

**The New York Times** Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



November 27, 2010

# Relics of Film and Paper Retain Their Grip Even in a Digital Era

By JEANNE CARSTENSEN

I recently saw some of my family's home movies from the 1940s and 1950s for the first time.

The scenes were captured on color film, but I fired up my laptop to watch the men felling Douglas fir trees and my teenage dad skiing the slopes of Mount Hood. I got this new look at my own history because my highly organized sister had transferred the old reels onto DVDs.

If I have my sister, San Francisco has Rick Prelinger, one of the country's premier archivists and an outspoken advocate of open access to information.

Mr. Prelinger is the founder of the [Prelinger Archives](#), a celebrated collection of "ephemeral film" — industrial, educational, amateur and other film and video footage. The [Library of Congress](#) acquired the bulk of the archive in 2002, but Mr. Prelinger continues to collect footage, with a focus on home movies. With his wife, Megan Shaw Prelinger, he also runs the Prelinger Library in San Francisco — an eclectic collection of out-of-print books, periodicals, government publications and other printed matter.

Mr. Prelinger's annual [Lost Landscapes of San Francisco](#) event (Dec. 16 at the Herbst Theater) is a sort of home-movie night for the entire city.

Compiled from a vast assortment of footage, much of it uncovered by Mr. Prelinger in musty basements, Lost Landscapes weaves together an evolving selection of what he calls "unedited straight actualities" from around the city, mostly from 1906 to 1978.

Watching the scraps of life from decades past — workers protesting in front of the Ferry Building in the early 1900s, a huge Civic Center crowd awaiting the arrival of [Charles Lindbergh](#), Key System cars zipping along the lower deck of the Bay Bridge in the '40s — is mesmerizing. Their unpolished quality makes the history they depict seem intimate and approachable.

Lost Landscape is presented by the Long Now Foundation, which was created by Stewart Brand and others to promote long-term thinking. Like Long Now, Mr. Prelinger wants to jolt

people out of what he calls “presentism” — the myopia that’s encouraged by cultural trends like the constant documentation of the moment with digital devices — so they’ll start caring about the future.

“I’m not a nostalgia-minded person,” the archivist told me. “I’m interested in using images of the past to help us think about the kind of city we would like to live in.”

One of the most captivating sequences in *Lost Landscapes* is a long take filmed from a street car moving down Market Street in 1906, just weeks before the great earthquake. Nothing special happens, but it is fascinating to watch the chaotic movements of horses, pedestrians and a few cars weaving down the street in a series of near accidents. When it ends, the audience cheers.

“I love it when people applaud unedited material,” Mr. Prelinger said. “It shows that naked documentation of history can rivet people’s attention.”

Indeed, [a version of the Market Street footage](#) set to music by Air on YouTube has been viewed almost two million times, and the original clip was recently screened on “60 Minutes.” (The *Lost Landscapes* programs are also available free on the Internet.) Yet more recent and dramatic moments on Market Street — the World Series victory parade a few weeks ago that drew a crowd of hundreds of thousands, for example — are likely to look less interesting as history, even though there is a mother lode of digital imagery from the event.

For one thing, most of those cellphone videos won’t be around 50 years from now. The paradox of the information age is that the digital technology that enables it is also highly degradable — and the sheer volume makes any given bit less exceptional and thus less worthy of preservation.

As the archival scholar Howard Besser has pointed out, more-tangible material tends to “persist over time,” whereas “the default for digital information is not to survive.”

Mr. Prelinger says the value of today’s digital records will depend partly on what the future has in store. For example, “if the oceans rise by 2100 and we lose the San Francisco waterfront, documentation of that will be kind of precious.”

In the meantime, Mr. Prelinger warns, if you’re interested in the long-term record, don’t throw out that original film when you make digital copies.

With those words ringing in my ears, I called my sister. At least for now, she has the box with the reels of celluloid. And I have my beloved DVDs.

*Jeanne Carstensen is a managing editor at The Bay Citizen.*

*[jcarstensen@baycitizen.org](mailto:jcarstensen@baycitizen.org)*