

GROWING UP ON THE PRAIRIE

Written by Irma Hall Vahl

In the early 1900's, my father Charles William Hall and Mother Theresa J. Bauer Hall came to Chester, Montana. Dad's health was not good, so came West to see if it would help him. He had Tuberculosis. Dad worked for the Geo. Bourne & Hamilton Sheep Co. He was a range rider and this Company was located North of Chester near the Hill P.O. in the Sweet Grass Hills. Dad filed on a homestead which was north of the P. O. about 4 miles. Mother worked at the P. O. which was also the Mail Route Relay Station between Chester and Gold Butte. She cooked meals and cleaned the rooms (which were for the passengers and the mail carriers who changed men and their horses). Larry Emerson was the Boss. He hired and fired men. Matt Morgan and Nelson Petterson drove stage from Hill to Gold Butte. Frank Lowe drove from Chester to Hill.



Irma Hall Vahl

Dad's job as range rider required him to carry a 45 revolver. Many times predators were seen around sheep herds, he would bring home or to camp - bum lambs, so Mom would feed them from a bottle. She had a tame one called Billy - he would run up the stairs and wake the men for breakfast, but when he saw Mom with the mop, he was gone.

Mr. Bourne and Hamilton built a large 2 story house not far from camp and in later years I remembered this mansion, as I could see us living in that mansion. But, in later years it was moved to Shelby Mt. by Jim and Bertha Christian. In late 1903, Mother returned to New York and waited my arrival. She returned about one year later, however, Dad in the meantime, was getting a house and barn built on the homestead. Lumber and material had to be hauled from Chester and Fort Benton. Dad had also got a few head of cattle and a team and wagon. Mother returning from the East said the Mosquitos were very bad and very hot weather-she kept me under a net. That winter had been hard - as lots of cattle froze to

death and snow was deep and bad blizzards. After being home for a week or so, I had been bitten by a mosquito and infection set in, so was taken to Great Falls and was in the hospital for some time. Mother had a large garden as I can remember playing in the rich black dirt, while she put in vegetables and Dad carried water from the creek by the house.

In 1907, Dad's health was getting worse. I can see him yet, laying in bed and coughing and I remember I was making more noise than I should and he scolded me for it. I sassed him and he got out of bed and put soap in my mouth - besides a paddling. I sat down behind the wooden rocker and shed a few tears. Our house had only three rooms, a bedroom, kitchen and front room. Not too much room - and very little furniture, mostly apple boxes for chair and Dad made a table. Our stove was a flat top - 4 hole top, a door on each side of oven. A small heater in the front room and our fuel was coal and wood. Coal was hauled from West Butte and also some came from Roundup, Mont. Emil Jeppesen hauled coal by team from West Butte. They were mining not too far from our house, and some folks hauled there, but the coal was a poor grade. There was a mine or two that Mr. Bragg worked on for gold.

Dad left in the Fall of 1907 back to Penna. to his folks where he passed away on Oct. 25, 1908 at Dallas, Penna. Mother, of course, could not go East with winter coming on and she had two horses and cattle to take care of. The winter was a bad one, we had a blizzard that lasted three days so she could not get to the barn to feed or water the stock and our fuel was low. Mother kept me in bed most of the time (I was 3 years of age at the time Dad left home) so Mom had to burn up our furniture to keep warm. A neighbor by the name of Bragg, who was a miner, lived about a mile from us. He would come to see how Mom was getting along. His clothes were patch upon patch and the seat of his pants had 2 large bright red patches. Mom and I would go over and visit him. He had a large wild strawberry patch and "Boy" were they good! Neighbors were at least a mile "as the crow flies". Mr. Bragg gave me 2 black kittens. Mom kept them up in the barn and I would go up there and spend hours playing with them. One day, I decided I was going down to see the John Oswoods - they had 2 girls and 1 boy (Margaret, Tillie, and Burnett). I got Mom's mop stick and 2 cats and took off across the prairie. Mother was frantic, she called and looked everywhere, thought I might have got into the creek and as the sun was setting and a storm coming in, there

she saw me coming with my 2 cats and the mop stick horse.

Mom would take the team and wagon and would go over to see the Joe Roke family, they had 2 boys and 1 girl, Johnny, Tootie and Dick. John Oswood was our closest neighbor. There were about 4 or 5 white women in the area, others were Indian women. There were round circles of stone on several places by the creeks and that was where the Indians had a camp. Teepees were put in the circle. Several bachlors had home-steads, they were Severt Reswold, Jake Oswood, Louis Oswood and Nelson Petterson who bought the Knute Oswood place in later years.

Whitlash and Gold Butte were west of us - also the old Co. Ranch. Gold Butte was being mined for gold. The town composed of Tony Fey's General Store, a hotel - I think the Carrol's had it. Then there was a saloon, livery barn and Blacks Smith Shop. Mother would visit friends at Whitlash - Mrs. Amidroze who was a sister of Mrs. Roke, then there were the Launers, Strattons, Elmer Brown, Demerests, Feys, Christians, Iversons, Morgans, Jeppesens, Forsyths, Harvey Price and Lottie and others whose names I can't remember. Mother took care of Mrs. Amidroze when her last baby was born and she is Louise Greer of Big Fork, Mt. I wouldn't play with the Stratton children because they had runny noses. The Amidroze had 3 girls and 1 boy, Lucille, Louise, Nettie and Fritz. Fritz in later years worked on the Joe Roke ranch for years until he retired and came to Kalispell, Mt. The Fontaines lived on Strawberry Flats, they had 10 children, one girl still in Columbia Falls since 1910. Her name is Rosie Burnett.

Ed Trommer and Mother married at Fort Benton, Mt. 1909. He had several bands of sheep besides stock. He came from Iowa. His wife had died and left 5 children, but they never came out to Montana to the ranch as long as I lived there, which was 8 years.

Mother and I went back to New York to visit her sister there. My aunt bought me a big doll at Macys Store. I enjoyed going up and down the rolling strairs. We then went on to Antigo, Wisc. to see another aunt, Mom's youngest sister, Lydia Churney and Uncle Jack. I stayed with them for several months and went to school. Uncle Jack tried to pierce my ears with a needle and burnt cork, but didn't work out as I crawled under the bed. They had a small girl, Doris, who now lives in Miami, Fla. and later 2 boys were born - Jack who lives in Deltona, Fla. and David lives in Penna.

I do not remember if I came back to Montana with my Aunt and Uncle, but I do know they were at the ranch and Aunt Lydia said they were there in 1910 - Ed Trommer wanted Uncle Jack to file on a homestead, because he needed more land for sheep range. He had one large herd that stayed year around on Horse Creek, where there was water. Nels Petterson and Matt Morgan were the range riders for Trommer, as he had several herds and herders.

In the Spring the sheep were brought to the ranch for shearing, this was done by hand. I felt sorry for the animals because they'd cut them so bad with the large shears they used. They would put me in those big, large sacks to stomp the wool, so it would pack down, that's when I found out sheep had Ticks.

Mother's oldest sister's son came from Wilkes-Barre, Pa. to work on the ranch. He was 16 and had 7 brothers. He was the only one of the family that came out West and his name was George Cerwanka. He worked in the Mill at Bonner for many years, he also filed on a homestead which was south of the ranch near the Fred Swantner homestead and Nick Laas land (He went into the service and when he returned, he married Nina Bernhard - a teacher who taught school in Lothair, Mt. Sam Irvine and wife and Grandad had land just north of the ranch and was the first Trommer P.O. Postmaster. During lambing, branding, farming and haying, these men all settlers were working off and on for Trommer.

Our neighbors, who were settlers around the area were, Callaways, Olsons, Larsons, Holmes, Ira Martin, Stalcups, Braybanders, Noklebys, Markusons, Bolmas, Buckmasters, Hills, Abbotts, Wilsons, Porters, Smestads, Phillips, Gormans, Lees, Rockmans, Swanson, Snuffer, Swantners, Randy (last name don't remember), she lived near Noklebys farm - Gleora Olson - she was my music teacher. She homesteaded in the Grand View Area and came from Grand Forks, N. Dak. Also a fellow who homesteaded near the Holmes Farm - he returned to Kalispell and was Mayor of the city, but do not recall his name. The Children would stop on their way home from school and he'd have cookies for them. In the Horse Creek area, were the Zeans, Bush, Fredricksons, Egglestons, Russels, Prescotts, Hulls, Sheltons and Coon.

I attended the Trommer school (1910), summer school began in March through December. My teacher was Effie Madson and her parents farmed near Joplin. She graduated from school there and took the teachers exams

and passed her test, so applied for our school, she was 16 years of age. Mother was on the school board, so helped her get her first school. The teachers usually board and roomed at the ranch as there was more room. Our house had three bedrooms. The teachers and I would walk sometimes to school and could also ride my pony. It was two miles walking and $2\frac{1}{2}$ by road. We carried our lunch. Teachers had to do their own janitor work, plus build the fire. I would help if I didn't have chores to do when I got home. Water was hauled by a neighbor in cans. The girls and boys that attended the school were - John, Elmer, Mable and Clara Bolma - Basil Buckmaster, John and Tessie Abbott. Ruth and Willard Rockman, Carloyn Oswood, Alice Larson, Lilly, Dagny, Egbert and Rudolp Nokleby, Amy and John Stalcup, Oilens boy and a Gorman boy. There were 3 teachers besides Effie that taught at the school during my years going there. A Miss Wall, Nettie Star and Vera Hughlett (She married Chas, Bush) from Horse Creek.

Trommer had 3 large stallions. They each had a separate stall. One had a large pen outside to exercise in - one was a Clysdale, a Belgian and a Percheron. I could ride the Belgian as the hired men would help me up on him and I looked like a pea on a walnut. He was gentle, but the other two were more frisky and one would bite if given the chance. I had to help feed them, but thank goodness, I could put the hay through a window from the outside. I also took care of gathering eggs and feeding chickens. We also had geese, duck, and turkeys. Would bring in the cows and on the hired mans day off or he was working away from the ranch, I'd help with the milking. George and I would also help herd a band of sheep, probably on Saturday and sometimes Sunday. One time I sat down in a patch of cactus, my cousin had to help pick out the stickers and the days were hot and no shade. When going to Chester for supplies, Mom would take the team and buggy. In winter we used a sleigh with hay in bottom of the box and a foot warmer or a couple of hot bricks and a big cow hide robe. I always looked forward to going into town, as Mr. Baker who owned the Chester Trading Co. would always give me a string of rock candy or large licorice stick. We would go and visit some friends that Mom knew - Mrs. Crist, she was a seamstress and the Browns and the Lattimores, (I believe they had the Hotel). Mr. & Mrs. Baker and their daughter Helen, would come out to the ranch on a Sunday and have dinner with us. I would help Mom with the dishwashing - I would stand on a small stool my Dad had made for me. The hired men that worked for Trommer through the years were - Hauns Yurman (Carl & Mike's Dad), he couldn't speak English very good. They lived on a

homestead just north and west of Chester. Their house was made out of clay and straw or old hay and there was no floor, the walls were real thick. (I'm told the house still stands). Visiting them one day, I remember Carl, he was very shy - and stood around the corner of the house and peeked around the corner. Mike was a tease. Their Dad, Hauns, one morning at the ranch, played a trick on me and I never forgave him. The wagon was out in the yard and they had steel rims on the wheels. It was a frosty morn and he told me to stick my tongue on it, and of course, I did, it took all the skin off of my tongue and he laughed, but I cried and that ended our friendship. I wouldn't pack lunch to him when out in the field after that. Sveier Rockman, Nick Laas, Brad Skinner were some of the men who worked at times on the ranch.

Being the only child, I had to make my own amusement, so played a lot with my doll. Mom would help me make doll clothes and I had to feed the bum lambs by bottle. In winter I had no sled, so my cousin made me one, but it was too heavy to pull up hill and the runners were without metal, I sometimes used the big coal shovel.

One day in early spring the hired man found twin antelopes, he brought them to the house so Mom and Geo. got busy and built a pen for them. She raised them on the bottle till real large. One night one got out, so we had one for some time and then it was turned out to roam the prairie. There were several herds, we would see them when going to town in a large meadow south of Nick Laas place and also near Matt Morgans farm. I would go and visit Morgans as I liked the baby and would rock it to sleep. In a dug out North of Matt Morgans lived a man, his wife and a little girl. It was near Christmas, so Mom took some food to them, they had nothing much to wear and food was low, so Mom took my doll that my Aunt gave me and gave it to the little girl. After leaving there, I cried most of the way home.



Antelope Mom (Ma Trommer) raised on bottles at Trommer Ranch.

In the late summer, we would take some food, bedding, buckets and boxes and we'd go to the old homestead and camp in the house. Mom loved to pick gooseberries and sometimes we'd find other berries - she'd make goosie berry pie and jams and jellies - they sure tasted good in the winter. One day Mom stepped into a hornets nest and her leg and ankle swelled, so had to go down to the creek to bath it and get the swelling down.

Mother and I would go to Havre by train to visit friends and sometimes I would stay and visit with Mary (McDonough) Bailey. Her husband had one of the first Saloons in Havre, they had a nice horse and buggy, so on Sundays in the afternoon, we'd go for a ride out to the old Fort Assinaboine - Mary had 2 brothers that also lived in Havre and worked for G.N. one was an engineer and other a conductor. Tom and Bess McDonough had a son Tommy and I use to help babysit, in later years they had adopted a girl. Last I heard of Tommy was from Seattle. Mary in later years worked as G.N. operator and in later years married Skinny Enfield. Mary was a second mother to me. There were also the Lorangers, they had a saloon in Chester and Havre, Dr. Almas and Harris families, also the Yeons.

Going to school I had traps to check. Geo. had set them for badgers and kit fox, that helped him with spending money. Ruth Rockman and I would take our ponies and go to visit Zerans on Horse Creek. we would go across country and the gullies would be filled with snow. One time we got caught in a snow storm and our horses were really tired, when we got there -also we'd go out and have races - anything for amusement. One day, we were playing with the calves, we'd grab them by the tail and they'd run, would try to hang on and part of one's tail came off and BOY! were we scared. We put the tail part down a old water hole and took off. Her Dad never did know what happened to that calfs tail - (we laugh about it when we visit) (Poor Ruth was really scared) (She'll probably skin me for telling this).

ED TROMMER (my stepdad) was not a sociable man, never took mother and I to visit our neighbors, social gathings at the school house, Christmas programs or dances. He would go on a spree for a week or 10 days, never knew where. He also gambled, which was his down-fall, and lost the ranch. He came home one time and Mother found a bottle of whiskey in the buggy, so she smashed the bottle. He got the whip and chased us around the yard. We finally got away and went over to our neighbors until it got dark. George had him calmed down by then. Another time, Mother, the teacher and



Trommer Ranch (Picture taken April 25, 1953)

I had gone to a dance at the school house, and in those days they danced until sun up. When we got home, found the kitches, walls and ceiling plastered with eggs. What a mess to clean up!

In 1926 or 1927, Trommer had a sale, I went to it, to buy back my dishes and some of Moms - that were given to us for our birthdays, etc. He would not let Mom take them, some of the neighbors bid them in to be sure we got them back. John Holm bid in my small cups and saucers, also a large cut glass bowl. That was the last time I was at the ranch until summer of 1981. The old log cabin, barn and house are still there - but the creek is gone, the nice trees are dead and I could not get near the house because of weeds and thistles.

In the Spring of 1917 Mother left the ranch and went to work for Ike Diemert, he had the restaurant and hotel in Lothair. That fall Mother took over the hotel and ran it until 1933. The town was growing and settlers were coming in (1916 was the beginning of the land boom). Taylor and Ridgeway came from Spokane and opened a land or real estate office. There were two general stores, DuBoise - sold his out to Chas. Benson, Ed Robinson had the other - a smaller store owned by Mr. & Mrs. Sanford. He was a missionary and had a small Chapel for services, also a Catholic Church and some services were held in the school house. Bank of Lothair

was managed by a Mr. Day and Dick Stille, he married Mary Jo Sisk. She was a music teacher. Post Mistresses were during the years, Mrs. Hughlett, she had 2 girls and a boy. Vera, she was my teacher at Trommer school, she married Chas. Bush from Horse Creek. Mildred worked for G. N. as operator. Mrs. Hughlett was related to the Star Sisters in Galata, Edith Greiner (Irma Nelson) Mrs. Wilsie & Mrs. McLaren. Ralph Wilsie ran the Implement Store, Bob Schwen had the livery stable and dray. Geo. Mitchell ran the saloon, he came from Nome, Alaska, going there in his teens during the Gold Rush Days. Section foreman's were Dicks, they had 2 girls, Kathryn and Ruth, and Andy Anderson, a single man. Trumbull was depot agent, as was Steve Coram & Dave McLaren. Operators were coming and going, some I remember who stayed any length of time were Pat Mulliken, Alma Hoppen (she lives in Polson) Mary Emfield. Elevator men were - Erickson and Alair, Matkin and later years Glen Standiford. A lumber yard was run by Sam Myre(?) and Barker. Dance Hall - a garage, the mechanic was Rumley(Nick name) Bill. A seaman who was really a character, he came from Ireland through Canada, a friend when you needed one and of many trades. When the war broke out he left and he was never heard from again.

Roy Slater was a carpenter, brother of Mrs. Greiner. Pool Hall was run by Edgar Ballou, Billy Ballou was a barber, Gay Rose was a nephew.



Mother Trommer's Hotel in Lothair

Mr. Jim Whiteley, was also a mechanic, his wife, Ann was a nurse, they had two boys, George and Norman. They came from England, they farmed, but dry years didn't help them, so they moved into town and had a garage. The school had 8 grades and later 1 & 2 years of high school.

Mother added a kitchen and 6 bedrooms to the hotel - she employed at times when business was good. A cook and waitress and a chamber-maid the girls who worked at that time of World War I were, Alice Reap, her sister Lydia and some times another sister Erma. Mrs. Helen Brigger and her mother - also a lady named JoJo. A Mrs. Winters and Alma Zanda were cooks at one time or another through the years.

In the year 1918 - a lot of the young men went into the service - also my cousin Geo. left. Some of these younger men who had bought land left for service. Bert Nelson and brother who helped in the elevators, and many worked on the section crew.

In the summer of 1919, Mother got very ill. The nearest doctor was Dr. Melvin of Chester which is 10 miles east of Lothair, she had inflammatory Rheumatism, Mrs. Whitely cared for her for several weeks. Mother could hardly stand a sheet over her body, she would scream when being cared for, she really suffered and Mrs. Whitely was a wonderful person, stayed by her side for a good many days and nites. Norman Whitely and I had our tonsils removed by Dr. Melvin on the kitchen table. Norman and I were put in the same bed and I was crying and Norman reached over and patted me on the shoulder and said "Irma don't cry, I'll buy you an ice cream cone". In my school days there, I had measles twice, croop, and head lice - seemed to me one summer I had my head in Lard and Kerosene several times. I took painting lessons the summer of 1918. Mother did also, as did several others. Mrs. Chas. Walden was the teacher and really an artist. I still have a picture of mine and one of Mothers that we painted.

In school here are a list of those I knew and some who came and left during my 2½ years in school there:

Mark Wilson	Byron Harris
Glen Standiford	Bill Casper
Muriel Wilson	Freda Doyle
Thomas Porter	Francis Violettt
Edward Hutchison	Francis Moran
Dean Gillespie	Jessie Violettt

Blanche Smith	Elizabeth Williams
Faye Smith	Edith Greiner
Mary Schroer	Josephine Voitten
Jessie Diemert	Earl Wallace & Carter Children
Buelah Standiford	Mable Zelda and Zada Case
June Standiford	Gordon Standiford
Ruth Dick	Marie and Lila Glen
Kathyrn Dick	
Cecil Hutchison	
Rose Hutchison	
Earl - Claude - Eddy - Billy - Mina - Mable, Ames	
Chas. - Willard - Mary Jo - Beatrice - Helen, Trumbull	

Teachers I had were:

Nellie McClaren	Nellie Poland
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Mr. Gist was a high school teacher and Josie Ferebee grade, they were teachers in later years. Miss Brassfield, she taught for several years and had a home in Lothair and died there, but she wasn't my teacher. In later years, Evelyn Jensen, Mrs. Harvey Olson and Lillian Reynolds -Edwards, taught there. Lillian boarded & roomed with us when she taught in the 30's.

When prohibition came in, Mother leased the Hotel out to Helen Smith for one year and then to a Mrs. Winters for a year. Geo Mitchell had closed the saloon and had leased the Harrington Hotel in Great Falls. He wanted mother to be house-keeper, so we moved to Great Falls. I finished my 7th grade there, took the street car to and from school which was up on Boston Heights.

The next year the new 8th grade school opened on 9th St. and Central. After 8th grade I went to Commercial College, but later went to work in a dime store. All this time, it was what they called Bootleg days, and there was plenty of it especially on the old Bootleggers trail south of Galata into Gt. Falls.

I was very unhappy in Gt. Falls, I had no school chums and living in the hotel was very lonesome. After couple years there, Geo. Mitchell sold out and went into the Pool Hall and Bootleg business. Mother rented a house with several bedrooms. She opened up a boarding house and had that for a year, then the lease was up on the hotel so she returned to Lothair. I stayed in Gt. Falls, went to school part time and then worked.

When the Liberty Theatre opened up, I was one of several girls who worked there and really enjoyed it, the theatre was really nice. Mr. Myrich was the manager, later Bill Steege was manager.

In 1923, I returned to Lothair as mother needed me home to help her out, then the Gibbon-Dempsey Prize fight came to Shelby. The oil boom was on- then later came the drouth - Army worms and grasshoppers and with dry winds and dust storms, all in all was a struggle. We had no electricity, no water, a spring supplied water by hauling it in a tank and put in oisters. In the winter the G. N. supplied water for drinking and cooking. We hauled it in 5 gallon cans. Ice was put up in Winter for our refrigeration during summer (ice boxes) and home made, at that. In summer, rain water was used for washing, Coleman gas lights - kerosene lamps, Mother put in the carbide lights later.



The Golden West Hotel & Bar

Ma Trommer moved her Hotel from Lothair to Chester in 1933. The top part of the hotel was removed in Lothair before it was moved by Otto Shepherd cross country to Chester. This part was made into the bar and she added it on to the north side of the Western Hotel that had been owned by Henry Schneider and it was named the Golden West. Ma Trommer sold the bar & hotel to Larry Aaberg in 1944 or 1945.



Charles Wm. Hall's homestead north of Hill P. O. in Northern Chouteau Co. now Liberty. Picture taken when Irma was three years old. Her dad passed away in 1907 in Hazeltown, Pa. Charles Hall was herdrider for the Bourne & Hamilton Sheep Co., which was south of Hill Post Office.

Some History of Dad, Charles Wm. Hall. Dad was raised in Penna. His father raised race horses. Dad was a jockey. He had four brothers and two sisters. One of my Dad's brother boy, Joe Hall - lives in Shamokin, Pa., as does a sister Helen Witmer. I correspond with them now, up until two years ago, I did not know any of Dads relatives were alive. Dad was married in early life and had a boy by the name of Frank Hall. This became known to me in 1936 when I lived at the head of Whitefish Lake and received a letter from Frank saying he was coming out to see me, he had a boy and two girls. He got as far as Chicago and had to return home because he was too ill to come West.

His daughter corresponded with me for a couple of years and then I never heard from them again. So, I've regretted that I didn't get to meet him and learn more about his family.

Theresa Bauer Hall Trommer: A little life story about Mother. She came from Tachau, Austria with her parents. There were 7 girls and 1 boy. They were on a boat for several weeks. Landing in New York, my Grandfather fell heir to another family of 5 children and their mother. Seems the husband did not meet the family and Grand dad did what he could for them. He worked digging ditches and whatever he could get. They spoke no English, with very little money and in a strange land was indeed a challenge for all. Mother was 9 years old. She attended Catholic schools. She could read and write and speak German. The youngest girl (Aunt Lydia) was a baby. Grand Dad finally settled in Freeland, Pennsylvania. He had a trade, it was making wooden barrels with the metal stays around.



Theresa Bauer Hall Trommer

Mother went to work in the silk mill at Wilkes-Barre, Pa. So her schooling was not too good. She was 12 years old. One day coming home from work, she found a gold band ring, she gave it to her mother. Her mother wore it until her death and then Mother got the ring and she wore it until her death. (1966)

Later years she went to work for a family in New York. They were Jewish. Mother always said they were the nicest, most considerate and very good to their help or servants. One of the boys was a doctor, and had it not been for him, she would have died from an accident. They cared for her and payed all the costs.

The Owsley Family Historical Society held their fifth annual meeting at the John Marshall Hotel in Richmond, Virginia, 13 May, 1983. Carl J. Owsley of Orlando, Florida was chosen President for the next two years. Mrs. William H. Martin of Seattle, Washington is the Secretary.

Albert W. L. Moore, Membership Chairman

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