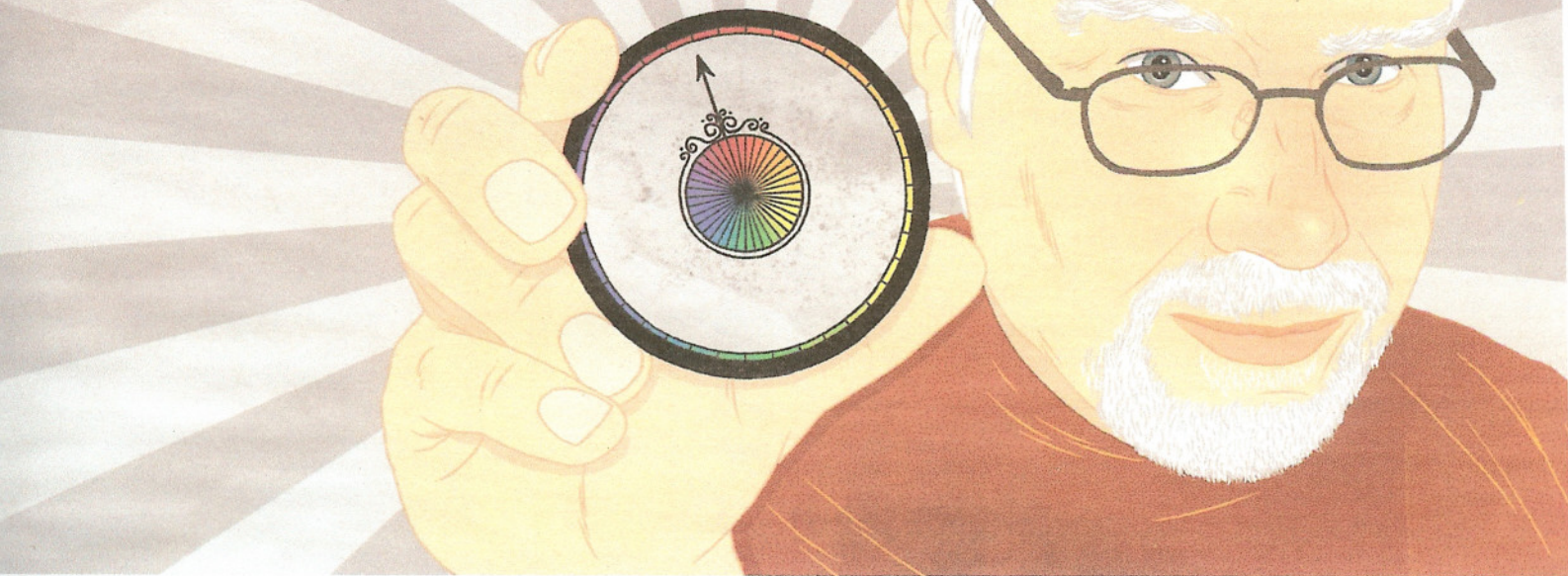# Bright Ideas

< By Sam Whiting >

CAN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD BE REDUCED TO A WEB SITE? ALGIS RATNIKAS THINKS SO

Algis Ratnikas lives in one of the little boxes on a hilltop in Daly City. But he's not like the others in his row. Every day Ratnikas, 60, sits at the computers that have taken over his dining room, entering data into the Timelines of History.

"TIMELINES OF HISTORY starts from the Big Bang and continues to the present. It's all on the Web site *www.timelines.ws*. I get about 8,000 hits per week. There are tens of thousands of entries. The universal timeline, which is the principle collection of files, is organized so that every item is dated, whether it's B.C. or A.D. I have perhaps a thousand entries for each day of the year. The reason it is organized in linear form is to allow people within a couple of clicks to go to any point in time. It's also organized in geographical form such that each country and each state within the United States also have their own timelines.

THE WHOLE PROJECT was developed to be a tool for writers, researchers, students, anybody who is interested in history. It allows a person within two or three clicks to go to any point in time and space. It is not a commercial product. I make a little bit of income from contributions, from selling licenses, but I don't make a living at it. Until a couple of years ago, I worked as a field service engineer for Becton Dickinson Corp. repairing medical equipment. I retired in order to work on the project full time.

I GET UP ABOUT 6:30 a.m. and start work at 7. By 9:30 I have the day's events downloaded from the Internet. Then I start reading The Chronicle and the Wall Street Journal. I input all that information. That will pull me up until about 1:30 p.m. Then I go out for a hike on San Bruno Mountain. When I get back I have the Economist to deal with. Those are my three main sources because they have pretty good historical information. Every item on my site has a reference as to where I got the data from.

I COVER EVERYTHING that I deem important. Sports is not part of

THE LIGHTBULB: I got ahold of a roll of paper that was 30 inches wide and 30 feet long. I spread it out and taped it to the wall of my parents' basement in Dearborn, Mich. On that paper timeline I started knocking off periods and events and dates and people's names across the whole gamut, from the Greeks and Romans through the Renaissance and into the 20th century. That paper rapidly fell apart, even with all the Scotch tape that I used. I realized that it was a great idea, but at that point in time the tools were not right. This was 1973.

the story. It's too transient. I try to focus on the question: What's going to have a long-term historical impact? The war in Iraq I have covered since I began the project, so it's detailed on a day-to-day basis.

I STARTED collecting timeline information on my computer in 1995. I posted the Web site in 1998. Wikipedia started a similar project in 2002. They're now a major competitor. There are others that have copied me verbatim.

I WANT IT to go on forever, so I need to figure out a way to monetize it and get it generating income so that it can live on its own. I want to have graphics associated with it. I have a postcard collection of thousands and thousands of images that would be nice to associate with these various entries.

MY PROJECT IS Sisyphusian. Sisyphus is the Greek god who was condemned to rolling a boulder up a hill forever. Every time he reached the top, the boulder would roll back down and he'd have to start over. It is an endless task. I've gotten e-mails from people around the world congratulating me for the work, offering suggestions and corrections."

We are looking for Bay Area people with innovative ideas who have put them to use. Please e-mail candidates to bright ideas@sfchronicle.com.