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# History — digitised and abridged

**SALINAS (California):** The National Steinbeck Center, at the top of Main Street in this farming community, exhibits an array of artifacts from John Steinbeck’s life and works: family memorabilia, a passport from the 1960s and movie stills from “The Grapes of Wrath”. Downstairs, in a climate-controlled vault, is the original manuscript of “The Pearl”, his novella published in 1947. There is also an exuberant letter that Steinbeck wrote to a distant relative when he was a teenager, as well as rare footage of him on 16-millimeter film, introducing a 1961 movie, “Flight”.

Steinbeck aficionados wishing to examine the manuscript of “The Pearl”, which he wrote in pencil in small, precise handwriting on a yellow legal pad, have to travel here — after making an appointment with a part-time archivist, who is in on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

The centre takes great care to preserve these relics of Steinbeck, a Nobel laureate, yet it has no plans to take the collection a step further, to adapt to a digital age. As a result, the manuscript of “The Pearl” is no more likely to be digitised

than is the camper with the canine-motif curtains that Steinbeck immortalised in his book “Travels With Charley”, and that is parked in perpetuity in the centre’s main exhibition hall.

These Steinbeck artifacts are not the only important pieces of history that are at risk of disappearing or being ignored in the digital age. As more museums and archives become digital domains, and as electronic resources become the main tool for gathering information, items left behind in non-digital form, scholars and archivists say, are in danger of disappearing from the collective cultural memory, potentially leaving America’s historical fabric riddled

with holes.

“There’s an illusion being created that all the world’s knowledge is on the Web, but we haven’t begun to glimpse what is out there in local archives and libraries,” said Edward L. Ayers, a historian and dean of the college and graduate school of arts and sciences at the University of Virginia. “Material that is not digitised risks being neglected as it would not have been in the past, virtually lost to the great majority of potential users.”

It is not for a lack of trying.

At the Library of Congress, for example, despite continuing and ambitious digitisation efforts, perhaps only 10

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per cent of the 132 million objects held will be digitised in the foreseeable future. For one thing, costs are prohibitive. Scanning alone on smaller items ranges from US\$6 to US\$9 (US\$1 = RM3.51) for a 35-millimeter slide, to US\$7 to US\$11 a page for presidential papers, to US\$12 to US\$25 for poster-size pieces. (The cost of scanning an object can be a relatively minor part of the entire expense of digitising and making an item accessible online.)

Similarly, at the National Archives, the repository for some nine billion documents, only a small fraction are likely to be digitised and put online. And at thousands of smaller, local collections around the country, the bulk of the material is languishing on yesterday's media: paper, LPs, magnetic tape and film.

Strapped for money, archivists around the country are looking to private partners for help. Google has donated US\$3 million to help start an effort led by the Library of Congress that will digitise and share materials around the globe, and has also provided technical resources for digitising various printed materials at the library. Google, on its own, is digitising books at the Library of Congress, which has its hands full with other items. And a number of other companies and foundations, including Reuters, IBM and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, have financed digitisation projects around the world.

Even with outside help, experts say, entire swathes of political and cultural history are in danger of being forgotten by new generations of amateur researchers and serious scholars.

Consider the Library of Congress archive of one million photo prints from The New York World-Telegram & Sun; only 5,407 have been digitised. Of the 1.2 million images from US News and World Report, the library has digitised only 366. Its collection of five million images from Look magazine, spanning the period from 1937 to 1971, creates what Jeremy E. Adamson, director of collections and services at the library, calls “a fascinating portrait of America through photo stories on social and political subjects, personalities, food, fashion and sports.” Yet only 313 of those images have been digitised.

**Lure of the computer**

“It's a crying shame,” Adamson said, “as today's public is acutely visually literate and comfortable with pictures as a means to understand the past and experience for themselves the direct look and feel of history.”

The reason for not digitising these collections? “Not enough money,” Adamson said.

While the Internet boom has made information more accessible and widespread than ever, that very ubiquity also threatens records and artifacts that do not easily lend themselves to digitisation — because of cost, but also because Web surfers and more devoted data hounds simply find it easier to go online than to travel far and wide to see tangible artifacts.

“This is the great problem right now, and it's a scary thing,” said documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. “The dots are only connected by a few of us who are willing to go to the places to make those connections.”

The Library of Congress and other archives are creating indexes that refer to the contents of a physical collection, in the hope that they will entice researchers away from their computers.

But the reality remains that a new generation of researchers prefers to seek information online, a trend made all too clear to Hastings of the National Archives last year, after Google, in an experiment of sorts, digitised 101 of the National Archives' films — including World War II newsreels and NASA footage — and put them up on its site, at [video.google.com/nara.html](http://video.google.com/nara.html).

“Before that happened, we had 200 requests total for the whole year in our research room,” Hastings said. “The first month the films were available on Google, there were about

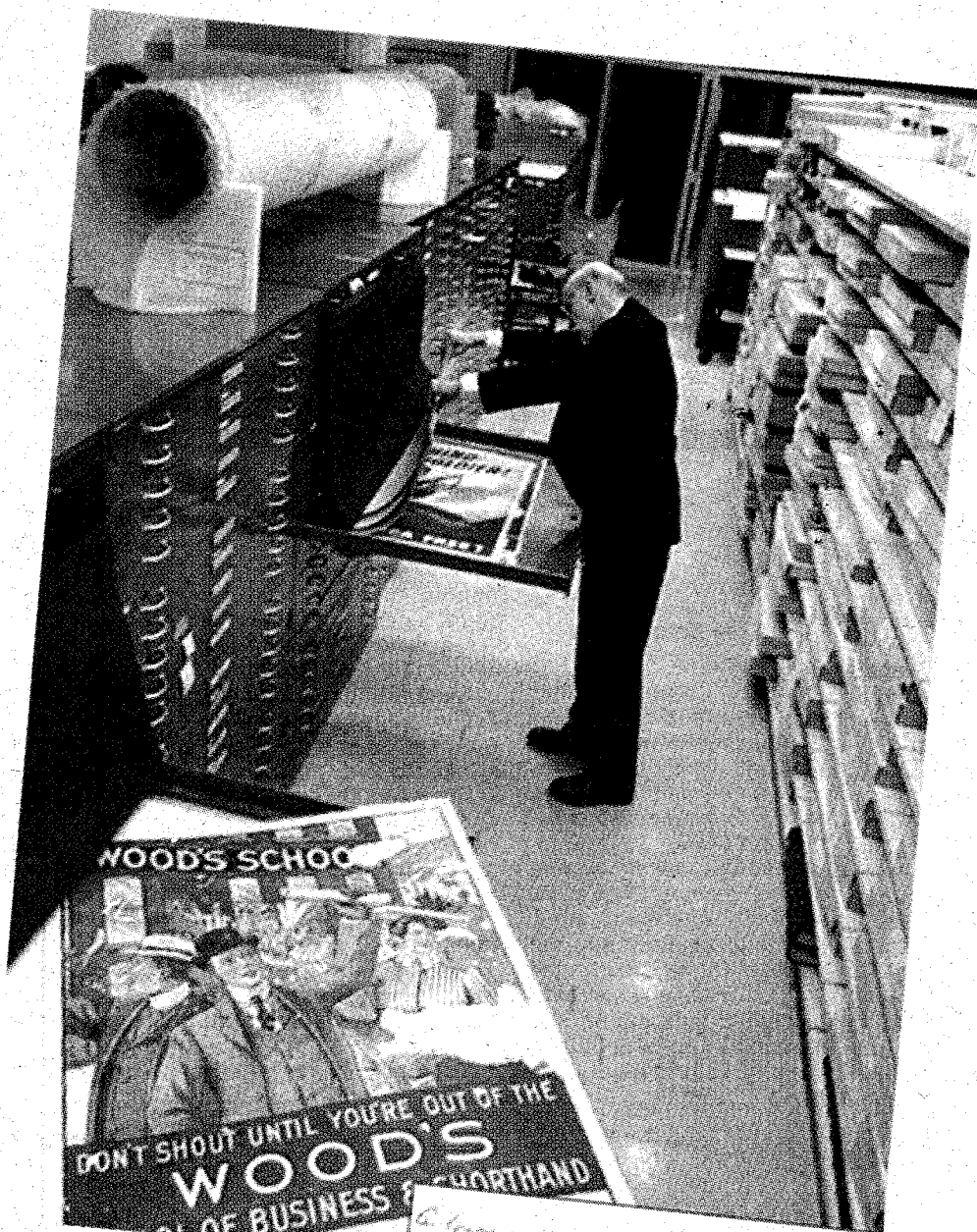
200,000 hits on them — a thousandfold increase.”

In some cases, strange bedfellows have conspired to help solve the problem.

IBM's digitisation efforts — dating to the mid-1990s, when the company converted a healthy chunk of the Vatican Library's archives — are done in a way to benefit the company as well as the institution looking to digitise its holdings.

“We look for projects that will highlight IBM's most innovative technologies or help us develop those technologies with very specific partners who have a problem to solve,” said Paula Baker, vice-president for global community initiatives at IBM. The company looks for projects that require the newest technology.

Such is the case with its most recent multi-year, multi-million-dollar project: a virtual version of the vast Forbidden City in Beijing, which IBM is building in partnership with China's Ministry of Culture. When it is finished, early next year, the site will include interactive, three-dimensional images of ancient thrones, artwork and military implements. — NYT



(Above) The Library of Congress houses tens of thousands of historic posters, very few of which have been digitised; (Right) The original manuscript of John Steinbeck's 'The Pearl', an important piece of history, is at risk of disappearing or being ignored in the digital age. — NYT pictures

