

The Portland That Was

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.
Walter Benjamin

The Portland That Was was a public history/public art project which combined film, video, an interactive website and free live outdoor screenings. It was created for the **2006 Time Based Arts Festival** in Portland, Oregon.

The website is still up: www.portlandwas.com



Independent film archivist **Dennis Nyback** and artist **Mack McFarland** created thirteen videos based on fourteen films selected by Nyback. **Anne Richardson** matched each video with a specific site in Portland. **Damon Eckhoff** created the interactive website which housed the videos. In addition to the website, the project included four live screenings, including one for which the audience traveled on foot from site to site, to see selected archival 16mm films screened against the walls of buildings or sites with which they had some historic connection.

Unlike Rick Prelinger's (very wonderful) *Lost Landscapes* series, which uses home movies shot in San Francisco to explore San Francisco history, **The Portland That Was** used archival films from a variety of sources to explore Portland history.



We drew on:

- one home movie
- one newsreel
- one music short
- one cartoon
- one political campaign film
- two industrial films
- one educational film
- one comedy short
- one army training film
- one propaganda film
- one travelogue parody
- one drug scare film parody
- several television ads



All films were 16mm.

All were made between 1930 to 1972.

Of the twelve, five were made in Portland.



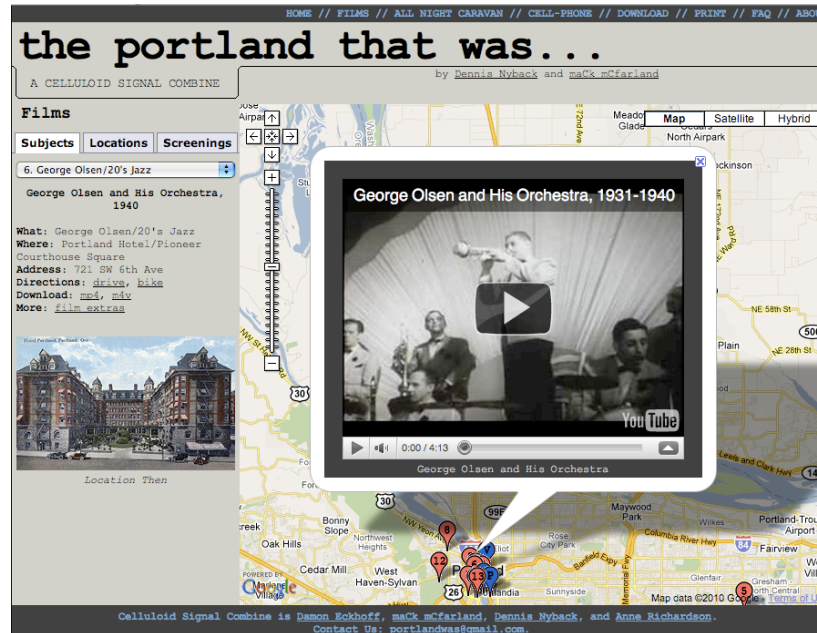
By including films made elsewhere, but which have a strong Portland connection, we intended to disrupt our audience's sense of regional identity as much as to confirm it. Where are we? Who are we? Who do we entrust with telling us answers to these questions?

We were asking about progress, asking about culture, asking about identity, asking about knowledge. We were combining past and present, private and public, familiar and forgotten, old media and new.

So, how did the project work?

We embedded YouTube videos in a Google Map, an interface Damon Eckhoff engineered for our project by hand. One month after **The Portland That Was** premiered, Google bought YouTube and embedding video on Google Maps became a push button convenience.

In September 2006, however, this had never been done.



For us, it was new. For us, it was a way to turn the entire city of Portland into an installation.

Practically, we wanted to:

- a) explore the video capability of mobile phones
- b) use films from Dennis' archive which had Portland connections
- c) foreground those connections by linking each film to a specific site in the city

Conceptually, we wanted to:

- a) collapse time
- b) challenge identity

Archival film is often used to lend authority; it is experienced as safe and soothing. Dennis Nyback's career as a collector and programmer has been spent doing the opposite - showing audiences rare short films which raise hairs on the back of the neck. We wanted to preserve this sense of surprise while at the same time translating it to new media.

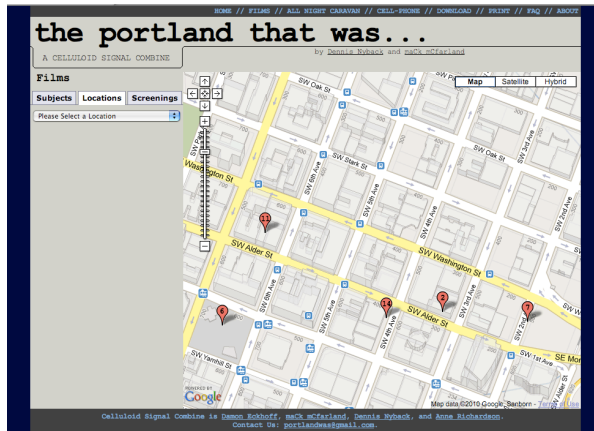
We used excerpts. We did not alter the films.

Films appeal to public historians in two ways. One, they are primary sources. Portland General Electric denied that their 1937 industrial film *It Can Be Done* existed. Then we showed it to them. Two: as historic artifacts go, films are audience friendly. They are made to be watched.

Even more than full length Hollywood films, short films are a snapshot of the nation's mood: its obsessions, anxieties, and aspirations. The short films we drew on in **The Portland That Was** were not created to tell elaborate stories. They were created to sell records, teach children, persuade farmers to electrify. They were created to sell beer. They were created to persuade us to accept the wartime relocation of Japanese Americans. They were created by mom & pop to document improvements to their motel. They were not made for posterity. As far as we can tell, for example, mom & pop never watched the home movie they made of the renovation of the Shangri-La. When Dennis bought it, it appeared to have never once been run through a projector. What mom & pop had recorded on film was their pride, pure and simple. These are the ways short films provide an unusually candid and revealing portrait of our country.

We purposefully placed the information about each film several clicks away from the moving image on the website, so that people would experience the moving image first, before consulting the "extras" to find out why we chose it and where Dennis acquired it.





Project interns lobbied successfully for an **All Night Caravan**, where the audience would troop on foot from site to site to watch eight archival films, each one projected against the wall of the building on the site to which it had been matched. Audiences reported the most moving experiences they had with the project happened during this evening.

The TBA Festival wanted the Caravan, but couldn't take legal responsibility for it. We had no permits. A security guard came out of the Standard Insurance Plaza building to videotape us as

the portland that was...

A CELLULOID SIGNAL COMBINE

by Dennis Nyback and maCk mCfarland

ALL NIGHT LONG / FILM CARAVAN

THE PORTLAND THAT WAS, OUTDOOR EVENT

All Night Long is a free, outdoor film show in which the audience travels from site to site to see eight short films in eight related historic sites in downtown Portland.

Artist Mack McFarland and film archivist Dennis Nyback will lead the caravan which will go from the South Park Blocks to The Pearl. Audience members traveling on foot, by bike, or on skateboard will see a line up of films which includes classic Hollywood animation featuring the voice of Portlander Mel Blanc, an educational film which features Mayor Terry Shrunken and City Commissioner Neil Goldschmidt being dressed down by Portlanders upset by development in Goose Hollow, a 1940 Republican Party campaign film encouraging voters to choose the Wilkie/McNary ticket, and more. All presented in glorious 16mm on film, not video!

All of the projection equipment and films will be transported by bicycle, facilitated by SHIFT www.shift2bikes.org

Event: All Night Long Caravan
Description: Outdoor site specific screenings of eight short films featured in THE PORTLAND THAT WAS (www.portlandwas.com)
Date: Saturday September 16
Time: Dusk (about 8:00 PM)
Location: Begins outside Lincoln Hall, 1620 SW Park
Cost: Free

We can screen this program for the press. Please contact Portland Was at portlandwas@gmail.com to request a screening.

All Night Long Film Caravan will follow this route:

1. Lincoln High School, now Lincoln Hall

Address: Across from 1620 SW Park



we set up the projector, and Mack McFarland had to show him how to turn his camera.

At the former site of the Portland Hotel, now a public plaza, Dennis Nyback had foreseen that the MAX train could possibly come through in the middle of the screening. The film we matched with that site was of George Olsen, a 1920's bandleader who was first discovered while performing at the hotel. Dennis rehearsed the move he wanted to make in case the train came. When it did, he swung the projector around and refocused the image so the audience could watch George Olsen's genial tuxedoed ghost flash past on the train, the staccato rhythm of train car windows a visual repetition of the 16mm film frames where his image was stored.



The film has not yet realized its true meaning, its real possibilities ...these consist in its unique faculty to express by natural means and with incomparable persuasiveness all that is fairylike, marvelous, supernatural. Franz Werfel, "Ein Sommernachtstraum, Ein Film von Shakespeare und Reinhardt", 1935

Everything we had expected to happen with people watching site specific films on cell phones happened in that moment. The collision of expectations and the sheer density of information we wanted to orchestrate using handheld digital video came to a peak in the sensual richness of 16mm film image projected against a moving train.

After the festival ended, **The Portland That Was** website remained up, untouched. Five years later, this project, which combined old and new media, is itself an historic artifact.

The following is a list of the locations, and the films with which those locations were paired, in [The Portland That Was](#).

All films are from The Nyback Collection, with the exception of *The Music Racket*, which was given to us on video by a Lee Morse fan.

THE PORTLAND THAT WAS: Locations & films

1. Portland Hotel, now Pioneer Courthouse Square, paired with: **George Olsen and His Music (1940)** b&w newsreel; color newsreel, 10 min. George Olsen was discovered here, before moving to New York to become one of the most popular bandleaders of the Jazz Age. Interview: Thomas Lauderdale.

We thought Thomas Lauderdale would discuss the parallels between himself and Olsen, since both traveled from local to national fame. Instead Lauderdale amazed us by commenting mostly on the fleeting nature of pop stardom.

2. Pacific International Livestock Exposition Hall, now the Expo Center, paired with: **Japanese Relocation (1942)** b&w government propaganda short, 10 min. A US Government film explains why we were moving West Coast Japanese American citizens to internment camps for the duration of WWII. Interview: George Katagiri

Japanese Americans board buses in this 1942 government produced short. Japanese American Oregonians traveled to the internment camps on trains, not buses, and they boarded those trains from the Pacific International Livestock Exposition train yards in North Portland, where they had been housed in cattle barns.

3. Shangri-La Motel, now an auto shop, paired with: **The Re-Building of the Shangri-La Motel (1956)** color home movie, 20 min. This lovingly detailed 1956 home movie documents the remodeling of a 1930's motel on Highway 99E. The building still survives--it is now a auto shop. In stunning Kodachrome color.

Dennis Nyback bought a small can of 16mm film labeled "The Re-Building of the Shangri-La Motel" in a second hand store in downtown Portland. From the pristine condition of the print, Dennis believes it was never shown, even once, by the people who

shot it. Tracking down the exact location of the Shangri-la Motel involved the use of old Portland phone books. Mack McFarland was startled to discover the address was only a few blocks from his house.

4. Civic Auditorium, now the Keller Auditorium, paired with: **Wilkie and McNary Know Their Farming (1940)** b&w Republican Party campaign film, 10 min. The Republican National Committee screened this film here during the 1940 presidential campaign for Wendell Wilkie, whose Vice Presidential running mate, Senator Charles McNary, was from Oregon. Shows McNary on his filbert farm.

We tried and failed to find an Oregonian able to speak from experience about the Wilkie & McNary campaign. Dennis remembers his mother quoting a catchphrase of the time, "Well, muss my hair and call me Wendell!"

5. International Test Rose Gardens, paired with: **Drugs: Killers or Dillers (1972)** color student film, 10 min. 16 year old Tim Smith and classmate Matt Groening, the future creator of The Simpsons, used the rose garden as a location in this drug scare film parody. Matt Groening appears briefly as a caveman under the influence. Also **This Is Portland (1971)** b&w student film, 8 min. 15 year old Tim Smith made this film as a spoof of a local TV travelogue. It stars future Oregonian columnist Elinor Markgraf, and features footage of downtown Portland before the transit mall. Interview: Tim Smith

Tim Smith learned film editing on the only equipment available to an aspiring teenage filmmaker in the early 70's in Portland - the flatbeds of the KGW TV newsrooms. In this interview he talks about pre-digital high school filmmaking, and what it was like to work with his longtime childhood playmate Matt Groening.

6. Vaughn Ballfield, now Esco Industries, paired with: **One Run Elmer (1935)** b&w comedy short, 20 min. We ran across a photo of Jim Thorpe wearing a Beaver uniform in a used bookstore. He was standing in this very spot. Until seeing this photo, we had no idea Thorpe had spent time in Portland. Dennis was able to use his rare, non-silent Buster Keaton baseball short, in which Thorpe has a cameo. This video has the highest view count (right now, 40,000 plus) on Youtube of all the videos we created for the project.

2. Spaatenhaus Restaurant, now Keller auditorium, paired with: **We Are the City (1971)** color educational film, 15 min. Portland filmmaker Tom Chamberlin made this educational film about urban renewal for Encyclopedia Britannica. Features then-mayor Terry Schunk and a lightening fast glimpse of future mayor Neil Goldschmidt. Future mayor Bud Clark owned one of the businesses displaced by urban renewal. Interview : Bud Clark.

Dennis acquired *We Are The City* in a batch of films discarded by Syracuse University. It clearly was shot in Portland, but had no credits. When we were making **The Portland That Was**, we asked around town to see if anyone knew who made this film. We got no place. Finally Dennis was at a party where someone finally said "I did." That's how we found Tom Chamberlin, the director of *We Are The City*.

8. Electric Building, paired with: **It Can Be Done (1937)** b&w industrial film, 20 min. A promotional film made by Portland General Electric to encourage the electrification of rural Oregon. When asked for more information about this film, PGE told us it never existed. Interview: Courtenay Hameister

Eventually a PGE historian, working from the film's credits, was able to confirm that the film crew, with the exception of the director, was made up of PGE employees. The cast appears to have been drawn from PGE customers, with the exception of one or two professionals.

9. Star Furniture, now an unoccupied building, paired with: **Stars of Tomorrow (1937)** b&w industrial film, 5 min. Portland radio talent show *Nate Cohn's Stars of Tomorrow* was sponsored by Star Furniture. This particular segment was staged for the PGE film *It Can Be Done*. Interview: Courtenay Hameister

We separated this short vaudeville sequence from where it had been interpolated in *It Can Be Done*. Our best guess is that the *Stars of Tomorrow* clip was intended to increase the film's appeal to rural families, the audience PGE was trying to reach.

10. Oregonian Tower, now gone, paired with: **GI Journal (1944)** b&w military training film, 7 min. This excerpt from an Army-Navy Screen Magazine short features a rare live appearance by Portland raised radio star and voice artist Mel Blanc. Mel Blanc's voice appears in more Hollywood films than any other performer, doing the voices of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and doz-

ens of other cartoon characters. His first radio work took place at this exact location. Interview: Dennis Nyback

11. Lincoln High School, now PSU's Lincoln Hall, paired with **The Screwdriver (1941)** b&w Walter Lantz cartoon, 7 min. Mel Blanc performs the Woody Woodpecker laugh which he invented as a high school student to show off the echo in the hallways of this very building. The second Woody Woodpecker cartoon ever made. Interview John Callahan

Portland cartoonist John Callahan had no idea that Mel Blanc was from Portland. Neither did any of the current Lincoln High School students we asked, although former mayor Bud Clark assured us that was not the case when he went there.

11. Multnomah Hotel, now Embassy Suites, paired with **The Music Racket (1930)** b&w music shorts, 6 min. Lee Morse was a radio star of the 20's. Her distinctive low voice necessitated advertising her as "Miss Lee Morse" to clarify her gender. Born in Eastern Oregon, Lee Morse grew up in Kooskia, Idaho. She performed on radio from this address during a 1920's Portland visit. Interview: Erin Sutherland

12. D Street Corral, now Division Street Flea market, paired with **Where the Action Is (1965)** b&w television show, 25 min. Copyright lawyers yanked the video we created using clips from Where The Action Is, a daily half hour NBC show hosted by Portland rock band Paul Revere and the Raiders. Mack McFarland re-worked the video around a public domain commercial he found on the web. Interview: James Hawthorne

13. Weinhard Brewery, now Cellar Building and Brewhouse, paired with **Blitz Me! (c 1967)** several color television commercials 10 and one color industrial film, 13 min. Vintage television commercials for Blitz Weinhard and other Northwest beers including Rainier and Heidelberg. Also an industrial film documenting a meeting between four NW beer distributors, who discuss, but never explain, the mysterious appeal of the keg shaped bottle. Interview: Dennis Nyback

Related research:

The Portland That Was was created for an arts festival as a work of art. It did trigger subsequent projects related to Oregon film history, most significantly the [Mel Blanc Project](#), which was directly inspired by the lack of awareness Anne Richardson

and Dennis Nyback witnessed in Portland of the Portland origins of this much beloved artist. **Oregon Cartoon Institute**, led by Richardson and Nyback, is partnering with Oregon Jewish Museum, Ethos Music School and Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission on the Mel Blanc Project, which will take place May through August 2011.

Anne Richardson began publishing [Oregon Movies, A to Z](#) in October 2008, and is in the process of turning that film history blog into a book.

Dennis Nyback presented his first paper on **Lee Morse** at the Pacific Northwest History Conference in November 2010.