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The Torres family is having a party, and I'm watching it happen. Balloon animals bounce around, a young boy makes a face, and a woman in pink pants and a matching shirt jumps around, delighted by the camera. When someone filmed the Torres' tables overflowing with half-eaten platters in the 1970s, they didn't know this footage would be seen by hundreds of San Franciscans in 2019. But here we all were.

For 14 years, the filmmaker and archivist Rick Prelinger has made an annual movie from found and archival 20th century footage like this, as part of his "Lost Landscapes of San Francisco" series. Hosted in recent years by the Long Now Foundation, an organization that supports "long-term thinking," the screenings are meant to be rowdy affairs, where audience members call out what they recognize when confronted with the landscapes of the past.

For the most vivid sense of a time you didn't live through, don't look to narrative films, said Stewart Brand, the co-founder of the [Long Now Foundation](http://www.longnow.org). "You get most ... from impromptu, amateur, family-type stuff; things done for no reason entirely."

Some of the images in “Lost Landscapes” were viscerally familiar—the first, a close up of the Golden Gate Bridge, inspired knowing shouts. The waterfront Ferry Building rose unmistakably from the fog. Tommy’s Joynt, a *hofbrau* that opened in 1947 on the corner of Geary Street, drew whistles. And the audience could spot the “Chop Suey” sign outside Chinatown’s Far East Café from several blocks away. Long-gone landmarks were just as recognizable: the loathed Embarcadero Freeway, which was torn down before I was born; and Sutro Baths, now in ruins, then filled with water.

The movie managed to be nostalgic without slipping too far into revisionist history. Still, an interview pulled from the 1974 film “Redevelopment: A Marxist Analysis” recalled apartment building rents rising to \$255 a month—a stat that drew chuckles from today’s audience. Cable cars stuffed with commuters criss-cross the movie version of the city, recalling a time before fares were hiked to \$8 and “real San Franciscan” riders hadn’t yet been replaced with tourists.

The most powerful moments were the more intimate scenes: the plop of raindrops in gutter puddles; a man sleeping on a boat in the harbor; women in cardigans walking dogs along the Presidio; the Torres family, celebrating who-knows-what. Disembodied from context, the scenes could have felt disembodied from place, but they didn’t. To me, even as a newcomer to this city—maybe especially as a newcomer—those memories felt as much a part of San Francisco’s identity as the Golden Gate Bridge.

There’s a lot the impromptu can’t reveal, however. On screen, San Francisco’s 1945 VJ-Day celebration is all about soldiers whooping and hollering off the side of streetcars and dipping women down for kisses. The rest of the day would devolve, said Prelinger, into off-screen murders, rapes, and assaults, leaving 11 dead, 1,000 injured, and streetcars upended, according to SFGate. Later on, we meet a wealthy Japanese dentist playing golf with his suited-up friends. He filmed several of his outings, Prelinger said, until he was detained in an internment camp during the war. When he got out, the videos resumed. The middle years are left blank.

But that’s the nature of archives. They’re incomplete, and selective, and subject to the lens of the person recording. They’re also profoundly important—not so we can put the past on a pedestal, but so we can remember it, and build some kind of better future from its remains.

—Sarah Holder