

The Nostalgia Machine

by **Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.**
for the Sunday Gazette

In past commentaries, I have extolled the virtues of Google and Wikipedia, but until very recently I had ignored YouTube.com, thinking that it was just a children's toy. Not so. Apparently, while I wasn't paying close attention, hundreds of thousands of people all over the earth have been posting some fascinating video clips on that website. YouTube was created in February, 2005 by three former PayPal employees. The site proved so popular and generated so much advertising revenue that in November, 2006, it was sold to—who else—Google, for a mere \$1.6 billion of its stock.

What prompted my first visit to YouTube was a locally filmed movie in which my ninth-grade grandson Patrick played a significant role. It was while searching for it that I discovered that not only was there a trailer for his movie there, but also short snippets of just about every popular movie and TV series ever made. The length of each clip varies from just a few seconds to about ten minutes, a limit seemingly imposed by the YouTube czars, whoever they might be. And how they cope with copyright laws escapes me. But the result is the greatest nostalgia machine ever invented, just the thing for New Years Eve reminiscence.

Anyone may view the website, but one must register to qualify to upload new material. Naughty material is banned, although to view some things one must claim to be 18 or older at time of registration. There is no limit as to how many video clips any one person may upload; the number of clips already posted exceeds six million and they occupy 50 terabytes (50,000 gigabytes!) of storage.

To find something of interest, just type some key phrase into YouTube's search field and either hit your "enter" key or click on the search link. I just tried "dinosaur" and I was told that there are 16,100 relevant video clips. Hey, what fun, much more visual than Wikipedia. So I started looking for parts of some of my favorite movies.

Trying "Charlie Chaplin" I found three classic scenes that make me laugh just remembering them, the one where he cooks and feeds a shoe to a hungry man as if it were a Thanksgiving turkey, and the other from Modern Times where he falls into machinery and rolls through a maze of gears, coming out unharmed. The third is the scene from the Great Dictator where Herr Hinkle keeps bouncing a balloon that looks like the earth off his hands, feet, and other parts of his anatomy—until, inevitably of course, both bubbles burst, both his own and that of the globe.

Now I was on a roll. Could it be that once again I could watch Harold Lloyd cling for dear life to the hands of a large clock atop a skyscraper? Sure, it was there. Could I watch the Bridge on the River Kwai blow up (even though it didn't in Pierre Boulle's novel)? Sure thing. Watch King Kong, either version, swat away airplanes. Listen to Ray Bolger sing "If I only had a brain," and watch Dorothy and her friends expose the Great Oz for the charlatan that he was. Watch the British stalwarts run along the beach to the Vangelis sound track from Chariots of Fire. Type in "Tom Hanks and Robert Loggia in Big!" and watch them dance along a giant keyboard to the tune of "Heart and Soul."

When a clip starts running, the screen size is somewhat small, but the click of a little white square will extend it to the full size of your monitor's screen. Sometimes lack of resolution makes the result a bit fuzzy, so hitting the "escape" key brings you back, which one wants to do anyway at the end in order to prepare for another selection. The resolution for Casablanca at full screen was fine, and my speakers were good enough to send chills down my spine when the French patriots drowned out Deutschland Über Alles with La Marseillaise. Play it again, Sam (though that is not exactly what Ilsa said).

Music, too, is fair game. I tried Rhapsody in Blue, Pachelbel's Canon, Finlandia, Ode to Joy, and Somewhere in Time from the Christopher Reeve movie of that name. All there. I had to try very hard to find something missing, but finally did. No one has yet posted a version of "Who through the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder," but any day now, someone surely will.

Then I tried some songs from favorite musicals. How about "Sunrise, Sunset" from Fiddler on the Roof, and "If I were a rich man" from the same? Both there, beautifully done, from the movie version. ("Lord, would it spoil some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man?") And try Camelot, Carousel, Phantom of the Opera. My favorites may not be yours, so try others. They'll be there.

Sports? Watch Willie Mays make his favorite catch, then watch Willie Mays Hayes jump over the catcher at home plate in Major League, the funniest baseball movie ever made. Watch the famous Hanson brothers commit mayhem in Slapshot, the funniest hockey movie ever made. Watch Robert Redford playing a wounded Roy Hobbs smash a dramatic game ending home run, then watch the wounded Dodger Kirk Gibson playing himself do the same thing in a real World Series.

Do you know any famous robots? Remember Elektro at the 1939 Worlds Fair in New York. I didn't get there until 1940, but he was still smoking (somewhat safely, I presume, because he had a built in iron lung). And he's immortal, because he's there on YouTube. So is Gort, who came from outer space on The Day the Earth Stood Still. And I had forgotten that it was Steve McQueen who did him battle.

Remember the haunting chord from Close Encounters of the Third Kind? Watch the spaceship land again. (Perhaps it's the one Dennis Kucinich saw.) And Star Wars and Star Trek are well represented too. See how different the young Captain Kirk looks than the current and larger Denny Crane of TV's Boston Legal, even though both are William Shatner.

Think of the famous speeches of the last 70 years or so. Watch and listen to FDR's "A Date that will live in infamy." See and hear Joseph Welch ask Senator Joseph McCarthy if he has no decency left. And when you hear JFK say "Ich bin ein Berliner!" be glad he didn't go to Hamburg or Frankfurt.

I even came across a movie I didn't know existed, one that should be of interest to my friends at the Edison Exploratorium. In the clip Orson Welles as J.P. Morgan is talking to visitor Thomas Edison just as Nikola Tesla enters the room and begins to extol the virtues of alternating current over Edison's preferred direct current. I have read whole books about the controversy, but never knew that this movie, "The Secret of Nikola Tesla," existed. I've ordered it from Netflix, hoping that it will be electrifying.

As I knew I would, I found Judy Garland in "Meet Me in St. Louis" of 1944. Watch full screen as she sings to the young Margaret O'Brien the words I extend to you, dear reader: "Through the years we all will be together, If the fates allow." And, tomorrow night at midnight, finish with the Andre Rieu orchestra playing to bagpipe accompaniment, as I wish I could for you:

Should auld acquaintance be forgot
and never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
and days of auld lang syne?

Of course not.

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