



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Community Through Survival: La Purísima Mission State Historic Park

Hello. Welcome to La Purísima Mission State Historic Park. My name is Nikki Combs, and I will be your guide on this short tour of the eleventh of California's twenty-one missions. Each mission in California was a colony; it was a community struggling to survive on the frontier. The people at La Purísima were the Chumash Indians, who are the Native Americans in this area, the Spanish priests, the craftsmen, the soldiers, and sometimes family members, and these people could either come from Mexico or from Spain. These people had to learn to join together, to live together, to work together, struggling to survive, not only for their own survival, but for the survival of their community and their colony.

La Purísima was founded on December 8, 1787, and it was actually all the way across the valley in what is now downtown Lompoc. For 25 years that community grew and prospered in that location. Then in 1812 a massive earthquake struck California, and the mission was destroyed. The people of the community were reluctant to rebuild in the same location. The priest in charge at the time, Father Mariano Payéras, had to write to Mexico City asking permission to move up into this location. With permission granted, the people of the community began to rebuild their mission in 1813.

As they rebuilt, they changed the configuration of the mission. All missions in California were built in a square, a quadrangle, or a fort shape, but after the earthquake, La Purísima was opened up into a linear design. That's what we can see here is this open design of the mission. Behind me here we have the walled cemetery and the bell tower. The large white building is the main church. The center building behind you here is the shops and quarters. These were the factory rooms and the apartments of some members of the community. The largest building down here was the priests', or the padres', residence.

La Purísima struggled for another 21 years in this area until finally it was secularized in 1834. Secularization means all the missions were shut down, taken away from the control of the Catholic Church and given to the control of private individuals. La Purísima was run by a mayordomo who tried to oversee the huge ranch and farmland that was here. But eventually the land was divided; it was sold off to a variety of farmers, ranchers, and even the Union Oil Company. Over time the buildings fell into disrepair until finally there was nothing left but piles of rubble. Then in the 1930s President Roosevelt's New Deal to get America back to work was the Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC. Groups of young men came to this area, forming their own community, working together to rebuild this mission, as a state park.

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One of the wonderful things about La Purísima being a ranch, being abandoned, was that no city grew up around her. So we're not a church in the middle of a downtown area. We are an open agricultural community. And as a state park we can have some of the representative breeds of the animals that were here. Behind you, you see some of the Churro sheep that were a part of the mission. We have longhorn cattle, horses, burros, goats, pigs, turkeys, ducks, geese. They were trying to be as self-sufficient as possible. They were trying to survive out here. Of course the church was the foundation of the community, and that's where I'd like to take you to first.

This is the main church. Watch your step as you come inside.

Everything you see around you has been reconstructed. Keep in mind that the CCC came and rebuilt La Purísima during the 1930s. The priests were very good at giving us records of how many beans they grew, how much corn they had, how many horses, cattle, or sheep they had, how much wine was produced. We always didn't have records of what even the inside of their own church looked like. The shell pattern along the wall is a La Purísima design, because enough plaster was found to reproduce that design. But the designs of the altar are copies off of other missions. The tabernacle is actually copied off of Mission Santa Barbara, and the patterns on the wall are copied off of Mission San Miguel; that's the only mission in California that still has her original paint on the inside, so I encourage everybody to go see that one.

There's a stripe running down the center of the church. It's made out of half bricks, and that's separating the church. What do you think they were trying to separate in those days?

You're exactly right; they were separating men and women in those days. So the congregation would be standing out here. The priest would either be up at the altar or using the pulpit and the sounding board, and that sounding board kept his voice from bouncing around. You can hear mine is going all over this huge building in here. That would keep his voice down so the congregation, even the guys way in the back, could hear. At the back of the church what you're seeing is the original tiles of this floor. So where you're walking is on a tile made by an Indian. You're standing on a spot that an Indian once stood on. And one of the wonderful things about the original tile floor are these markers back here. What we have are parallel rows of these half bricks. These bricks are just the size for feet. And if everyone will find two bricks close to each other and stand there, you can see that the choir, which is who stood here, was in nice parallel rows.

Music was one of the enticements of the Chumash to come into the church. The Chumash had such a rich area out here, they had time to develop art and music. And when they heard the music and saw the ceremony of the church, some of them were enticed to join in. But once the Chumash joined the mission, life did change. In a Chumash village, men and women were just about equal; if things worked out just right, a woman could even be chieftain of her village. Once they entered the mission, though, women took on the second-class citizenship that was very prevalent in Europe in those days, to the point where women were not even allowed to sing in the choir. The choir was only for men and boys.

This church was only used until about the end of the 1820s. What happened was, it was accidentally built on a spring. The spring wasn't there when the church was built, but it did bubble up later on, and the adobe walls of the church were actually damaged. We also think

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there was probably some damage to this church during the revolt of 1824. We do know the Indians were holed up in here. The military was firing cannon at them; it kind of makes sense that the church was damaged. The church was dropped out of use. They did use another church later on in the mission life, and then eventually this whole building melted and fell down, only leaving this tile floor back here. The 1930s came along, the CCC came, rebuilt on the same spot, and we're having the exact same problems that the priests had. We have our spring bubbling up again, damaging the walls of this church.

The church was the foundation of the community. This was the daily place for people to come. A group of people who often didn't come though, and the records show how dismayed the priests were that they didn't come to church very often, were the soldiers. They were part of the community and yet separate from the community, and that's where we're going to go next is to the soldiers' quarters.

Where you're at now is the cuartel, which is the Spanish word for quarters, which means barracks. This was the living area for the unmarried military men out here. Somebody give me a guess how many military men were here? How many soldiers?

VISITOR: Five?

NIKKI: Five, and one guy lived next door, which makes six. This was the entire force living at the mission, and their life was very difficult. Like we said in the church, they were part of the community, and yet they were separate from the community. The men in the military were stationed to a cuartel, or to a mission. They would come for temporary duty, maybe a couple of months, maybe a couple of years, depending on how often they were forgotten about. And they were forgotten about, quite often. There was a separation of church and state. The men did not report to the priests; they actually reported to their corporal, the highest ranking officer, the guy who lived next door, who reported to the Presidio, which was the fort down in Santa Barbara.

We know life for a soldier was very difficult. Some of them did have family members; most of them were bachelors, similar to the military today. A private was paid about 290 pesos, almost 290 dollars, a year, not a whole lot of money. From that 290 pesos a private had to buy and maintain all of his equipment. He had to buy and maintain his uniforms, plus six horses and a mule that he kept at the ready. Then oftentimes, because he was living at the mission, he had to pay for the food and sometimes medical while he was here. Keep in mind these men were on temporary duty. They didn't always have the livestock and the gardens that they needed to keep themselves going. They were not members of the mission community. They were outsiders just living and working here.

Willie, why don't you try on this shield? Put your left hand through there, grab it with your left arm. Grab a lance. That's what the soldiers got to deal with in early California. They actually had to pay for their own shot, their own powder, and then they had to make their own bullets. Powder only came when they were lucky, when they could afford it, and when the ships were in. Life was pretty tough for these men, and then life was going to get much more difficult as the years went on. The years between 1810 to 1821 were the Mexican Revolution. Mexico was fighting for her independence. California remained loyal to Spain, but Spain had been so thinly stretched in her resources already, she pretty much turned her back on California. At the

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missions here, the soldiers, at the mission and also at the presidio, went for months, sometimes years, without pay. One of the priests wrote that the soldiers' uniforms were so threadbare they were actually becoming more naked than the Indians. Frustrations rose highly. These men were out here expected to do their duty, with no pay. They started relying more and more on the missions to support them. As they were asking for more support that meant the Indians had to work harder. The Indians were the workforce of the mission. As the Indians are working harder it's also a time when the missions are in a downward spiral. The Indian population is dying off. We have more and more straws put onto that camel's back and then finally that's got to break.

So in 1824 what happened was a Chumash man was whipped by a soldier over at Mission Santa Ynez. There was probably already a plan in place for a revolt to happen. The Chumash of Santa Ynez revolted, came over here to La Purísima, told them about the revolt, and the revolt started happening here. The Indians were able to round up the few soldiers, there was just a few of them remember, and their family members, and the next day sent them down to the Presidio at Santa Barbara. Basically the mission was run by the Indians for a month. There was one priest left behind; one priest went down to Santa Barbara. Then after a month, a whole garrison came down from Monterey dragging field cannon. We know there was a battle against the Indians holed up in the church. That's why we think the church was damaged at the end of the 1820s until it couldn't be used anymore. The soldiers did take the mission back. The mission tried to keep running, but unfortunately there was only ten years left before that secularization happened and that downward spiral just continued. Morale was at an all-time low, diseases were very high, high die-off rate, very, very difficult times. This colony was no longer struggling, it was not surviving, and it was heading downhill from then on out.

VISITORS: What is this here?

NIKKI: That is our field cannon, and we actually get to fire that about twice a year when we have our living history here. Remember, the soldiers were here for protection. They were also here to enforce the laws of Spain. Those laws were against murder and stealing, typical laws of a community. So the field cannon wasn't fired very often at the mission. What was used more often were things like whipping or stocks. And here's the stocks up here, if you'd like to follow me. The stocks here are different. You may be used to the stocks you've seen on the East Coast with the Puritans, where they put heads and hands in. That was public humiliation. I kind of like the way the Spanish thought, they actually put peoples' ankles in here so somebody would sit on the floor with their feet in here, their hands are free. They can still be doing things like preparing corn or shucking peas or getting food ready. They can still be working even though they're being punished at that time. We've been talking about food a lot, and let's go over to the padre's kitchen and see how that food was prepared. We're going right out here.

As we go on our way to the padre's kitchen, we're going to pass through the courtyard. And the chickens are out today. The courtyard here is very deceptive because it's very quiet right now. During the mission days, this is where life happened. Those rooms that you see are very dark. They're actually small. People did not live indoors in those days; when the sun came out, the people came out. A room was for storage and for sleeping. Everybody spent their day outside. They were much more used to their environment than we are. So this whole

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area would have been filled with people of all ages, from the smallest up to the oldest, spending their day working, talking together, gossiping, singing. Out here we would have had corn-grinding going on, baking bread happening in the horno. The carpenter would have pulled out his work so he had the natural light to work the wood with. The master weaver might bring out the children so they would have the natural light to work their wool. This is where life happened, and it was a very busy place out here. Let's go down and see how that food was prepared.

This was called the padres' kitchen, but it was actually a community kitchen also. This room had two functions. There would be Indian servants in here cooking for the priests and any guest who happened to come to the mission. Also, this was like a soup kitchen for the other members of the community. If somebody did not want to do their own cooking, they were welcome to come here and get a meal. Of course, the foods that they were getting were different from what the padres and the guests would be getting. Typical food for the upper class—the priests, the guests, maybe the corporal of the guard, the ranch foreman, people like that—would be meats, vegetables, breads, flour tortillas, wine, maybe an afternoon meal followed by brandy. Hot chocolate was the favorite drink of the day.

For the Indians, when they came to the community kitchen here, they were given two separate meals—one, atole, which was basically a gruel; they were given that morning and night. That gruel could be made out of corn, generally, could be made out of whatever they had. Think of it like a cream of wheat or an oatmeal. It was basically a cereal, a gruel. In the afternoon they would be given pazole; that could be a stew or a soup depending on how many days old it was. And depending on the time of year it was depended on what was in it; definitely vegetables, but seasonal vegetables—so squashes in the wintertime, carrots in more of the late summer, beans throughout the year. Depending on what they had available, it could have anywhere from zero to three or four meats in it, and a combination of meats was fine. So the community kitchen here was a place that people could come to. But the Indians, we think also, some of them at least, had their own gardens and, if they were able to, maybe even get a chicken or something like that. The beef, the horses, the sheep were out there. They belonged to the mission, but they were not at the disposal of the Indians. The mission would occasionally slaughter a cow and pass out the meat. The Indians were also given a measure of wheat every Sunday so they could make their own breads or flour tortillas.

Mostly what the Indians ate were the corn tortillas. Corn was a food that is from America, but it was not in California. The corn actually had to come from the priests when the Spanish moved into the area. So corn was grown, and it could be served a variety of ways. How they stored it was to dry it, and this is similar to the corn that they had in those days, not the great big ears of hybrid corn that we have today. Once it was dried, it stored easier, but then you always have to do a little extra processing with it. One of the ways to process it was to take it off the cob with an object called an oletara. And how this was worked, and the ladies in those days would be much better at it than I am, they would just rub it, and you can see the kernels just pop right off. Yes, they're going everywhere—popcorn, right? So this could be collected, the corn could be ground dry, and that's how you get corn flour if you want to make something like cornbread, which we make today. They wouldn't in those days. Or the corn is soaked, and it's soaked in actually a combination of water and lime. Not the limes of the citrus that you might be used to, lime that comes from stones, like limestone. It's soaked overnight, the corn kernels pop up, get all nice and mushy there. This is called nixtamal. Once it's wet, you can do wet grinding.

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And I'm going to ask one of you to come over and grind here pretty soon. The grinding was done with a mano and a metate. Spanish word for mano actually means hand. This was such an important tool, it was a third hand to a woman. And the object here is to use your wrists. So you're going to work back and forth, grinding that corn up, and all that wrist action. You don't want to go bang and down up, it's got to be a wrist action. Petra, would you like to come try this? Try that action in there. Now all the corn had to be ground when it was fresh to make into tortillas. Tortillas were eaten by the Indian community three times a day. They were also available for snacks. There was always one laying somewhere on a griddle; somebody could just walk by, grab it, and go on their way.

PETRA: How am I doing?

NIKKI: You're doing great; actually you're doing wonderful.

I should tell you a little bit about the room. There are a lot of stoves in here. Charcoal would be burned in here because wood just makes much too much smoke, but you might notice there's no chimneys in here. For this one there is, and that was typical if they were burning wood. Charcoal would be burned over here with no chimney at all. You can see the smoke goes right on up, it also goes through. The roof, you might notice, has a cane on top of it. That's arundo cane. It's a relative of the bamboo, and it was actually brought in by the Europeans to use as a roofing material. Above that we have the roof tiles, and they're not sealed tight so that smoke can go on up and out. You can imagine this was probably a pretty smoky area to work in.

This is called an horno. A fire is built in here, kept going for several hours until the heat soaks into the walls here, then the fire is pulled out, a piece of wet rag is used to wash the floor. The bread can be put directly on the floor there, and then a wooden door that's been soaked in water is placed in. The residual heat in here comes out to bake the bread. If you get it hot enough, you can actually get two bakings done.

A lot of the foods, what they could, were grown here at the mission, but sometimes they did have to import things. The mission tried to be as self-sufficient as possible, but, like we talked about, during that Mexican Revolution there was no support coming for the missions. The pay wasn't coming for the soldiers, extra foods weren't coming in. The mission always tried to get things like rice, or chocolate was a favorite import. Chocolate in those days were not the Hershey bars that we're used to, it was for hot chocolate. Cocoa was the drink of the day, especially for the upper class. So trade was very important to the missions, especially during those Mexican Revolution years. And we're going to go next into the priest's office and library, and I'll be able to talk to you more about that trade.

Welcome to the padres' bedroom. All the priests in California were Franciscans, so their bedroom is supposed to represent their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. This room represents Father Mariano Payéras, the man who was in charge of the mission at the time when the earthquake happened and was responsible for bringing it up into this canyon. We represent him by this pair of socks laying over on his chest. Franciscan priests were not allowed to wear socks, they wore their robes and sandals. But Payéras became so ill in his later years, he had a lot of trouble with his feet and so he wrote to Mexico City, again asking permission, this time to wear socks. He was given that permission, and he was actually one of

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the few priests in California who got to basically wear underwear. This room is very simple, just a few things for his needs. Keep in mind, again, this is a reproduction—we don't know exactly what Father Payéras had in this room. He probably did more work up in his office and his library, and that's where I'd like to take you to now.

Compare the furnishings in this room to the room you just saw. Does this look like a Franciscan room of poverty? Not too bad. The fun thing about this room is it doesn't have to show the poverty, because the office and the library would belong to the Catholic Church. They weren't under the same restrictions as their Order of Franciscans. So the church could have whatever they wanted.

The other fun thing about this room is it shows us the trade that was going on. Remember that Mexican Revolution of 1810 to 1821? Supplies and support stopped coming to the missions; the soldiers were not getting paid. Trade had to increase, but trade was illegal in those days—no colony of Spain was actually allowed to trade with a foreign country. They were supposed to sit and wait until a Spanish ship came out to give them supplies. But during the Mexican Revolution, those Spanish ships were very involved in fighting the war with Mexico. They just didn't even come out.

The missionaries sat out here waiting for help, waiting for supplies. It got to the point where they had to make a decision. Do they pack up and go home, abandoning their missions? Or do they start trading on the black market, illegal trading? Guess what they did—black market trading. You're exactly right.

Those 10,000 cows that were out on those 300,000 acres, they weren't grown for their meat. The beef was actually a by-product. They were grown for their hides and their tallow, which is the layer of fat right underneath the skin. The tallow was used for making soap and candles. It was also a trade item. The hides were the biggest trade item. Ships came from all over—England, Europe, China, America. And remember, America was a tiny little piece on the other side of this chunk of land. This was Spain. America would come out by going all the way around the tip of South America, come into California, and trade as much as they could. Americans would bring up chocolate from South America. They'd bring over cotton, glass, wax candles, all sorts of things, rice that they could pick up and they would trade. So the missions started becoming a melting pot of a lot of cultures. The Americans would bring in mirrors for the padres to trade with. The Chinese would bring in silk couches or even dishes. And what do we call dishes from China? China! It's one thing we can always remember. Rugs would come in from England. So a variety of countries would come, trade with the missions, and give them the supplies that they needed.

So what happened is, as what happens anywhere, men would jump ship and start staying here in this area, or throughout California. Remember, the missions were in decline at this time—the padres were struggling, as much as they could, to keep their communities going. They would trade, the men would jump ship, stay in, maybe help out at the mission or things like that.

Then, after the Mexican Revolution, Mexico took over California, but again did not help with the support of the missions. Mexico forgot about California, just as much as Spain had forgotten about her. The missions continued to struggle until 1834 when they were secularized, totally

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shut down. At that point, like we said, La Purísima was run by private commissioners, and then also ranches.

So what happened in California was now the era of the Dons—the big Mexican ranches running thousands of head of cattle on what used to be the mission lands. Mexico had such a weak hold on California, though, it wasn't too difficult for the guys who jumped ship to marry into Mexican families, have some of that land, start writing back to Washington D.C. saying, "California's a great place. We should be part of this nation." America at that time was starting to get ideas of Manifest Destiny. America was supposed to be from "sea to shining sea," and it wasn't long before they started gobbling up land, even going to war with Mexico with its weak hold on California—actually went to war over Texas but got California in the process.

We're going to go into the blacksmith shop next. I'm going to talk about that hierarchy of the priests, the craftsman, the soldiers, the Indians, and we're going to learn about the social status and more about the trade that was happening in California. So we're going to turn around, go right on out and head over to the blacksmith shop.

Well, this is the blacksmith shop. The blacksmith, the carpenter, the master weaver, the stonemason, people like this were the craftsmen of the mission. They would come when a mission was first being built, come up with the padres, the soldiers, a few Christianized Indians, and help build the mission by forming the tools, teaching the Indians the skills, building the mission as it went along.

These men worked for room, salary, and their board. So they were part of the mission community, and they were a very important part of that community. These men sometimes brought their families if they could, and that meant bringing their families from the civilization of Mexico, up into the wilds, the frontier, of California. It's fun to read some of the reports. At one time the padres here at La Purísima were in negotiations with a new carpenter for La Purísima. He had accepted the salary, room and board, but he was very nervous about bringing his family from civilization up to here until he could be guaranteed of two pounds of chocolate a month. Of course, we just talked about the trade and we know how difficult sometimes that was, and remember that chocolate was for hot cocoa, it wasn't Hershey bars. Of course there's no guarantee in the trade business, but we do think the carpenter did come.

The blacksmith was an important person, and he had a very difficult job. He had to bring his tools because you couldn't make a lot of the tools in those days. So things like an anvil, had to be brought in. But he could make some tools—just a simple chisel—and what the craftsmen did is they brought their tools, made the tools, taught the Indians how to use the tools properly, and then built the mission. When you think about it, everything had to be built by hand here at the mission. The Indians did it. When the CCC came along, they did it using the same techniques. A simple nail, that we go down to buy at the hardware store now, had to be made by hand. And in the mission days that meant shipping in the iron to make a simple nail. There were no ore mined in California, so all the iron had to be brought in by ship. Even when it was not coming during those Mexican Revolution days, they had to get it from somewhere, and every nail, every door latch, every handle, everything for the mission had to be created by hand.

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But there was more than just creating what the mission needed. There were the tools—shovels, hoes, picks, sickles, scythe—anything like that had to be created by the blacksmith. Iron was such a premium that when it did come in and it was made into something, if that, say a shovel, broke, it would not be thrown away. That shovel may be made into a hoe, taken down when that broke, maybe made into a door latch. When that broke, it would eventually get down to a nail, to something so small you couldn't use it anymore.

The craftsmen, while they were here at the mission were a part of that community. They were an upper class part of that community. Not as high as the priests, probably close to the soldiers that they could consider themselves on the same level of the soldiers. So the community of the mission—with the priests at the top, remember just two of them, the mayordomo, basically the ranch foreman underneath them, the corporal of the guard, the highest ranking officer, the soldiers and the craftsmen, family members, and then the Indians.

The Indians were the largest part of the population at the mission, and that's the one area we haven't seen—how the Chumash Indians lived. So I'd like to take you out to the village next, and we'll see and learn about the Chumash. Here we go.

Outside the Chumash home here we have a deerskin. We do know the Chumash would have a door, either a woven mat door or a deerskin door. We don't think, like the eastern Indians, they had their homes all arranged so the doors faced east or things like that, we're just not sure about the Chumash. But what we do know is that an open door meant the family was home, anybody was welcome to come visit. A closed door meant that the family wasn't home, there was no sense coming over to visit. When the Chumash came to the mission, they didn't stop their culture right away, it was a blending of cultures. Baskets continued to be made for a while. Acorns continued to be used, but over the years the priests, especially, and the craftsmen convinced the Indians to use more and more of pottery, woven blankets, things like that, instead of their normal clothes.

Acorns were a great food staple for the Chumash. They're a food that was readily available in early California. They're very high in protein, very low in fat, and actually most Native Americans' diet was just what we're supposed to be eating today, very good protein, low in fat. Things like deer, fish, rabbits are what the Chumash were eating, the seeds, the berries, the nuts. They would come into the mission, they had to change to things like corn like we ground up in the padres' kitchen.

Corn is not very good nutritionally. It's a lot of calories, but it doesn't give you the proteins and stuff that people need. Once the Chumash entered the mission they were doing a lot more physical labor than they used to before. The central coast here gave them plenty of resources—squirrel hunting and gathering, which really wasn't simple. It just was much easier for them and they had time for their things. When they came into the mission, they would change from their clothing, which was either skin or even grass skirts for the women, basically nothing for the men. They stopped weaving their grass mats, and started weaving wool into blankets for the mission and for their clothing.

The Chumash were an incredible people, like I said. They had their life, they had the foods that they have, they had the herbs that they used for medicine. They were doing fairly well out here, although we think their population was in decline when the missionaries came in. We'll

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never know if that decline was just a normal flux and flow of the population and they were going to recover. The missionaries came in, changed life in California forever, but we do like to remind people that if it wasn't the Spanish missionaries, it was going to be the French, it was going to be the English, it was going to be the Russians, it was going to be the Americans. History is filled with one group moving in on top of another group. The mission was a community, groups of people trying to learn to live, to work together, and to survive on the Spanish frontier.

Well thank you all for joining me. I had a wonderful time showing you La Purísima and showing you the community that was here. Please ask me any questions. And come back and see us again.

VISITORS: Thank you.

NIKKI: Thank you.

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