

The Internet Archive: Finding Lost Things on the Web

by Peter McCracken

While writing the previous column about Web 2.0 and user-generated content (*Sea History* 119), I thought a good balancing column would discuss ways of finding sites that no longer exist. The relevance of this idea became clear to me a few weeks later when the host for web sites I've maintained online for a dozen years suddenly removed all my content. Using the **Internet Archive's "Wayback Machine,"** which I'll describe below, I was able to recover the information I had lost, and I will, eventually, repost it on a site I control, rather than a site managed by someone else.

I also recently used the Wayback Machine to locate the defunct web site of a potential landlord. A search on Google returned information that identified the site, but clicking on the link or typing in the URL repeatedly returned a "site not found" error. Using the Wayback Machine, I could find what his web site looked like several years ago and could thus figure out how this potential landlord had presented himself in the past.

The Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>) is a collection of many tools, including the Wayback Machine. Go to <http://www.archive.org>, then type in a URL, such as <http://www.unc.edu>, and the Wayback Machine will show you what the University of North Carolina's web page looked like back in 1997, or in 2000. The Wayback Machine is impressive in that it contains more than eighty-five billion pages, but it does have a number of limitations. It works by taking a regular snapshot of a site, perhaps as often as once a day in some cases. That obviously doesn't work well for sites such as Amazon, YouTube, CNN, Craigs List, and many of the largest and most popular sites, which liter-

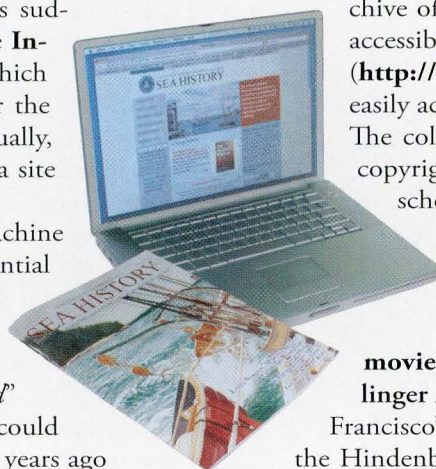
ally change from one moment to the next. Some sites won't show up at all. Also, it may take as long as six months or a year between the time when a site is 'viewed' by the Wayback Machine and when that version is posted online.

In addition to the Wayback Machine, the Internet Archive offers a collection of over 200,000 freely-accessible digitized books in its **Text Archive** (<http://www.archive.org/details/texts>; it's also easily accessed from the archive.org home page). The collection primarily includes books out of copyright, so one may not find a lot of current scholarship, but it can be fun to view some works here—especially images of unique editions of famous works.

The Moving Images collection (<http://www.archive.org/details/movies>) contains old film clips from the **Prelinger Archives**, including news reels from San Francisco's 1934 general strike, the explosion of the Hindenburg, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and other major events caught on film. There is also a collection of very short drive-in movie ads, designed to get folks hungry for items sold at the concessions stand.

Other parts of the collection contain old software (including old video games!), live concert recordings and other audio content, and a variety of open educational resources. The Internet Archive is run by a small group of individuals in San Francisco as a non-profit organization. It's an interesting example of what can be done to preserve historical content and promote free access to information online.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at shipindex@yahoo.com. See <http://www.shipindex.org> for a compilation of over 100,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓



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