Lurking in closets, packed away in attics, stuffed in bags or boxes is a trove of celluloid treasures – home movies. Seeing the image of his mom as a young girl, the social historian inside him began to look at the screen in an entirely different way. “Suddenly, I saw more than just family history,” says Montrie, professor of history. “I also saw evidence of gender roles, fashion trends, religious practice and social habits.”

Struck by what he calls “the rich untapped historical source of information” inherent in home movies, Montrie did what any good historian would: he investigated the existence of an archive that gathers and categorizes them.

“I found a couple of projects in early stages that were specific to a certain community or culture,” he says. What he didn’t find was a comprehensive, accessible and searchable archive. So, he started himself, with the help of Mitch Shuldman, Division Head of Media Services.

The UMass Lowell Home Movie Archive Project was born in 2004, and has grown to include hundreds of hours of categorized historical clues in a host of subject areas, including holiday rituals, vacations, sports, youth culture and maturation, ethnic traditions and assimilation, gender roles and others.

For the first time, Montrie and Shuldman participated in Home Movie Day, an annual worldwide celebration of amateur films and filmmaking, by posting an online sampling from the Home Movie Archive. Three families are represented in the selections, ranging from the 1930s to the 1960s. Picnics, first birthday parties, family vacations, weddings – all the notable occasions of everyday life.

“I’m fascinated by the lives, customs and multiple facets of ordinary people,” says Montrie. “The archive allows others access to a fresh, untapped pool of rich data.”

UMass Lowell student and faculty researchers have made good use of the archive, drawing on primary source materials for insights on cultural trends over time. Montrie, has also used clips of family dogs and their owners to illustrate his most recent documentary, “Tough Love, Science and Dogs.”

UMass Lowell Libraries maintain the archive and Shuldman is working to get the existing films online, so that people can search out and view items of interest.

“My longer-term goal is to have these videos be a part of the Library’s overall digital repository,” says Shuldman. “The searchable database is complete, so my short-term goal is to tie up loose ends and make the films available online.”

For more information, go to the Home Movie Archive @ Library.uml.edu/homemovies.

Classes that have integrated footage from the Home Movie Archive into student scholarship.

Graduate School of Education
Curriculum and Instruction (P. Fontaine)
- The United States of Consumption: Consumerism in Post War America
- Women in the 1950s
- A Return to Tradition: Weddings Post WWII
- Veterans
- The Changing Faces of Lowell
- Patriotism
- The 1950s: A Leisurely Decade
- Tet Offensive
- World War I

College of Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
History Department
Historical Methods (C. Montrie)
- The Public’s Glorification of War and the Military
- From Cradle to the Nave
- The Cultural Love of Dancing
- What Were We Thinking: A Guide to the 1980s Fashion
- The Need to be Free: How the Automobile Changed Middle Class America
- American Values Through Children at Play

Women in American History
American Social History
- The Flume
- Disneyland
- Evolution of Amusement Parks
- Amusement Parks: Then and Now

People have been recording scenes and events with hand-held cameras since the 1920s, leaving to posterity reels of “home movies” that offer a wealth of information about twentieth century American life. The Home Movie Archive at UMass Lowell was established to save these home movies for use by historians, artists, documentarians and others, allowing them to access this largely untapped resource for their work.

In classrooms across campus professors are incorporating these truths in a novel way – by assigning their students to make videos – with the help from the staff of the Media Center, part of UMass Lowell Libraries.

In the Graduate School of Education, Assoc. Prof. Pat Fontaine teaches social studies methods to future high school history teachers. Her project challenged the students to make a teaching video: to research the historic topic, create the video and present it to high school students, where its effectiveness at engaging students could be observed.

“The students are already savvy about making short movies,” says Fontaine. “This task demanded more – that they incorporate a sharp narrative and embed video, music and still photos – all at a level appropriate to the high school audience and within five minutes.”

Students formed themselves into teams of three with an eye toward gathering different strengths. They chose topics such as the 1893 Chicago Worlds Fair and the Tet offensive in Vietnam. Fontaine and Shuldman laid out benchmark requirements (including story elements, script, storyboard and image sourcing) with deadlines.

For images beyond those available in mainstream media, the students had access to UMass Lowell’s Home Movie Archive, “a great cultural resource,” says Fontaine.

“For the students, this is a very strong and meaningful project,” says Fontaine. “As a faculty member, it pushed me to collaborate, to entrust my students to Mitch’s judgment and care.”

Charles Dickens: A Virtual Walking Tour
A collaborative website and video digital humanities project that makes use of primary source materials to re-create in video Charles Dickens’s 1842 tour of Lowell, Massachusetts.
- Principal Scholar: Associate Professor Diana Archibald (English),
- Four current and former students:
  - Brad Heglin, writer,
  - Zack Zolud, videographer and editor,
  - Matt Iannotti (’12), web design & sound engineer,
  - Lara Goss (’12), narrator.
- Martha Mayo, Librarian and Head of the Center of Lowell History,
- Mitch Shuldman, Librarian, Head of Division of Media Services, and
- Prof. John Woold as the voice of Charles Dickens.