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THE DAILY GAZETTE | Monday, April 9, 2018

# LOCAL LIFE



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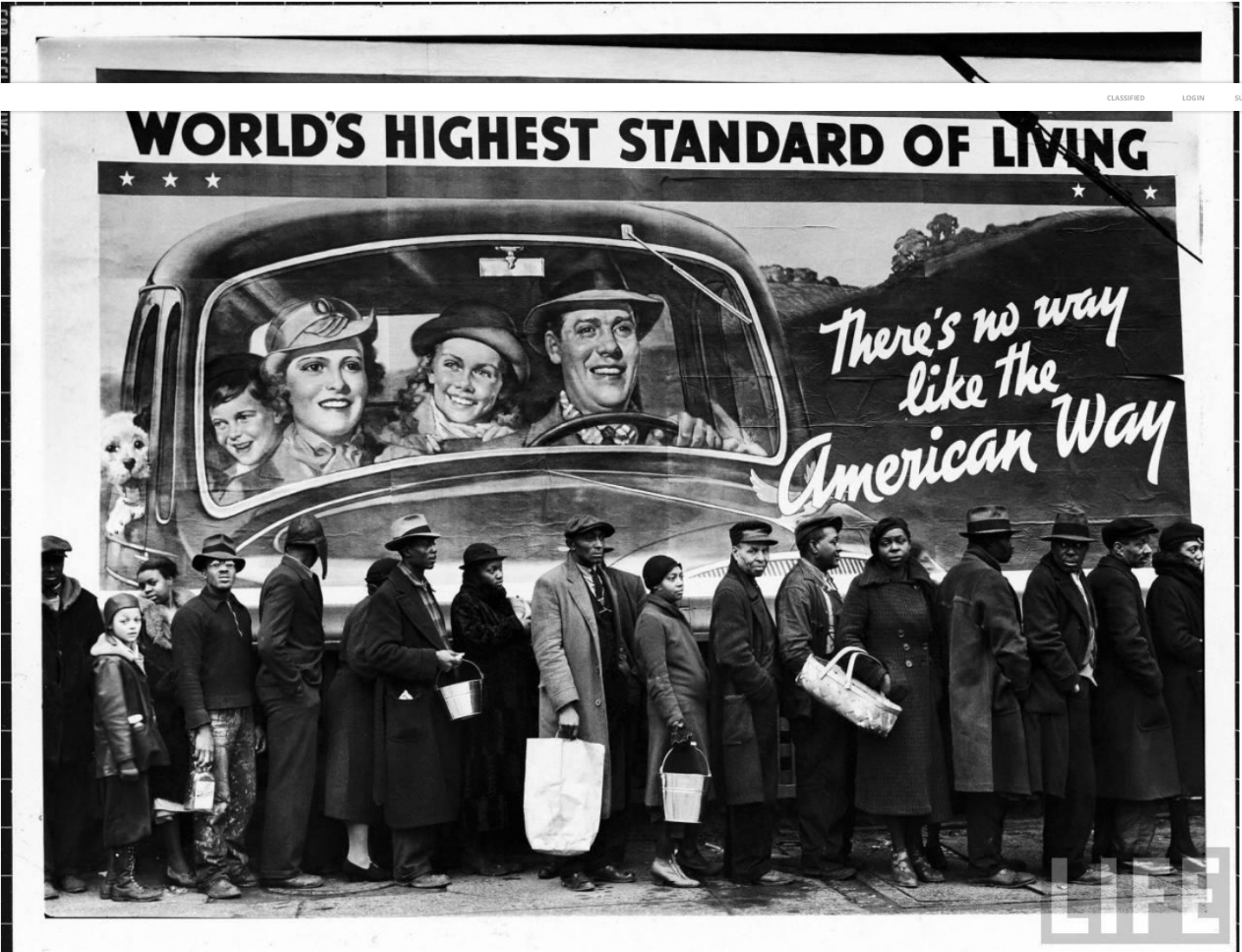
## Filmmaker's work reveals black lives in new ways

For decades, Don Perry's favorite people lived only when someone opened a family photo album.

Jeff Wilkin | June 7, 2015



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This photo taken in 1937 during the Great Depression shows a line of black people standing in front of a billboard promoting the 'American Way,' defined by the advertisement as a carload of smiling white people and their dog. The photo is included in '...

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For decades, Don Perry's favorite people lived only when someone opened a family photo album.



Men and women framed inside old pages smiled at wedding receptions or near the Christmas tree. They wore neat suits and smart dresses, and posed at the dinner table or on the front porch. Older photos, from the Civil War era, showed proud men in military uniforms.



The photo subjects in the old photos were all black. Perry, a resident of Warwick, believes much of America of another time would have never thought such scenarios possible — black people living the good life and living with honor and dignity.



**'Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People'**

WHEN: 7 p.m. Monday



WHERE: Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs



HOW MUCH: Free

MORE INFO: [www.skidmore.edu/mdocs/storytellers-institute/](http://www.skidmore.edu/mdocs/storytellers-institute/)

These scenes are part of the film "Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People," which will be shown Monday at 7 p.m. in the Payne Room of Skidmore College's Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery. Perry, who wrote and helped produce the film, and director Thomas Allen Harris will be on hand to discuss the images and meaning of the film, which lasts 93 minutes and includes 950 images.

The screening is part of Skidmore's inaugural Storytellers Institute, an academic-artistic summer program for the documentary arts. Family is the theme, and family photos are a big part of "Through a Lens Darkly."

Inspired by the book "Reflections in Black" by photo historian Deborah Willis, the film features the works of photographers such as Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, Clarissa Sligh, James Van Der Zee and Gordon Parks, among others. Perry talked enthusiastically about the film — and what it can teach people — during a question-and-answer interview.

Q: What are people going to see in this film?

A: People are going to see images that were really never meant to be public. These are family photographs, this is how they began their lives, they were supposed to commemorate special events, special occasions. Basically, what they're going to see is a slice of American history that has been totally absent from the public record.

They're going to see black peoples' lives in a way that has rarely been depicted in media and film, and they're going to see a history that for most people is going to be brand-spanking new.

Q: Can you give us some examples?

A: Photography as an art got started in 1839, most people are familiar with Louis Daguerre and the daguerreotype. What they would not have recognized was African Americans were responsible for bringing that technology to New Orleans and really beginning commercial studio photography in the states as early as 1840. The images they're going to see are of a multi-cultural world where blacks and whites — free blacks and whites — were engaged together building a country.

You're going to see images of incredibly well-dressed, well-to-do African Americans on par with people like the Gamble family of Procter and Gamble. When most people thought of African Americans of the 1850s, if they had any images at all in their minds, it was going to be images of enslaved people or it may have been people like Sojourner Truth or Frederick Douglass, who were quite prominent in photographs of that era and actually used their photographs as a way to advance the cause of African-American freedom, but what's different is they are not alone.

There's this idea in America of exceptionalism, particularly among African Americans, "Oh, there's only one person we can show, that will be Frederick Douglass or Sojourner Truth," but what these photographs show is that they weren't the exception, there were many, many people.

Q: What are people doing in the photos?

A: You've got families sitting at dining tables, families on the porches of their homes. You've got people celebrating weddings, you've got people at the parks, people at the beach, people doing things. And the one reason they're extraordinary is because we've not seen black subjects doing this in pictures in these various time frames, whether it's the 1850s or the 1860s, 1870s, right up to the present day.

They're going to see images of African Americans serving this country going all the way back to the Civil War . . . this is not "Glory" or the 54th Massachusetts regiment. What they're going to see are black Civil War officers, they've never seen this kind of image before. They're going to see blacks, 600,000 who served in the Civil War at every rank in every part of the service from Navy people to infantrymen.

They're going to see the contribution of black soldiers fighting for ideas of liberty and justice, even when they were being denied those things, in every single conflict this country has been in.

Q: Where did all these photos come from?

A: That's the beautiful part about this film. The historical archives where you would expect to find images like this never valued black subjects, so a lot of the archives don't exist. But the one place you can find the archives is in the family photographic albums, so a lot of these images have been collected, certainly by archivists around the country and they've all been extensively listed in our credits, but more importantly, we created this project called "Digital Diaspora Family Reunion," which will be taking place in Albany and Saratoga Springs where people can put their own family records into this digital history. This family photo album that we're creating, we used "digital diaspora" as a way to find images that weren't findable.

Q: What will watching this film teach people?

A: The major take-away that people will have, that we hope they have, is finally to understand the construction of race — the fact that race doesn't exist, the fact that there is only one race and we're all part of it and it's called the human race.

Q: During sessions after the film is shown, what kinds of questions are you asked?

A: They run in two camps. For a lot of our Anglo audience, it's "I never knew that. Why was this hidden from me as a history and what haven't we seen these images?" From African Americans, it's really more of a further affirmation, it's a "Thank you — thank you at last for finally showing the kinds of things that we know exist because we have these things in our family albums."

Q: What are your favorite images in the film?

A: Oh my gosh. I think very early on, when we start the film, there's an incredible set of images of very successful-looking black men. If you could slow the images down and really take in the fullness of them, these men are impeccable, their clothing is impeccable and this is like 1855. The reason for that, and what people don't realize because they don't have access to the back story, these are black Mississippi planters who have come up to Cleveland to sell their crops, and because Cleveland was a more sophisticated place, they had second homes there, they were extremely wealthy and it shows in these photographs.

Q: Any other messages in the movie?

A: What we're trying to do, in another subtle kind of ploy, is to show people that the very images they may be curating right now on their cell phones are exactly the kind of images that 200 years from now, future film makers and future historians will be looking to in order to better understand who we are. This is exactly what we're doing with these photographs.

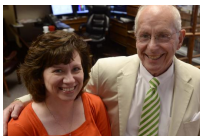
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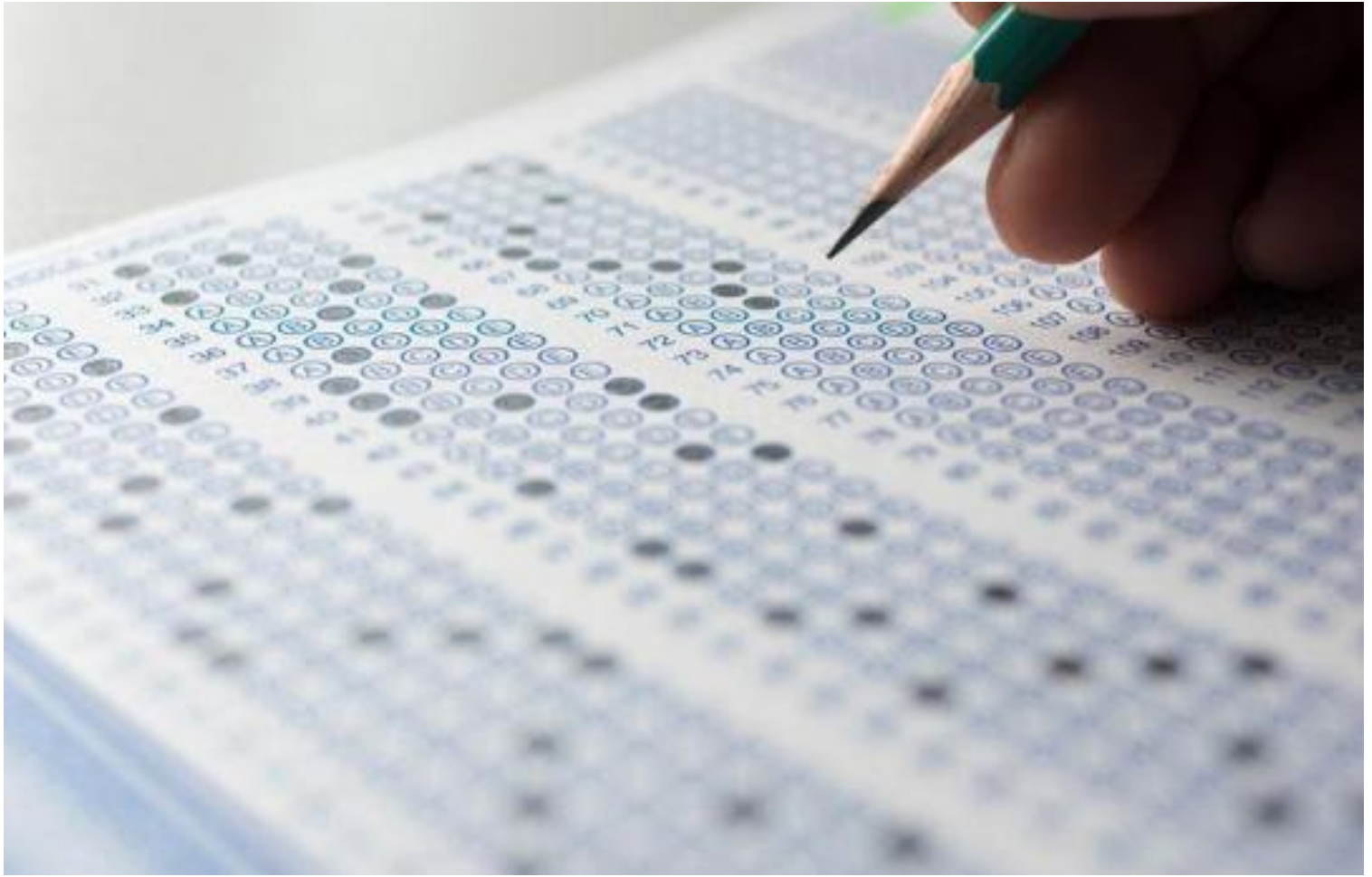
The big house on the hill



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## The big house on the hill

By all accounts, E.W. Rice, president of the General Electric Company from 1913 to 1922, was a quiet

Bill Buell | May 31, 2015







Abbe Hall, now home to the Office of College Relations at Union College, was the first house built in the GE Realty Plot in 1900 for General Electric president E.W. Rice.

PHOTOGRAPHER: PETER K. BARBER

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1 of 5 The former living room at the Rice Mansion, now Abbe Hall, serves as meeting space for the College of Office Relations at Union College.

By all accounts, E.W. Rice, president of the General Electric Company from 1913 to 1922, was a quiet and unassuming kind of guy.

His residence at the northeast corner of Lenox Road and Union Avenue, however, has always had a much more commanding presence. Now known as Abbe Hall and home to the Office of College Relations at Union

College, the building that was once Rice's is one of the biggest in the GE Realty Plot.

The house, the expansive lawn and lengthy stone wall encircling the grounds are all shrouded in trees, giving visitors the sense of a great Adirondack camp as opposed to a prominent city dwelling.

Built in 1900, it was one of the first homes finished in the GE Realty Plot, a section of land just east of the college campus that was purchased a year earlier from Union by the newly formed Schenectady Realty Company.

"Rice was a fisherman, he loved the Adirondacks, and I also think he wanted to let people know that his home was the promontory of that real estate," said Julia Kirk Blackwelder, who addressed GE's history in Schenectady with her recent book, "Electric City."

"His was the largest plot of land, and I think that stone wall was supposed to tell you, 'hey, you're in Rice land just in case you didn't know it.' From his house, he looked down over the city."

But while Rice's residence was quite grand, he had a much more modest manner in his personal interaction with people. He was also quite an effective company president.

"He was not at all a gregarious person," said Blackwelder. "He was, however, a talented engineer and one of the few who combined that with some managerial skill. I argue in my book that without Rice in the early years of General Electric, the company would not have become the technical powerhouse that it did."

Rice's home sits on a parcel of land covering 3.7 acres, and includes a carriage house. The main structure has two main meeting rooms while also serving as office space for about 55 Union College employees.

Built in the classic Queen Anne style with an exterior covered in dark shingles, the house was acquired by the college through a bequest in 1976, when it was known as the Parker-Rice House. Rice's daughter Mabel and her husband, Philo W. Parker, had been the last family members living in the house, but the couple spent most of their final years in their New York City home.

Renovation on Abbe Hall began in 1999 with the help of a financial gift from 1949 alumnus Robert T. Abbe and his wife, Virginia, and it opened as the Office of College Relations in 2003 with its new name.

"It was very important to Abbe and his wife that they restore the house to its original look as much as possible," said Frank Taormina, past president of the Schenectady County Historical Society and a 1950 graduate of Union College.

"When Abbe agreed to finance the place, it's my understanding that he did so with the stipulation that the college would not alter the building at all. He wanted it left just like Rice had left it."

Abbe, a former General Electric employee who had homes in Lake George and Peabody, Massachusetts, died earlier this month, while his wife passed away in 2012. Their concerns about Rice's residence, his house and the carriage building have all been honored by the college, according to Loren Rucinski, director of facilities and planning at Union.

"Great care was taken to keep all of the original details of both buildings, both on the exterior and the interior, including removing, restoring and re-installing the hand-painted wall covering on the first floor," said Rucinski, who has worked at the college since 1986. "The college continues to maintain this property in great shape. It's an important place for alumni to visit and meet."

While Abbe Hall will be part of the GE Realty Plot Tour on June 6-7, the college and the GE Realty Plot Association have had their differences in the past. In 1999, when the college announced plans to begin using the building, many neighbors in the area resisted, complaining that their property value would suffer.

"We envision a gracious building for alumni and college personnel with the comfortable decor of its time," Abbe said in a Union College press release in 1999. "The house and the grounds have great potential and, once the project is completed, they will be an asset to both Union and the neighborhood."

Rice would have appreciated Abbe's sentiments, and would have wanted his neighborhood and the college to be on good terms. While not a college graduate himself, Rice's father had been a member of Union's class of 1850, and in 1906 Rice became a college trustee and often donated his time and money to the school. He did it all in his typical, low-key manner.

"He was a quiet leader, and there was nothing egotistical or unethical about him," said former GE employee George Wise, another local expert on GE history. "You never heard one bad word about him. He had integrity, and he was very happy to stay in the background and let other people take the credit and become famous."

Reach Gazette reporter Bill Buell at 395-3190 or bbuell@dailygazette.com.

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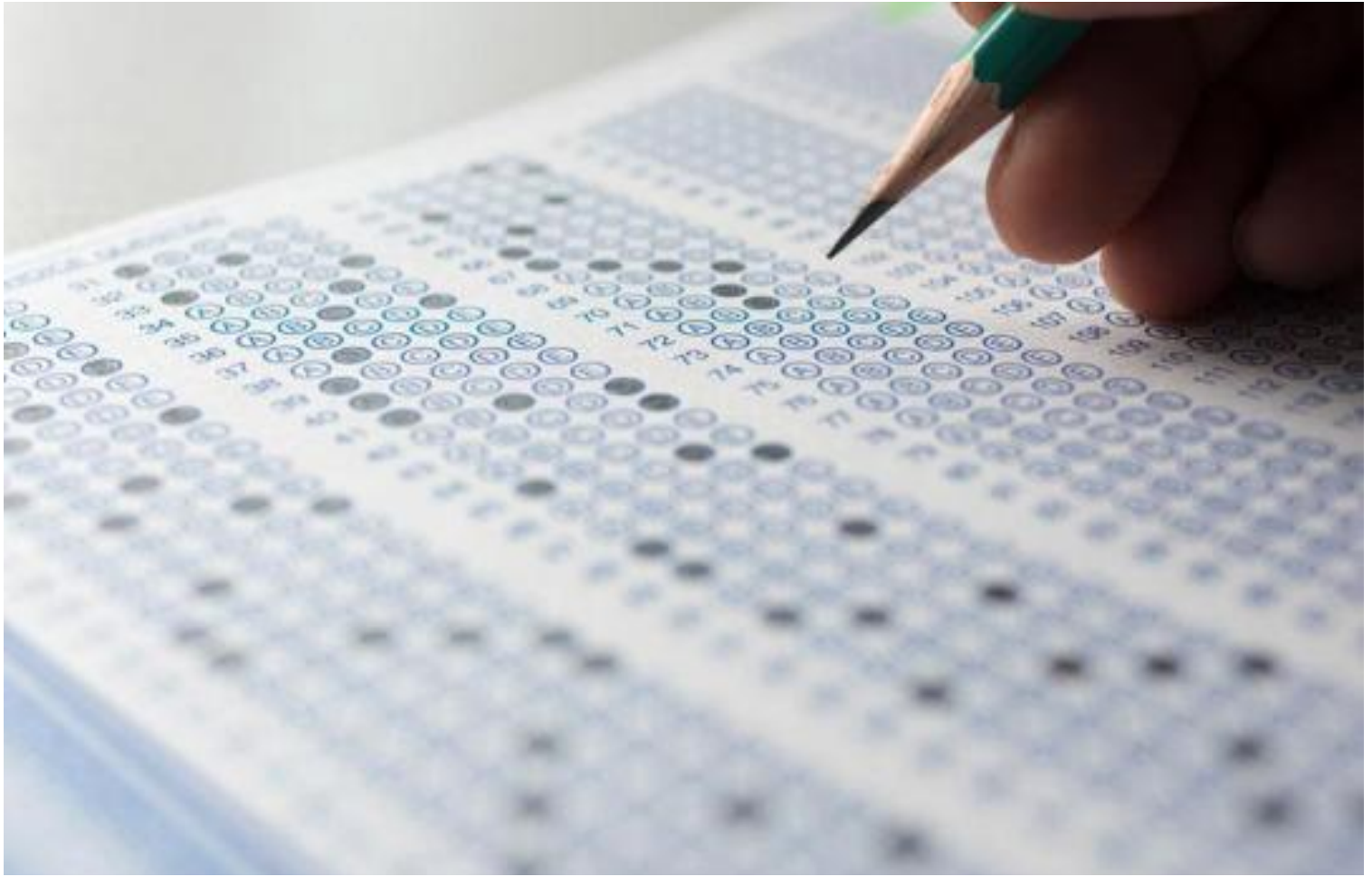
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