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# Family Preservation: A Professional Reform Movement

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*Family Preservation is examined as a manifestation of collective professional activity intent on reforming various aspects of the social welfare system. George Smelser's theoretical framework is used to analyze and interpret the emergence and development of the Family Preservation Movement. The article identifies societal problems which spawned the movement, the formation of a shared belief system, and the confirmation and sanctioning of those beliefs. Factors which mobilized increasing numbers of professionals to the cause, efforts which reflect collective action, and the conventionalization and standardization of the movement are discussed.*

Family preservation has emerged as a galvanizing concept cutting across diverse social welfare sectors and related helping professions. There are numerous perspectives on what family preservation means, and a wealth of opinions on what it has come to represent. According to Nelson, Landsman, and Deutelbaum (1990) it reflects an area of rapid growth in child welfare services. For Geismar and Wood (1986) family preservation represents an underutilized way of involving the entire family when working with juvenile delinquents. In the human services literature "home-based services", "home-based family centered treatment", and "family-based services" are additional phrases often used to describe family preservation programs (Pecora et al., 1987). Some academics and professionals choose to see the concept limited to short term intensive service programs that strive to prevent the out-of-home placement of children, while others adopt a more expansive family support orientation (Kammerman, 1990). In the broadest sense family preservation espouses a philosophy that most children's needs are best met by their natural families, contends that by helping parents to

more effectively function as caregivers and childrearsers, family and community life can be enhanced, and exhorts various levels of government to initiate and implement policies and programs to strengthen and support the well-being of families.

Despite the heightened prominence, rapid expansion, and increasing implementation of family preservation programs, reservations have been raised. Wald (1988) acknowledges a place for family preservation in the family and children's service continuum, but questions whether it is always congruent with the goal of child protection.

### Applying Relevant Sociological Theory

This article proposes that one of the best methods for interpreting and understanding the evolution of family preservation is to analyze it from a sociological perspective and interpret it as an expression of collective professional behavior. From this perspective family preservation represents a professional reform movement which seeks changes in policies, programs and practices primarily in the social welfare arenas of child welfare, juvenile and youth services, and mental health.

According to Genevie (1978), social movements are "collectivities that develop out of a desire on the part of a relatively large number of individuals to change or resist change in some aspect of the environment. . . ." (p. 00). The social welfare system functions as part of the larger society and as such is influenced by social movements occurring beyond its boundaries. Examples of external movements affecting social welfare are the Community Empowerment Movement (Boyte, 1980) and the Women's Movement (Zinn, 1980). The social welfare system also operates as a micro society within the larger social order and consequently is susceptible to movements generated by groups within its boundaries. The Patients' Rights Movement in mental health represents action on the part of an internal constituency to affect change on that system (Ziegenfuss, 1981).

Smelser (1963), one of the foremost modern theorists on the subject of collective behavior, describes it as "mobilization on the basis of a belief which redefines social action"

(p. 8). Whittaker (1991) sees family preservation prompting "fundamental changes in thinking in the family service and child welfare fields" (p. 294). Tavantzis et al., (1985) point out how home-based services for juvenile delinquents necessitates shifting one's focus from how problems arose to how they are perpetuated. For those involved in the movement, family preservation represents a novel means of shaping the interactions between clients and the service system particularly in terms of agency and worker responses.

Brown and Goldin (1973) see Smelser's conceptual work as focused on the long-range social movement in contrast to Turner's (1964) concentration on the short-term crowd and Goffman's (1961, 1967) emphasis on interpersonal interactions. Smelser's theoretical orientation, although open to a number of criticisms, is seen as having heuristic value for interpreting several decades of family preservation related work.

#### Adapting the Smelser Paradigm to Family Preservation

Smelser's (1963) theoretical model proposes a number of stages in an episode of collective behavior.

- First — the emergence of structural strains
- Second — the growth of a shared generalized belief
- Third — the confirmation of this belief by a precipitating incident
- Fourth — the mobilization of the collectivity
- Fifth — collective action and social control

In using Smelser's stages as a guide, one important distinction must be made. While his framework suggests the stages occur in a linear and sequential process, I assume the stages occur in an overlapping and even simultaneous fashion. It is the conceptual distinctions and the general process proposed by Smelser's stages, and not their hypothesized temporal order, that is most useful in making sense of a host of historical and contemporary events related to family preservation. Therefore, this article recasts Smelser's stages as dimensions of an episode of collective behavior.

*The Emergence of Structural Strains*

Census data from 1970 revealed major shifts in family composition, new dynamics underlying family formation, and expanded labor force participation by female adult family members. Nearly 1 in 8 children were living in one-parent households, just under 11% of all babies were born to unmarried women, and over 42% of all women were working outside of the home (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970).

From a contemporary vantage point these figures can be seen as harbingers of trends that would only accelerate over time. In the 1970s these changes were viewed in one of two ways: either the family was on the verge of dissolution and might no longer be able to play its traditional role in biological, social, and economic reproduction (Hobbs, 1975); or, it was a viable institution that could accommodate and adapt to this new set of social circumstances (Bane, 1976).

Increasing attention was paid to American family life in general and on families being served by the welfare state. Over time a host of initiatives included under the mantle of parent empowerment served to demonstrate that the policy and program needs of middle-class parents, and their expression in the form of family support services, were really not that different from the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged parents (Stehno, 1986). This helped establish the relevance and merit of broad-based family support services for the poor, an idea central to family preservation.

The Family Preservation Movement emerged in response to one particular structural strain on the social welfare delivery system—the failure to address the needs of vulnerable families and the resultant emphasis on out-of-home placements in foster care, residential facilities, group homes, etc., for children from those families.

The negative consequences of public agencies using placement as the primary response to vulnerable families have been documented by a number of researchers, theoreticians, and clinicians in child welfare, juvenile justice and mental health. Scholars have cited a number of potential problems with foster care and foster care drift beginning with Littner's research

(1956) and followed shortly by Maas and Engler's (1959) seminal study. The research of Geiser (1973), Knitzer and Allen (1978), Fanshel and Shinn (1978) and the work of Persico (1979) demonstrated how the foster care system in the child welfare arena had failed to provide many children with permanent living situations. Glueck and Glueck (1950), Alexander (1974), and Tolan et al. (1986) argued that intrafamilial issues had to be considered and dealt with when responding to delinquent acts committed by youth, and showed that working with the family can have favorable outcomes. Anthony (1974), Minuchin et al. (1978), and Tattler et al. (1982) all voiced similar concerns that emotionally disturbed children could be best helped by working within the family system and avoiding institutionalization.

Structural strains have been sustained as a result of the sheer scope of the problems with which the social welfare system must contend. According to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1.8 million cases of abuse and neglect were reported in 1991, a figure more than double that of a decade ago. The foster care population nearly doubled in size between the early 60s and late 70s—going from approximately 245,000 in 1961 to around a half million children in 1977. Then, after a modest decline in the late 70s and early 80s—attributable in large part to reductions in the length of time spent by children in substitute care, and not really a result of less children entering the system—the foster care population was on the rise again by 1983 (Pelton, 1990).

The child welfare sector had unwittingly established financial incentives for placement, creating monetary strains. The 1961 Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) Foster Care Amendments to Title IVA of the Social Security Act authorizing matching funds to states for children from ADC eligible families placed in foster care as a result of judicial determination of need (McGowan, 1990). Towards the middle of the 1980s a number of government officials became exceedingly anxious over the spiraling costs associated with substitute care payments (Smith, 1987). State executives, legislators, and budget analysts caught in a tight financial squeeze brought about by the long-term fiscal consequences of Reaganomics, and desperately looking for places to trim state outlays, identified the uncapped and

open-ended character of foster care payments as a way to cut costs (Bruner, 1988).

There continues to be ample evidence of these structural strains taking an enormous human and monetary toll. In an environment characterized by increasing reports of abuse and neglect, adolescent and child mental health problems, and juvenile offenses, the consequences of overlooking the real concerns and basic needs of families and emphasizing placements have taken on a heightened urgency.

### *The Growth of a Shared Generalized Belief*

During the period of time the strains were being identified, a shared generalized belief began to surface among disparate groups of human service professionals. They contended that working with families and trying to keep them together as opposed to separating children from their parents would be better emotionally and developmentally for young people (Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit, 1973, 1979).

One particular historical trend reinforced the growth of this shared belief. This has been the increasing awareness and acceptance within the helping professions of viewing families as systems and the more widespread employment of specific family centered services, therapies and counseling techniques. In the social service sphere the famous St. Paul Family-Centered Project responded to the collective needs of multi-problem families from 1948–1968 (Horesji, 1981). Pavenstedt (1967) reinforced the importance of involving the entire family system when working with multi-problem families. During the 1970s and early 1980s a small number of primarily private providers transferred these principles in the course of working with families deemed at risk in order to avoid placement of children in substitute care (Hutchinson and Nelson 1985). For professionals working in child welfare the concept of “permanency planning” suggested a means of overcoming the problems associated with placing children in foster care (Maluccio et al., 1980). Bryce and Lloyd (1981) compiled a composite portrait of how to conduct family centered practice in the homes of families to prevent placements.

Minuchin and his associates (1967) at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic applied systems theory and forged structural family therapy as a way of effectively responding to families mired in poverty and faced with juvenile delinquency. Alexander's and his colleagues' work with delinquent youth and their families in the early 1970s at the University of Utah showed how family focused interventions could ameliorate a number of family problems and greatly reduce recidivism (1973, 1977).

In mental health during the mid-1960s multiple impact therapy was employed as the basis for intensive work with families in crisis (MacGregor et al., 1964). Also, during the mid-1960s a number of therapists including Pasamanick, Scarpitti, and Dinitz (1967) and Langley and Kaplan (1968), showed that either in-home or out-patient family treatment minimized the need for hospitalization, reduced the length of hospitalization, if necessary, and linked the family to other services they needed. Various practitioners such as Bellack and Small (1965) and Mann (1973) demonstrated the effectiveness of short-term and focused therapy with outpatients.

Even though there was little, if any, cross-fertilization among these similar efforts in the various sectors, cumulatively these program and treatment orientations in mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice helped pave the way for the foundation of the family preservation belief system. The belief system, as it has coalesced, is predicated upon a growing professional consensus that every child should grow up in a permanent family, and proposes that the best way to accomplish permanency is by working with all family members in order to preserve families and prevent the placement of children outside the home. Family preservation accepts the fact there will be instances where substitute care is needed, but this option should only be exercised after all other viable alternatives have been exhausted. Yet, even if placement is necessary, every effort should be made to reunify the family as quickly as possible.

Whittaker (1991) articulates the tenets of the family preservation doctrine and distinguishes it from the traditional approach in the field of child welfare. Family preservation calls for shifting from a child rescue to a family support philosophy.



Treatment ideologies under family preservation help families meet their essential needs in more natural settings, such as the home, by way of imparting life skills and linking them with environmental supports as opposed to employing "personalistic psychologies" designed to assess and resolve the pathologies of individual members. The belief system promotes the establishment of a service continuum to overcome the deficiencies of an inflexible, wasteful, and redundant delivery system based on categorical programs.

A set of values directly tied to the philosophy have evolved to guide family preservation practice. According to Maluccio (1991) the principles held in esteem are: people can change; clients should be regarded as colleagues or partners; the worker is responsible for instilling hope; families need to become empowered; the worker needs system support.

With a cogent philosophy and core set of values the shared generalized beliefs of the Family Preservation Movement have gradually gelled.

#### *Confirmation of Belief by Precipitating Incidents*

A number of precipitating incidents involving the needs of children and of families served to confirm professionals shared belief in ideas that are basic to family preservation. These incidents led to the passage of Public Law 96-272, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, which helped sanction the value and importance of the family preservation approach.

The emergence of the "children's rights movement" as detailed by Gross and Gross (1977) brought the concerns facing young people in our society to the attention of the general public, policy makers and professionals, and suggested means of improving delivery systems, institutional practices, and laws. The campaign and election of Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976 cast the spotlight on family issues, since Carter had made the strengthening of families a major thrust of his election effort. Steiner (1981) interprets Carter's emphasis on the family as a surrogate for efforts in the child care and child development arena, lead from the outset by Walter Mondale, and as a spinoff of the policy work stimulated by the Moynihan analysis of the black family.

The difficulty in coming up with solutions to these vexing problems and the challenge in building broad based political support for competing solutions didn't diminish concerned parties belief that governmental responses to these issues were necessary. A cadre of elites was engaging in creative synthesis regarding the challenges confronting poor and troubled children and families. According to Diamond (1983) early on in the Carter Administration members of Congress, opinion leaders, intellectuals, social welfare advocates, and bureaucrats searching for ways to assist children mutually reoriented their thinking and analysis and settled on the family as the basis for improving the lot of children. The renaming of the old Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Office of Child Development to the Administration for Children, Youth and Families no doubt represented this shift in perspective. Steiner (1981) identifies a similar transformation in the work of the Carnegie Council on Children and the National Research Council's Advisory Committee on Child Development. Both groups shifted from their original early 1970s charge of examining children's and social service concerns to issuing reports in the mid to late 1970s that instead spoke to the needs of families and the creation of family oriented policies. Professional journals mirrored the interest in the family. Entire issues of *Daedalus*, Spring, 1977, the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, August, 1979, and *Social Work*, November, 1979 were devoted to family policy (Dempsey, 1981).

Congress had begun to deal with specific child welfare matters prior to the election of Carter. Senator Alan Cranston introduced legislation in 1975 on adoptions while Representative George Miller was tackling problems in the foster care system. Representative Miller was able to obtain substantial support within the House for a draft statute primarily aimed at overcoming the foster care system's emphasis on separating children from their parents (Pine, 1986). As the Carter Administration became entangled in the complexities of trying to formulate a cogent family policy, responding to children in need of parental care was eventually chosen as the core element (Steiner, 1981). Taylor (1981) offers a cynical interpretation of this decision, arguing that the overwhelming nature of support in the House

for the foster care reform draft legislation prompted Carter's staff to make it the centerpiece of their family policy effort. Regardless of the reasons stimulating interest, once the executive and legislative branches were sufficiently smitten with the idea of child welfare reform the stage was set for ongoing legislative activity.

Pine (1986) traces the political intrigue and maneuvering behind the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, P.L. 96-272. Employing Heclo's (1978) concept of the "iron triangle", Pine documents how the combination of attention and activity by congressional staffers serving on the Senate Committee on Human Resources, the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth and Public Assistance, and the House Judiciary Committee, top level bureaucrats working in the federal Children's Bureau, along with interest groups such as adoptive parent organizations, the Children's Defense Fund, and the Child Welfare League of America laid the groundwork, created the momentum, and forged the strategy for the development and approval of the legislation.

The legislative intent of P.L. 96-272 was to alter the way in which the public child welfare system was serving dependent children suffering from abuse and neglect (McGowan and Meezan, 1983). It was written to support and preserve the integrity of families, reduce the number of children "drifting" in the foster care system, set guidelines for permanency planning, and reverse those federal financial incentives which had made foster care placement an immediate and seemingly advantageous choice in response to abuse and neglect cases. The law sought to keep families intact by preventing the unnecessary separation of children from their parents, and emphasized the importance of providing services to support and strengthen families in an attempt to avoid removing the child and placing him or her in substitute care.

The passage of P.L. 96-272 simultaneously affirmed family-based reformist sentiments and established the broad policy legitimacy for family preservation by calling for widespread system reforms and spearheading the establishment of family-centered programs consistent with family preservation philosophy and values.

*The Mobilization of the Collectivity*

Much of this mobilization occurred against the backdrop of continuing interest in the family by politicians at all levels of government during the 1980s. At the federal level legislation touted as supporting the family was regularly introduced and lauded, and the idea of supporting the family became one of the few available issues around which politicians from across the political spectrum could rally. Yet, the variety of means advocated to render assistance to families reveals very different economic, political, and social ends. For example, most politicians pronounce support for child care programs but disagree about whether the government should manage the service or provide parents with tax breaks and let them choose their own provider. Upon closer inspection, the "family political agenda" has generally consisted of a mix of initiatives aimed at diverse classes or special groups and has quite often contained an implicit ideological perspective (Mannes, 1990).

Mobilizing the collectivity for the Family Preservation Movement meant getting more and more policy makers, administrators, and direct service workers to create and implement family preservation programs. Several sources have helped make this happen throughout the decade of the 1980s.

The Administration on Children, Youth and Families within the Department of Health and Human Services has used policy-implementation demonstration grants during the mid to latter part of the decade to foster the expansion of family preservation programs.

Federal funds have also been used to support the creation and ongoing operation of the National Resource Center on Family Based Services at the University of Iowa School of Social Work. The Center's efforts to expand the application of various family centered approaches throughout the country have also brought an understanding of and support for family preservation to human service policy and program staff (1980, 1982, 1983).

The creation of a National Family-Based Services Association, the establishment of state chapters of the association, and the holding of a growing annual national conference to

bringing the believers and the curious together have also served to energize a collective group of professionals.

The establishment of regional efforts such as the Family Preservation Institute at the Department of Social Work at New Mexico State University have also contributed to rallying support for the reform movement and advancing the movement's cause.

The primary mobilizer, though, has been the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. Peter Forsythe, Director of the Program for Children at the foundation, has provided the impetus for much of the attention and activity. For Forsythe, "Family preservation services can revolutionize the way we think about helping children and their families." (Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, no date). In order to accomplish this objective the foundation has provided massive financial support, estimated in the neighborhood of thirty million dollars, to highlight and promote family preservation. A generous portion of the Clark financial commitment to family preservation has gone to the Behavioral Sciences Institute, the organization that provides training and technical assistance for one specific intensive family preservation model known as "Homebuilders." The foundation has also sought to secure the participation of policy elites. Funds have been given to strategic organizations such as The Center for the Study of Social Policy, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the Child Welfare League of America, and the Children's Defense Fund. The Clark Foundation initiative has advocated for the establishment of family preservation programs at the state and local level, provided seed money for the start-up of new programs, disseminated instructional programs describing how to apply the concept, and trained direct service and management staff in administrative and practice techniques (Nelson, 1988).

Without the financial muscle and strategic planning of the Clark Foundation it is highly unlikely that the degree of activity surrounding family preservation would be as extensive as it is.

### *Collective Action and Social Control*

A groundswell of group action representing the Family Preservation Movement is evident in the exemplary and creative

program implementation work in numerous states including New York, Arkansas, Maryland, California, Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan, Missouri, New Mexico, Tennessee, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Connecticut (Frontlineviews, 1990). The result of these numerous state efforts has been to actively involve an ever increasing group of social welfare employees in family preservation work.

Even though Smelser acknowledged control exists to some degree in every phase of collective behavior, social control was assigned to the fifth and last stage of his framework and was seen as an attempt by those in power to dissipate the changes precipitated by the collective action. Another theorist of collective behavior, Turner (1964), defined the processes of social control in more appropriate terminology directly relevant to the Family Preservation Movement. He called it "conventionalization as control". For Turner, society's continuous attempt to reassert institutional order serves as a constant force for conventionalization. Reform movements run counter to the prevailing orthodoxy and the rules of the game, and even though they operate on a different belief system and propose a new way of doing business, the newly emergent norms of a reform movement are eventually "drawn into the traditional institutional framework of society" (Brown and Goldin, 1973, p. 145).

In the context of the Family Preservation Movement the process of conventionalization can be noted in the introduction of several pieces of family oriented legislation in the 101st and the 102nd Congress as well as in bureaucratic efforts to promote standardization and institutionalization as family preservation programs are increasingly implemented.

Golden (1990) identifies two approaches to fostering reform and change in the public sector that can help us appreciate the normalizing effect of the proposed legislation. The Policy Planning Model consists of "innovative ideas carefully refined into statute and policy" (Golden, 1990, p. 220) wherein conformity and compliance are promoted through the use of controls and incentives. The emphasis here is on rational thought and the careful planning and crafting of specific policy ideas. In contrast, the Groping Along Model represents experimentation and exploration wherein new ideas are tried out in applied settings and adjustments are made based on what is learned.

It is the interplay of experiences and adjustments that characterizes the Groping Along Model. The proposed legislation shifts the Family Preservation Movement away from its historic "groping-along" character and aligns the continuing evolution of it with the Policy Planning Model. The proposed legislation strives to formalize in statute what has been to-date a "bottom-up" expression of innovative and reformist collective action.

Introduced, though not passed, in the 101st session of Congress were, H.R. 5020, known as the Family Preservation Act of 1990, H.R. 5125, labeled the Children and Family Services Act of 1990, and S.3174, understood as a bill to amend Title IV of the Social Security Act. These three pieces of legislation would among other things have mandated such statewide services as preplacement prevention, family preservation, reunification, and aftercare; established a new uncapped entitlement effort to offer intensive family based crisis intervention programs for children at imminent risk of placement; and created a new entitlement program supporting the preservation and strengthening of families and avoiding the need for foster home placements. In the 102nd session of Congress similar pieces of legislation have been introduced. S.4, the Child Welfare and Preventive Services Act, would amend Titles IV, V, and XIX of the Social Security Act to establish innovative, preventive child welfare and family support services in order to strengthen families and avoid placement in foster care. As part of the effort to elicit state action several million dollars is to be set aside for states to conduct pilot projects to improve program coordination and focus a range of services on meeting the needs of children and families. H.R. 2571 would promote family preservation and the prevention of foster care with an emphasis on families where substance abuse is occurring, as well as the improvement of child welfare, foster care, and adoption services. Even though none of these bills have been approved, there is widespread agreement that a major piece of child welfare reform legislation with family preservation as a central component will eventually pass the Congress.

It is useful to contrast the role of these current legislative proposals with the role played by P.L. 96-272. While the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act emerged in response to a

number of precipitating incidents and served to confirm ideas central to the Family Preservation Movement, the proposed bills appears to reflect the process of conventionalization at work. Differences appear to be based upon the point in the movement's evolution the various legislation emerges and how it relates to circumstances and events at those points in time. P.L. 96-272 arrived on the scene when there were a relatively small but growing number of fledgling or isolated family preservation programs in operation, and the statute served to legitimize expanded awareness, interest and program development. The current crop of legislation appears after a great deal of institutionalization has occurred at the state and local level, is being considered precisely because institutionalization has occurred, and aims to promote conventionalization.

Meanwhile, bureaucratic forces will continue to be at work to enforce standardization and institutionalization. As social service agencies from various levels of government implement greater numbers of family preservation programs, they will be under enormous pressure to establish uniformity and consistency in the services being rendered. The eventual development of bureaucratically driven rules and regulations for the programs will emphasize discipline and conformity (Merton, 1968). The ascendancy of institutional order will be at work through the processes of cooptation to diffuse the reformist sentiment underlying family preservation and make the approach a part of "business as usual". The ability to withstand these potent forces will be a challenge. This is one reason why radical reformers often fear and fight conventionalization, even if it means they will not be acceptable to the mainstream.

Standardization is also being promoted from within the movement itself. The enormous financial resources supporting the dissemination of the Homebuilders Model contributes to its being seen by many as the singular approach to family preservation.

For the Family Preservation Movement, the combined effect of these legislative and bureaucratic actions will be to foster conventionalization. As family preservation programs shift from being the novel and the outlier to the more mainstream and widely accepted approach, the movement needs to consider



if and how it can avoid, or even resist, the consequences of being associated with or becoming a part of the status quo.

### Conclusion

The Family Preservation Movement has or is currently experiencing all the dimensions of an episode of collective behavior consistent with the Smelser paradigm. The Smelser framework has demonstrated heuristic value in helping to interpret and clarify the evolution of this professional reform movement.

The social welfare arena is replete with reform movements. Some have their origins within that arena while others have external roots. These reform movements' influence upon the dynamics and substance of policy formulation, program design, and service delivery is often enormous. They deserve the attention of scholars and practitioners. Those interested in trying to understand how expressions of collective professional behavior and professional reform movements develop and grow are encouraged to make use of frameworks and theoretical concepts from the social movement and collective behavior literature based upon their explanatory power for the Family Preservation Movement.

### Note

1. The article was written by the author when he was an assistant professor in the Department of Social Work at New Mexico State University and Director of the Family Preservation Institute.

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