville-born Punjabi husband, Manjit Bhatti, grew it into a local-pride ice cream company, Cruze Farm Dairy. "I wanted the farm to continue," Cruze said.

Another agrarian success story hit even closer to home: Sheena Bennett established her organic Wander Walnut Meadows farm in Greenback, not far from my own family's lost farm. I chatted with Bennett at the farmers' market, then went up the street to Henrietta Foy's wall mural, *Smoky Mountain Music History,* to pay homage to arguably Tennessee's most famous entrepreneur. Dolly Parton came from mountain poverty, not far from where my mother grew up, and now ranks among the Greatest Living Tennesseans thanks to "Jolene," Dollywood, and her $1 million gift to jump-start COVID-vaccine research.

▲ Fried chicken and a charcuterie board at the Restaurant at RT Lodge.

▶ At 256 feet, Fall Creek Falls, in Spencer, is one of the highest in the eastern U.S.

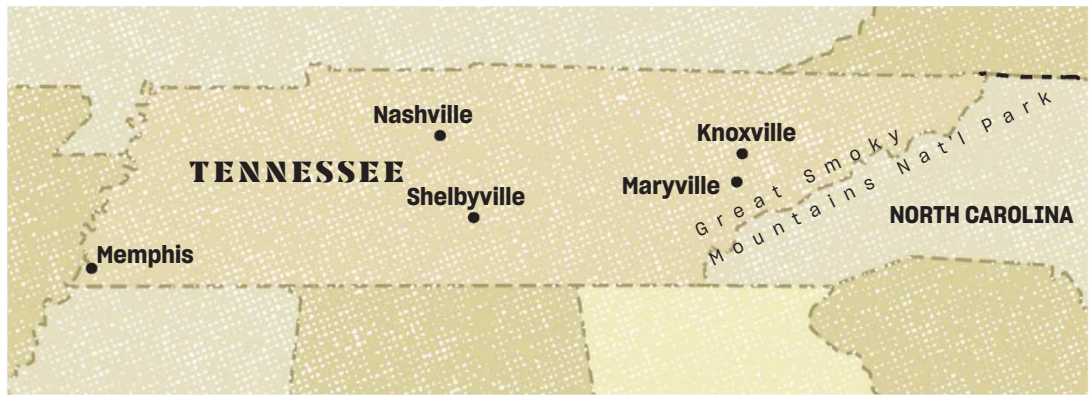
But beyond musical success, Dolly also represents the public flowering of a once soft-spoken constituency. It bears remembering that Tennessee cast the decisive vote to ratify the 19th Amendment, which gave women political agency. The nail-biter tally in 1920 was put over the top by a young Nashville legislator named Harry Burn, whose conscience was pricked by his mother. Many Tennessee families pass down stories of grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and wives, who quietly exerted their influence through family roles. Dolly did it differently. She loudly told the world what it meant to be a Tennessee woman, rather than the other way around.

THE NAME TENNESSEE comes from Tanasi, a lost Cherokee village up the Tennessee River from the town of Vonore, on the state's southeastern border. The nearby Sequoyah Birthplace Museum honors the inventor of the Cherokee syllabary, an example probably unique in human history of an individual solely devising a written language. Sequoyah also fought in the War of 1812 alongside officer Andrew Jackson, who later, as United States president, emptied Tennessee of its original landowners. Starting the day in Maryville, I drove to Vonore and from there toward Chattanooga, to piece together the story of Cherokee removal, better known as the Trail of Tears.

Southwest along Highway 411, just beyond Benton, I crossed the Ocoee River, a favorite spot for whitewater kayaking, and stopped at the gravesite of Nanye'hi, also known as Nancy Ward. A generation older than Sequoyah, she sat on the Cherokee Council in the pioneer era and advocated for appeasement, opposing her hawkish cousin Dragging Canoe's call for all-out war.

Standing at her grave, I was behind the line established by the Treaty of Calhoun as a permanent boundary against white incursion. Melissa Woody, a cofounder of the Hiwassee River Heritage Center, a museum dedicated to the Trail of Tears story, transported me to a moment of fragile security. "Imagine being a Cherokee boy or girl in 1820 and standing on the west bank of the Hiwassee," she said. "You were standing in the Cherokee Nation looking across at America."

America soon jumped the river. Starting in 1838, General Winfield Scott's forces herded Cherokee citizens into a concentration camp at Fort Cass, at the present-day town of Charleston. The Hiwassee River Heritage Center is built on that shadowed earth, often considered the first stop on the Trail of Tears. Woody corrected the common misperception: "The real start of the Trail of Tears," she said, "was those homesteads where the people were dragged from their homes."



A Tour of Tennessee

WHERE TO STAY

Arrive Memphis
Loft-style rooms in Memphis's trendy South Main neighborhood. *arrivehotels.com; doubles from $240.*

The Hermitage Hotel
Nashville's newly refreshed grande dame. *thehermitagehotel.com; doubles from $679.*

The Kinley
Boutique lodging smack in the middle of Chattanooga's booming downtown. *kinleychattanooga.com; doubles from $199.*

RT Lodge
Relaxed mountain-house style on the wooded campus of Maryville College. *rtlodge.com; doubles from $218.*

Sweeney Cottage
An eclectic three-bedroom getaway in Leiper's Fork. *whitesroomandboard.com; from $250.*

WHERE TO EAT

Alcenia's
Memphis soul food served with a hug from owner BJ Chester-Tamayo. *alcenias.com; entrées $15–$18.*

The Appalachian
Meat grilled over a wood fire in Sevierville. *theappalachianrestaurant.com; entrées $18–$36.*

Bishop
Paris in Memphis, from acclaimed chefs Andrew Ticer and Michael Hudman. *bishopmemphis.com; entrées $20–$50.*

Cozy Corner
The definition of Memphis-style ribs. *cozycornerbbq.com; entrées $8–$18.*

Cruze Farm Dairy
Creative soft-serve flavors, with locations in Sevierville and Knoxville. *cruzefarm.com.*

Gus's World Famous Fried Chicken
The name of this Memphis legend says it all. *gusfriedchicken.com; plates $11–$18.*

The Restaurant at RT Lodge
Southern garden cooking in a rambling 1932 Maryville mansion. *rtlodge.com; entrées $16–$65.*

WHAT TO DO

Cades Cove
An 11-mile driving loop through the scenic heart of the Great Smoky Mountains. *nps.gov/grsm.*

Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum
A can't-miss experience in Nashville. *countrymusichalloffame.org.*

Hiwassee River Heritage Center
An interpretive museum in Charleston, part of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. *hiwaseeheritage.com.*

McQueen Pottery
Elegant, hand-thrown tableware in Maryville. *mcqueenpottery.com.*

National Museum of African American Music
A comprehensive look at 400 years of Black music history in Nashville, from gospel to blues, jazz, R&B and hip-hop. *nmaam.org.*

Sequoyah Birthplace Museum
A tribute to the man who recorded the Cherokee language, outside the town of Vonore. *sequoyahmuseum.org.*

A Tour of Possibilities
Learn about the full sweep of Memphis history—the Big River, cotton, the blues, Civil Rights. *atopmemphis.com; tours from $55 per person.* —*K.W.*

Woody grew up two ridges away, but nobody in her community ever talked about the vanished Cherokee, and the atrocities of Fort Cass were largely undocumented. She and colleagues created the Heritage Center to unify narrative fragments scattered along the Tennessee River, from Tanasi to nearby Blythe's Ferry to Chattanooga's Moccasin Bend National Archeological District.

My other essential stop in a long day of driving was Red Clay State Historic Park, where I met Jamie Russell—maintenance supervisor, official interpreter, occasional costumed dancer, keeper of ancient songs, and guardian of a Cherokee legacy passed down through his father. Russell was born in Oklahoma and has lived around Red Clay, on and off, since the early 1970s.

Russell walked me out to Council Spring, a majestic woodland pool beneath a canopy of oak and sweetgum trees, locally known as the Blue Hole for its magical color. Like many Cherokee sites, it holds an intangible oral tradition. Or as Russell wryly put it, "there's nothing there unless you know what it is you're going there for."

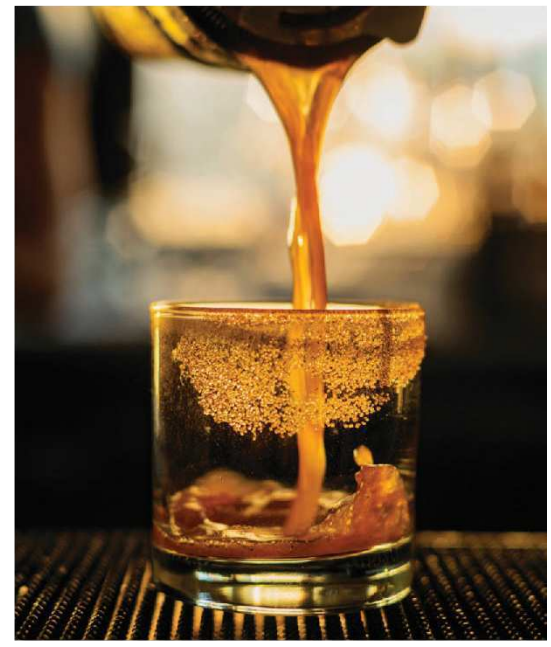
The namesake council established its capital-in-exile at Red Clay in 1832, after a land grab forced the Cherokee Nation from its territories around New Echota, Georgia. Chief John Ross pursued his people's legal complaints all the way to the Supreme Court and won, but President Jackson ignored the ruling. Sixteen thousand Cherokee citizens funneled through Fort Cass and other fearsome portals to the Trail of Tears. Four thousand died. "Here in Tennessee, people have a real good impression of Andrew Jackson," Russell said. "Ask a Cherokee."

The atmosphere around the Blue Hole felt becalmed, and my mind, abuzz from driving, gradually slowed. Russell told the legend of how medicine came to be. Animals acquired disease to chasten greedy hunters, then plants acquired the power to heal—the Creator's way to balance the three communities of life. "They all rely on each other," Russell explained. "The life force in that tree is no different than the life force coursing through me. It's what joins us all together."

IF THERE IS A Tennessean more famous than Dolly or Andrew Jackson, it must be Jack Daniel. (Elvis surpasses them all; his fame exists on a geologic timescale.) Daniel, of course, was a 19th-century whiskey maker from Middle Tennessee and a brand marketer nonpareil. In recent years, it came to broader public attention that the man behind Daniel was Nathan Green, a Black distiller, familiarly known as Uncle Nearest, who taught Daniel how to mix a mash bill, or recipe, and tend a still.

The lobby bar, Eight & Sand, at the Central Station Hotel, in Memphis.

Fawn Weaver, CEO of Uncle Nearest Premium Whiskey.



A cocktail at the Gray Canary, in Memphis.

After a refreshing night's rest at Sweeney Cottage, in Leiper's Fork, a sepia-tinted hamlet near Nashville, I went to Shelbyville to meet the woman behind Uncle Nearest, Inc. My appointment with founder and CEO Fawn Weaver was to be held in the distillery's new visitors' center. First I had to find my way in. Construction had not quite finished, and I drove in and out of unsigned gates until I met a man built like a brick outhouse. Shannon Locke, the head of security, phoned the office to verify my meeting, and we chatted while awaiting a call back. I asked if there were credible security risks. He looked at me as if I were simple, then gently explained that his job, in a county with an active Ku Klux Klan presence, was to protect a high-profile company owned and run by a Black woman and honoring a Black man whose memory might be perceived by paranoids as a challenge to the supremacy of Jack Daniel's. When the callback came, Locke, who exuded a palpable force field of lethal protection, pointed me toward the visitors' center.

I'd already read up on Weaver. A successful author living in Los Angeles, she was traveling with her husband, an entertainment executive, when she came across an article about Uncle Nearest. Moved by the story of unlikely friendship, she relocated to Tennessee with the sole purpose of digging deeper. "There are certain parts of the past that we are destined to follow," Weaver said when I asked what drew her. "It lights up for you."

At the time, a social media narrative had taken hold that Green had been an enslaved person and Daniel had stolen his recipe, then tried to erase his very existence. Nothing of the sort, Weaver found. Even Daniel's official biography mentioned Green. It was not so much a story hidden as a story lost to time. On the day she first met Jack Daniel's eldest living descendant, Weaver reassured the woman she meant no harm to the family legacy. "If this story were not rooted in love and grace," she said, "it would not have appealed to me."

Uncle Nearest Premium Whiskey launched in 2016 and has become the fastest-growing whiskey company in American history. Profits fund scholarships for Green's descendants, and the Weavers now own **(Continued on page 107)**

(Tennessee, continued from page 99)

the land where Daniel and Nearest first distilled "mountain dew" using water rising through limestone just below the Cumberland Plateau—another sacred spring.

In person, Weaver proved to be a quiet force of nature: luminous, ineluctable, a presence to bask in. Her speech was tinged by passages from the Gospel. Her hopefulness was moving because it was not naïve. A security team patrolled outside, after all. And yet Weaver had built her company on a foundation she considered to be American bedrock: a friendship between two men. "Nothing is going to fall into black and white," she told me. "There's healing in the nuance."

MY DRIVE ACROSS Tennessee charted a path from home ground to personal terra incognita. Before this trip, what I had seen of the west of the state depended on how close it was to Interstate 40, which runs from Nashville to Memphis before crossing the Mississippi River into Arkansas. The only spot in Memphis I would have claimed to know was a modest restaurant called Alcenia's, which is practically within earshot of I-40. I found it when I pulled off the highway hungry and googled "Memphis soul food." (The proprietor is Alcenia's daughter, BJ Chester-Tamayo, who hugs everyone who comes through the door, elevating Southern hospitality with gospel love.)

Compared with Alcenia's, Graceland needs no introduction. But it lies in the city's southern suburbs, far from I-40, so I'd never been, even though the King was part of my upbringing, like Santa Claus and Jesus. This would be the trip.

But first, lunch. With Alcenia's closed for expansion, I wound up a mile away at Cozy Corner, a genre-defining barbecue restaurant with the ambience of a faded gas station. I ordered the ribs plate to go—spicy sauce on the side—and ate it on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, some 500 miles and two Grand Divisions away from where I'd started in Cades Cove. Afterward, I found my stylish hotel, Arrive Memphis, in the gentrified neighborhood of South Main, across the street from the National Civil Rights Museum. The next day I'd make a tour of that painful but urgently important repository of national memory. I would stand outside the Lorraine Motel to reflect on what was taken from America by the bullet that killed Martin Luther King Jr.

BUT ON MY first evening in Memphis, excited to be in a city I barely knew, I walked around South Main to orient myself in relation to key local landmarks: Gus's World Famous Fried Chicken and Bishop, the newest restaurant from prolific restaurateurs Andy Ticer and Michael Hudman.

Memphis is Tennessee's other Music City. Nashville was to country music what Motor City was to cars, the place to make a consumer product. Memphis birthed—or at least midwifed—the blues, when club performers on Beale Street showcased a new sound that would rock and roll the world. The musical tale of both cities is well told in Nashville, at the Country Music Hall of Fame and the brilliant new National Museum of African American Music. In Memphis, a musical tour should take in the Blues Hall of Fame Museum, Stax Museum, Sun Studio—where a young Presley cut his first sides—and Graceland.

Of course Graceland. I planned to go. I had tickets. But my time ran short and "some part of me wanted to see"—to borrow a line from "Graceland," the Paul Simon hit that was echoing around my head—Shiloh, the Civil War battlefield. My mother had told me that another of our Burchfield ancestors perished upon that killing field, where 100,000 Americans clashed in blood fury—history's warning against current loose talk about civil war. John Palmer Burchfield died in defense of the Union, and I wanted to pay my respects.

Driving out from Memphis on Sunday morning, I followed state roads past railroad towns in which the railroad no longer mattered. The occasional plantation house had been restored to host weddings. Across the Wolf River, I slowed to read a peculiar sign, WELCOME TO MOSCOW, FOUNDED 1829, and my eye was drawn to a hand-lettered sign behind it: TACO BURRITOS BURGERS CAR WASH. The friendly owner of a food truck next to the car wash was a good ole boy from "moss-*ko*."

I asked about the Mexican dishes on his menu board. "My wife is Mexican and likes to mix different types of cuisine," he drawled, adding that she also cooked Asian dishes, finding similarities in the use of chiles, cilantro, and strong flavors. I'd met plenty of young chefs in Los Angeles with similar fusion moves. But I was surprised to hear tell of culinary ecumenicalism in the former Land of Cotton. Then I was surprised by my surprise, so to speak, and disappointed by my narrow preconception of the proprietor. He had a bigger view of things—of food, of culture, of America—than I had credited him for. Here, as I made my way to Shiloh to honor the cause of union in the face of dangerous grand divisions, I met someone farther down the path to *e pluribus unum*.

"Each cuisine has something good about it," he was saying now, on a roll, enthused to be talking food with a like-minded stranger. "Mix it all together and you get something real good."

Travel + Leisure (ISSN 0041-2007) September 2022, Vol. 52, No. 8, is published monthly, except for a combined issue in December/January, by TI Inc. Affluent Media Group, a subsidiary of Meredith Operations Corporation, Principal Office: 225 Liberty St., New York, NY 10281-1008, under license from Travel + Leisure Holdco, LLC. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER** Send all UAA to CFS. (See DMM 507.1.5.2.) Non-Postal and Military Facilities: Send address corrections to Travel + Leisure, PO Box 37508, Boone, IA 50037-0508. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement #40069223. BN #129480364RT.
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