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Stair Power

What, exactly, makes a staircase? In Pittsburgh, the answer can get a little complicated. You'll find steep steps, short steps, a single step, and steps to long-forgotten destinations. But despite their differences, they all lead to the same place: the heart of Steel City.



Laura Zurowski has set out to climb—and snap a Polaroid of—each of Pittsburgh's 739 public outdoor stairways.

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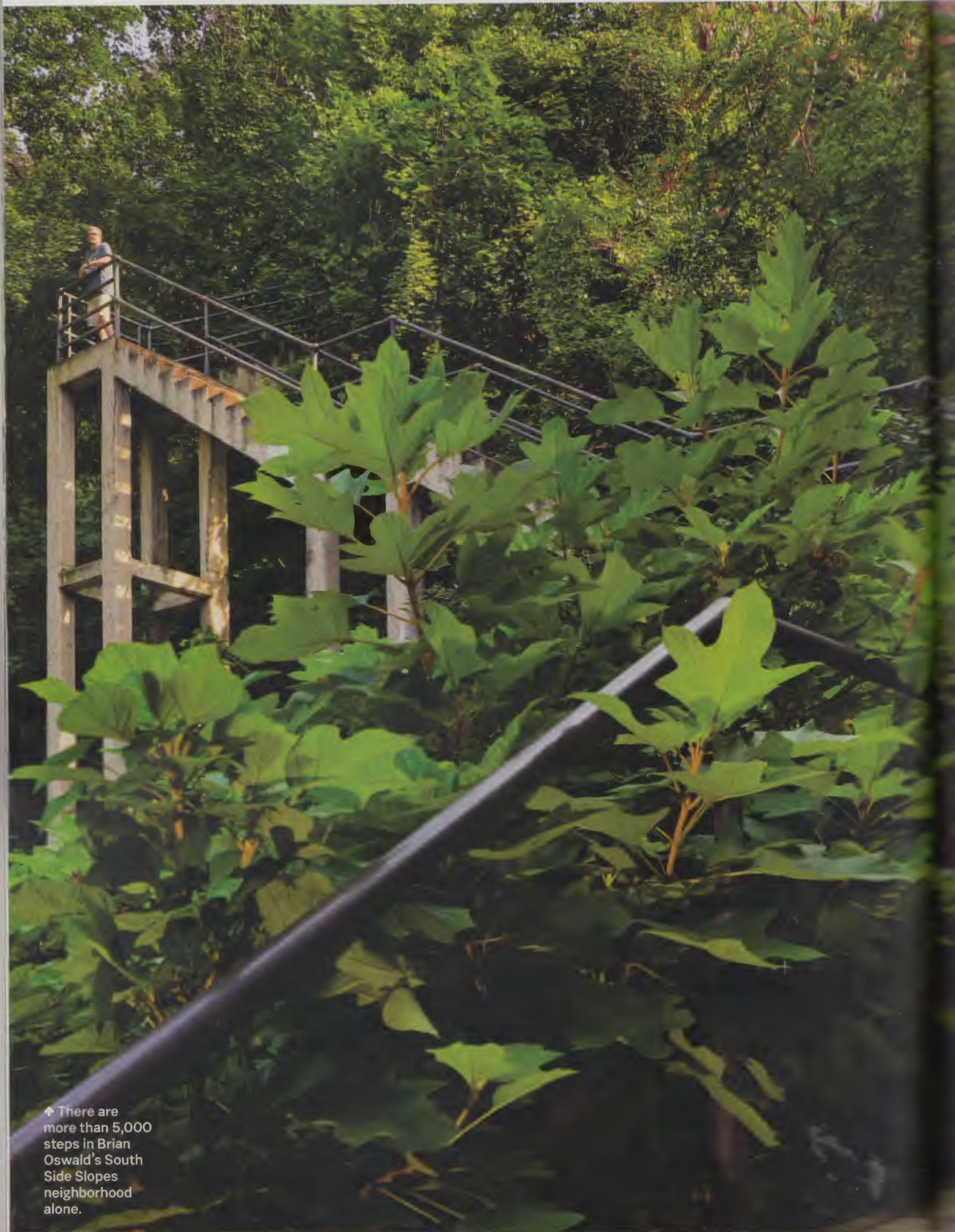
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↑ There are more than 5,000 steps in Brian Oswald's South Side Slopes neighborhood alone.

By **Bill Fink**

Photography by **Luke Copping**



More than
45,000 steps
tell the story
of where
Pittsburgh's
been—and
where it's going.

STAIR POWER

MISHKA LOOKS at me with pleading eyes, begging me to join her on her journey. She glances eagerly up the 250 steps that wind past well-tended homes and gardens toward a church at the summit of what some folks in this Pittsburgh neighborhood call “Holy Hill.” It’s like she’s been waiting to show me her city’s secrets. Or perhaps she just wants some help chasing squirrels.

“Yeah, Mishka is an eager one for the steps,” says Brian Oswald, who owns the Australian cattle dog mix. “We’ve gone up and down every one of the 68 stairways in the neighborhood. And with four legs, she really sets a pace.” Oswald, the chairperson of StepTrek, Pittsburgh’s annual stair-climbing event, is guiding me (with help from Mishka) along his favorite stairway route.

The more than 5,000 steps in Oswald’s South Side Slopes neighborhood are only a small subset of Pittsburgh’s epic public stairway network. The 739 outdoor stairways cover the city’s hills with more than 45,000 individual steps, comprising 24,545 vertical feet in all—approaching a Mount Everest’s worth of elevation. They’re the single greatest assembly of outdoor public staircases in America, and perhaps the world.

We hustle after Mishka up the church-covered

slopes of Holy Hill and are rewarded with expansive views of Pittsburgh in the springtime. Fresh blooms burst from trees beneath towering church spires, flowers radiate colors in elegant yards, and hillside greenery reaches down to meet the sprawl of the city. Oswald gestures proudly across our view. "Isn't this amazing? These steps show off Pittsburgh like nothing else."

The hills and rivers reveal a surprisingly green side of the city, while old warehouses, rail lines, and closed factories give it a Rust Belt feel, and the downtown skyline shows today's Pittsburgh at work. Interspersed through all of this are thousands upon thousands of 6-inch steps.

To understand these steps and the people who use them is to understand Pittsburgh's past, present, and future. Why are there so many steps? And how many can I climb on my visit before Mishka and my other local guides wear me out?

WITH DISHEVELED gray hair sprouting from his head like Pittsburgh hillside shrubs in winter, 79-year-old Bob Regan, the "God-

father of Steps," looks every part the eccentric retired professor that he is. He's come to meet me in a local library, wearing an old, stained sweat-suit, to preach his gospel of stairways and share his inspiration for writing the bible on the topic.

Regan's fascination with Pittsburgh's steps began 20 years ago as he rode his bike around town and saw them everywhere, wondering where they all went. He says he soon "became obsessed" with the topic, and with the compulsive focus of someone with a Ph.D. in geophysics, he decided he was going to map, climb, and count the city's stairways. Every. Single. Step.

At the time, in the late 1990s, nobody—including the city of Pittsburgh—had an idea how many stairways there were in town. Many had collapsed; others were overgrown with greenery or covered in muddy landslides. In the days before Google Maps, this search for lost stairways on the hills and in back alleys was almost like an urban, modern-day version of rediscovering Machu Picchu.

So Regan took two months' leave from his work as a professor at the University of Pittsburgh and set off on his bicycle with some paper maps to search for steps. He mapped them, including their location and additional details, using geographic information system technology.

But it was still a low-tech process, Regan recalls. "One day, I had the insight that bus stops tended to be correlated to the endings of stairways, so I followed the bus routes around and discovered new sets of stairs." In a way, the joy of



discovery was similar to 1860s Scottish explorer David Livingstone following the Nile to its source.

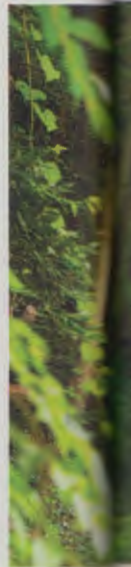
"I think this was the happiest time of my life," Regan says.

He cataloged and counted as he went, first compiling his work in notebooks and then publishing a book in 2004 with the comprehensive results. His *Pittsburgh Steps* (revised in 2015) is considered the definitive guide to a new generation of Pittsburgh stair-climbing enthusiasts, not to mention city planners, historians, and visitors.

Still, there's debate about exactly how many stairways there are. Regan says 739; the city government count is more than 800. Given the difference, I ask Regan a philosophical question: "Just how many steps does it take to make a stairway?"

He smiles and pauses, and like a Zen master replies, "If the setting is right, all you really need is a single step." He reminisces about a hill in town rising from the South Side's Eleanor Street. Someone had installed a single concrete step in the middle of a slippery slope, creating a "stair along the way." That was enough, in his mind, to call it a stairway. For Regan and other urban step enthusiasts, a public stairway is defined as an open thoroughfare with stairs connecting public areas (versus, say, steps to someone's porch or backyard, or a stairway to a building entrance).

Showing that, despite his science background, he's still a bit of a romantic, Regan recommends





(Left) Bob Regan, a retired professor, cataloged all of the city's steps in a 2004 book. Brian Oswald (bottom right) chairs the city's annual stair-climbing event, StepTrek. Both men are among the many locals who embrace the stairways as an integral part of Pittsburgh's identity and history.



I go see one of his favorite stairways. At the secluded intersection of Romeo and Frazier, two streets transformed into stairways meet in the woods like secret lovers, whispering the true story of the city's past.

FOR CARS, Romeo Street is now a dead end in the South Oakland neighborhood, but I walk past the barrier, down 57 steps, to a telephone pole marking the intersection of another

Laura Jean McLaughlin (right) is turning some staircases into art installations with her mosaic project. Laura Zurowski (below) is creating a collection of staircase photographs and “biographies.”



stairway with the street sign “Romeo” hanging from it. It isn’t the most well-kept set of steps—trash is scattered beneath the stairs in the hillside scrub, and the houses and apartments at the top of each path look similarly bedraggled. I follow the steps to their base, continuing on the flats until I reach the Monongahela River. One hundred years ago, this would have been a typical commute to the riverside steel mills, docks, and warehouses where the bulk of the city’s population worked. “The stairways were essentially a mass transit system,” Regan writes in his book. During the



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1880s, when Pittsburgh developed into a major commercial center, prime real estate was along the river, where steel mills connected to shipping traffic. Cheap lodging, back then, was up in the hills, where many new immigrant workers built shanties on land too steep for farming and too far from the river for commerce. But because of this, nobody spared the time or expense to carve roads in the hills. So steps it was. They were mostly wooden, with some built by the city or private employers to help workers commute, and some built by neighborhood residents using wood scraps.

By the early 1900s, more than a dozen mechanical inclines—cable-pulled rail cars ascending steep slopes—were built to bring people up the hills, but many workers desperate for money opted instead to climb a thousand steps, more than a mile uphill, to save the 5 or 10 cent incline fare. They did this after working for 12 hours in front of hot ovens in the steel mills. "Imagine how utterly amazed these guys would be," Regan says, "if you told them that nowadays people actually pay money to join gyms for the privilege of walking up

stair-climbing machines going nowhere."

With the decline and closing of Pittsburgh's steel mills beginning in the 1970s, resulting in the decrease of the city's population, many neighborhoods and the stairways that served them fell into disrepair or disappeared entirely. But the steps are far from becoming a historical side note. Today, as Pittsburgh's revival continues with new businesses, jobs, and residents, efforts are underway to revitalize these old stairways.

The Heinz History Center, an expansive museum full of exhibits about the city's ties to mining, mill, and steel, provides a more detailed view of the city's development, with a healthy dose of stairway background. And yes, it even has its own six-story stairway to explore, with displays and individual steps annotated to highlight notable pieces of Pittsburgh history.

IT'S A POST-APOCALYPTIC scene: Trees and vines grow through sidewalks and the blackened windows of abandoned homes. Fire hydrants are almost fully buried under decades of silt. Sun-bleached beer cans lie scattered along the trail like bread crumbs left from a drunken Hansel and Gretel.

Along the stairways, handrails have been broken into jagged steel toothpicks. Solid concrete steps have severely cracked, their internal iron rebar sticking out like rusty bones, while crooked gaps line the path like missing teeth, with the few remaining steps covered in a green-black mossy plaque. Blocking my way, a weathered wooden sign declares "Stairs Closed" in faded red letters.

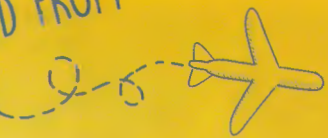
"This is so neat!" Laura Zurowski is all smiles as she surveys this scene going up the 57th Street steps above the Lawrenceville neighborhood. "It's like urban archaeology. Doesn't it make you wonder about who these people were, what they were doing, what they were thinking, living here, climbing these steps every day?"

A leading disciple of Pittsburgh stair culture, Zurowski has adopted the Instagram handle @mis.steps as she undertakes her own multiyear, interpretive journey along the vertical pathways of Pittsburgh.

She moved to the area five years ago from Poughkeepsie, New York, attracted to Pittsburgh's affordable city life. While working remotely as a writer and editor, she decided the stairs were a great way to explore her new hometown. After reading Regan's book on the topic, she made it her mission to walk every one of the 739 stairways he listed. But she didn't want to just visit them. She wanted to turn the endeavor into a journey of creation rather than a trek to tick boxes off a list.

So she has embarked on the Mis.Steps project,

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a multimedia documentary of her experience encountering the steps and the environment around them. She visits a new set of steps nearly every week, taking a single Polaroid photo and writing her impressions of each setting, posting her perspectives on Instagram and her blog, and using the combination to create and publish a semi-annual, CD-sized trading card set with photos and “biographies” of highlighted stairways. So far, Zurowski has covered about 200 of the stairways.

Along the wreckage of lost staircases, we come upon a set of eight “orphaned homes,” abandoned houses with no street access—only stairways. We peer into the yards, with Zurowski speculating about the broken toys strewn among the weeds at one house and the lace curtains fluttering out the shattered window of another. It’s a fertile ground for imagination—as well as knotweed, an invasive plant rapidly overgrowing empty lots.

“It’s like *Land of the Lost* in here,” she says, shaking her head.

We cross a single street, descending another staircase, and it’s a shock what traveling a single block can change in Pittsburgh. Urban renewal has hit this area, with tidy, freshly painted homes, each with a panoramic view of the Allegheny River.

It’s this positive turn in Pittsburgh that inspires Zurowski to share her passion with others. In the fall and spring, she leads monthly stairway tours in conjunction with a local cider house. The “Stair Stepping and Cider Sipping” tours bring out history buffs, locals eager to explore their neighborhood, fitness fanatics, and tourists who come to see for themselves how “scenic” and “Pittsburgh” can indeed belong in the same sentence.

FOR THE TIRED steel workers trudging to and from work along the stairways, the steps were simply the path between home and

“If the setting is right, all you really need is a single step.”

work. But now, the steps themselves are becoming the destination—for the views, for the history, and recently, for the art.

Inside The Clay Penn, an art studio in Pittsburgh's Garfield district, sculptor Laura Jean McLaughlin is reimagining Pittsburgh's steps, one half-inch mosaic tile at a time. As I enter the art space, walking carefully between large clay sculptures, tool-filled project tables, and cat beds, I see one of her assistants cutting colorful tiles for use in a mural.

“We've got the design. We've got the materials. We're just waiting for Department of Public Works

approval for the installation,” McLaughlin says of her upcoming 54-stair design project. (She adds that the city must also complete some repair work.) “We're doing everything at cost here. I just want to see it happen.”

What is happening is the transformation of broken-down old stairways into art installations. McLaughlin's experience in creating and helping install public art mosaics in the Pittsburgh area caught the attention of the South Side Slopes Neighborhood Association in 2015.

Eager to bring some joy to their local stairways, the association

began a crowdfunding campaign to pay for McLaughlin's team to pull together the materials to create a mosaic that would cascade down a series of 77 steps. Then it took a full community effort over three months to help design and install every one of the more than 7,500 tiles. The stairway at the intersection of Josephine and 27th streets came to life with a folk art rendition of idealized city life set amid the nature of Pittsburgh's forested hills.

Around the city, other neighborhoods are adding their own artistic touches to the stairways, from etched steel signs to colorful murals. Even simple new paint jobs are making a huge difference. Some adventurous guerrilla artists are getting into the act, adding incongruous decorations to staircases far from the beaten track. Taken as a whole, the stairway art is slowly turning this primitive mass transit system into a surprising sort of public art exhibition.

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THE SOUTH SIDE SLOPES neighborhood that hosts McLaughlin's mural has become the epicenter of Pittsburgh's step scene. Not just because of the area's concentration of 68 stairways, but also for the community involvement in maintaining, improving, and highlighting the steps.

Brian Oswald—who, with Mishka, provided my introduction to the steps—moved to Pittsburgh 14 years ago before buying his home in the South Side Slopes in 2008. An outdoors and hiking enthusiast, he took to climbing the stairways. “It’s kind of like a big Chutes and Ladders game around here,” he says. “When I first started exploring my neighborhood, I’d start climbing a twisting stairway without any idea if it was long or short, or what sort of street it would lead me to. It was a good workout and fun adventure.” Nowadays, he says he’ll pass “dozens of people” hiking up and down the steps on any good weather weekend, folks just enjoying the stairways as recreation.

After settling into his new home, Oswald joined the South Side Slopes Neighborhood Association as a way to socialize and meet people. He soon got involved in the annual StepTrek event, eventually becoming the program’s chairperson and helping guide the use of the raised funds. “I never thought, as a physician assistant, that I’d be learning the technical terms for concrete stair foundations and handrail welding techniques, but here we are,” he says, laughing.

StepTrek, now in its 18th year, is the quintessential immersion into the stairways of Pittsburgh. The fun run and walk, happening Oct. 6, ascends three different routes covering more than 2,500 steps (more than 4 miles) with about 1,400 feet of elevation. Along the way, the hundreds of participants learn about the history of the neighborhood through informative signs and route maps. They’re

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also treated to snacks, great views, and even a few open houses by real estate agents.

The funds raised by the event go toward maintaining and improving the neighborhood's stairways, from basic repairs to the addition of signs, lighting, and art.

After seeing this groundswell of interest in the history and future of the stairways, Pittsburgh's city government is beginning to dedicate additional resources to maintaining the steps. "I think they're finally recognizing that the stairways are a feature of this city that we should be proud of," Regan says.

As a first step, the city's Department of Mobility and Infrastructure conducted a comprehensive "Citywide Steps Assessment" this year. It collected nearly 1,500 surveys from residents, studied other step-filled cities like Cincinnati and Seattle, and researched design strategies and materials.

After the study, the department issued a report recommending a list of stairways to be repaired in partnership with the Department of Public Works. Kristin Saunders, the city's principal transportation planner, says they learned during the outreach program that "residents considered the steps to be part of Pittsburgh's cultural and neighborhood identity."

In a few days of dedicated stepping, on my own and with guides (both human and canine), I'm able to explore only a small portion of the stair network. But I can easily sense the civic pride Saunders talked about—both in the workers long ago who built and used those steps, and in the effort by so many to preserve that legacy. By the end of my trip, I feel like Mishka, pulling at my time-constrained travel leash with a desire to keep climbing. Maybe there's another hidden stairway out there. I wonder where it might lead.

Bill Fink is a freelance writer in Oakland. Email him at wbfink@gmail.com.

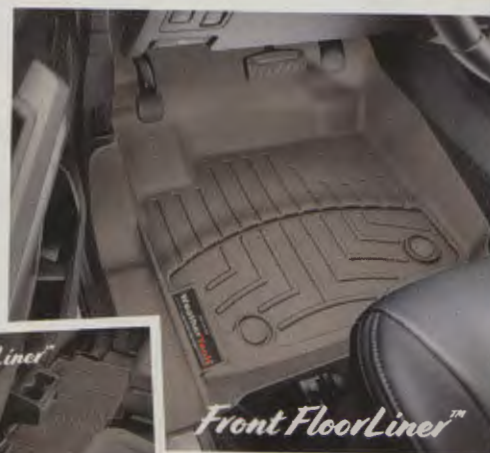
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