

JOY: Hello, "Forever Ago," fans. We're taking a break after this week, but we'll be back this fall with eight more brand new episodes, including one involving dinosaurs and another all about astronauts. Until then, there are lots of ways to support the show. Are you ready? OK, here it goes.

Number one, tell your friends about us. If you like our show, there's a good chance your friends will like it, too. Number two, you could donate at foreverago.org/donate and help us keep making new episodes. Number three, record yourself saying what you'd like to put in the "Forever Ago" Time Capsule and send it to us foreverago.org/contact. We want your ideas. We need your ideas. That's foreveago.org/contact. OK, that's enough of me. I'll see you in a bit.

Not your recent song green and lush. Sing, hey, we sailed the seas. No, that's not right. Oh, how about this? Swing your partner over the cow. Sing, hey, we sail the seas.

ELSA: Hey, Joy, I brought my compass and my peanut butter sandwich. I'm all ready to set off on our boat journey for our pirate episode.

JOY: Hey, Elsa. I'm just getting my second wind. One sec. Soil is the color of my love's eyes. No. I'm trying to write a sea shanty, but this is way harder than I thought.

ELSA: It sounds like your mind is still on land.

JOY: Uh-oh, I was so ready for today. Let me try one more. Land, land, you are hard and sturdy.

ELSA: You have to stop. It doesn't sound like your heart is on the waves.

JOY: Oh, no. I think I'm a land lover.

ELSA: A land lover?

JOY: Yeah, I've always had a soft spot for dirt. 'Tis going to make today's episode really arr-kward. Because pirates-- because we're talking about pirates.

ELSA: Well, maybe you just need to get into a sea shanty mindset. People usually sang these songs in a crew, when they were doing hard labor. That way, songs kept their minds busy while they did boring tasks.

JOY: Like swabbing the poop deck or the constant rowing.

ELSA: Or bringing my luggage onto the boat.

JOY: Or bringing your luggage onto the-- hey, wait a minute.

ELSA: Thanks so much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JOY: Welcome to "Forever Ago" from APM Studios. I'm Joy Dolo.

ELSA: And I'm Elsa.

JOY: Today, we are, indeed, headed out onto the open seas, where hoisting the sails of history and sailing toward a real life pirate story.

ELSA: And not just any pirate tale, the story of the most piratey pirate who ever pirated.

JOY: Arrgh, that is correct. Pirates are one of my favorite kinds of characters. I love sea shanties, as you know, and all those phrases like shiver me timbers. Elsa, what do you think of when you think of pirates?

ELSA: Well, I always love the story of Pippi Longstocking.

JOY: Oh, yeah.

ELSA: Just having a girl around my age being a pirate and going on all of these kinds of adventures, that seems really cool.

JOY: Yeah, do you have a favorite pirate phrase?

ELSA: Oh, that's a hard one.

JOY: It is.

ELSA: I mean, there are a lot in "Peter Pan" that I really like.

JOY: Yeah?

ELSA: That are really cool.

JOY: Like what?

ELSA: Like, aye, aye, captain.

JOY: Oh, yeah.

ELSA: Or, shiver me timbers.

JOY: If you had a pirate name, what would it be?

ELSA: Oh.

JOY: I've already thought of mine. That's why I asked. 's Ahoy Joy.

ELSA: Oh.

JOY: Do you have a favorite pirate from a movie or a book? I know you said you liked "Peter Pan."

ELSA: Oh, yeah. I would say Captain Hook, definitely.

JOY: Oh, yeah. What do you like about Captain Hook?

ELSA: Well, I just like-- he's so-- I mean, he's so mean. It's just so fun to watch him, and his expressions, and his way to things is fun.

JOY: OK, I have a weird question for you. This is a little strange.

ELSA: OK.

JOY: But what do you think pirates smelled like?

ELSA: Well-- I mean, not great, clearly. I feel like they would smell terrible. Because-- I mean, they wouldn't think about washing themselves because they would want to focus on finding treasure or capturing more ships, their piratey task.

JOY: All of their energy is focused on the task at hand and not bathing.

ELSA: And not their smell.

JOY: That's like me sometimes. Sometimes, I get so focused. Just kidding. I smell fine. No, pirate stories are just the best.

ELSA: But Pirates were real people, too. They were cunning, swift people, who traveled the world. They also committed crimes and stole stuff. In real life, they usually weren't the kind of people you'd want to cross paths with.

JOY: Right. And with that, I believe we are nearly ready to embark on our seafaring voyage.

ELSA: And our boat is that smallish wooden rowboat?

JOY: Oh, yes, a fine vessel.

ELSA: Cool. I invited a pirate expert along, too. Here she is.

LAURA: Well, hello there. My name is Laura Sook Duncombe.

ELSA: Laura brought along a few things to make our boat a little more piratey.

JOY: Oh, how perfect. I brought along a parrot friend for pirate-tasticness, too.

PARROT: Joy, I tried to tell you this at the pet store. I'm not as pirate as you might think.

JOY: I know, but I was just like, what are you even talking about?

ELSA: Oh, the parrot's actually correct. Right, Laura?

LAURA: So many of the legends that we know about pirates, like eye patches, buried treasure, and parrots all come from maybe a little kernel of truth, but maybe just from a story.

PARROT: And actually, Joy, there's one story in particular.

LAURA: There was a book called "Treasure Island" that was written by Robert Louis Stevenson that was extremely popular when it was written, and it was made into a movie by Disney in the 1950s that was even more popular.

PARROT: In "Treasure Island," there's this pirate. His name is Long John Silver. He has a pink leg and a pet parrot, and he buries the hair out of his treasure.

LAURA: He's the original internationally famous pirate, but he's made up.

PARROT: That's right. He's just a character. Robert Louis Stevenson dreamed him up.

ELSA: And the book, "Treasure Island," is old. It was written around 140 years ago, but real pirates are actually much older than the story, like from around 300 years ago. Robert Louis Stevenson was really just imagining what pirates might have been like.

PARROT: Starting with parents like me.

LAURA: Pirates did occasionally have birds on ships, but usually, they were taking them back to Europe to be sold. But they didn't really keep them as pets.

ELSA: For another example, some pirates wore eye patches, but way fewer than pirate stories would have you believe.

PARROT: Eye patches were for injuries, not style. Save for big legs.

LAURA: So loss of limbs was common on pirate ships. Being a pirate was very dangerous. Being a sailor was very dangerous.

ELSA: But burying treasure was really not a thing. Pirates usually spend their treasure as soon as they got it.

LAURA: Pirates moved around so often. It really wouldn't be practical to stick your money in the ground.

PARROT: So there you have it. Can I go now?

JOY: Oh, sure. Have a good day anyway.

PARROT: Bye bye.

JOY: How is it that everything I thought was piratey is actually not?

ELSA: Well, there are lots of pirate stories out there. They're fun. It's easy to get wrapped up in them, but not all of those stories are facts.

LAURA: And so, it's very important to look at the stories that we read and the stories that we tell because, sometimes, they become part of the truth without us even knowing it.

ELSA: But fear not, Sailor Joy.

LAURA: The real truth about pirates is far more interesting than the stories that you've heard about pirates.

ELSA: Ready to check out our actual pirate supplies?

JOY: Aye, aye. I mean, yes.

ELSA: Well, first, let's steer this ship towards the time of pirates. So this is way back before you could travel in an airplane or a car. It's even before boats had motors. Everyone sailed according to the winds. They sailed to travel, to trade, and to fight. And pirates did all those things for their own piratey purposes, not for a company or a country.

JOY: So many adventures.

ELSA: Yeah. And often, a lot of rule-breaking. Pirates were not always the nicest people, but we'll still be nice on our piratey voyage. Here are some items Laura brought that actually make our boat more piratey because real pirates use them. The first thing we've got is three of those black triangular hats.

LAURA: It's always good to have a hat to keep the sun out of your face, to protect you from rain, and any other weather you might run into while you're sailing on a pirate ship.

JOY: Oh, this one looks like it'll fit me perfectly.

LAURA: Yes, go ahead, try it on.

ELSA: And next, a rolled up scroll. What's the rolled up scroll for again, Laura?

LAURA: That is a pirate contract. So pirates agreed, before they set off on a voyage, what jobs they were going to do, how they were going to behave, and what part of any treasure they would receive at the end of the voyage.

JOY: Cool. So it says, we're all going to be ourselves. Take turns scanning the horizon. Everyone gets to keep all the history knowledge they gain. Elsa, what would you add to your contract if you're going out to sea with a bunch of pirates?

ELSA: Well, I would probably add no backstabbing because I feel like pirates would be really mean, and you would not want to get on their bad side.

JOY: No, they're super backstabby.

ELSA: And definitely no walking on the plank.

JOY: Yeah. I would say no beans because it's a small space, and it's a long time that you're out there.

ELSA: And the last thing for our voyage, a cow.

LAURA: Pirates frequently had livestock on their ships to use for food while they were out at sea.

JOY: We've got a hat, a scroll, and a cow.

ELSA: Sing, hey, we sail the seas.

JOY: Nice. This shanty is coming together.

ELSA: Yeah. Now, we're all set to the story of the greatest pirate who ever lived.

JOY: So Elsa, did we ever talk about where we're actually going?

ELSA: We're headed to the South China Sea.

JOY: Oh, OK. So that's the sea in between China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

CHENG I SAO: Exactly. Because that's where I did all my most piratey pirating.

JOY: Oh, hey, cow. Who are you? Where did you come from? And why aren't you surprised we have this cow aboard?

CHENG I SAO: Livestock on a ship? Whatever. Trust me, I've seen it all. I'm the Pirate Cheng I Sao. I thought you'd be expecting me.

JOY: And why is that?

CHENG I SAO: Because I'm the pirateist pirate who ever pirated. You're sailing straight for my story.

JOY: Well, wow. Cheng I Sao, I have to tell you, you're not really what I was expecting.

CHENG I SAO: Oh, I get that a lot. Thanks to all those pirate stories, people expect me to be a white beardy man with a peg leg and a parrot or something. And I'm none of those things. But as far as actual pirating goes, I was among the best of the best.

JOY: Yeah, I'm sure we'll see exactly how piratey you are when we get to your story.

CHENG I SAO: Oh, definitely. But you're actually going the wrong way. You'll never get to my story like this. So let's get their sails adjusted and steer the rudder this way.

JOY: Thank you. While you get us back on track, let's play around the First Things First. It's the game where we try to put things in order from oldest to newest. Today, we're talking captains. The three captains we need to put in order our Captain America, Captain Crunch, and Captain Hook, who you're familiar with. Are you familiar with Captain America or Captain Crunch?

ELSA: Yes, I know Captain Crunch is on the cereal box.

CHENG I SAO: Yes.

ELSA: And isn't Captain America a Marvel character?

JOY: Yeah, Yeah, I believe so. Yeah. OK, now, we have to guess which one came first, which one came second, and which one came most recently in history. So what do you think?

ELSA: Oh, I feel like, maybe Captain Hook was first.

JOY: Oh, yeah?

ELSA: And then, Captain Crunch.

JOY: OK.

ELSA: And then Captain America.

JOY: You know, I think similarly, too. I think because I know Captain America from Marvel--

ELSA: Yeah.

JOY: I'm like, oh, that one was made--

ELSA: That seems pretty recent, yeah.

JOY: --much later, you know? But I also don't know when Captain Crunch was really-- like, when that started because I feel like cereal is such like a '50s thing, when everyone was eating milk and sugar in the morning. And I actually don't know much about Captain Hook. So you're Captain Hook, one, Captain Crunch, two, Captain America, three.

ELSA: Yes.

JOY: I'm going to say, Captain Hook, one, and Captain Crunch, two-- and I'm going to say the same thing.

ELSA: All right, great.

JOY: That seems to make the most sense. Well, we'll hear the answers in just a bit.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Setting out on historical voyages rules. But guess what, the present is part of history, too. Because for people in the future, our right now will be their way back when.

ELSA: So we're building a time capsule to show what our time is like.

JOY: And we want to know, what would you put in our time capsule?

ELSA: Maybe you've drawn a picture of your favorite pirate or perfected the lyrics to a silly sea shanty.

JOY: Listeners, record yourself telling us about the item you have in mind and why you want to save it.

ELSA: And send it to us at foreverago.org/contact.

JOY: So Elsa, what would you put into the time capsule this week?

ELSA: Maybe one of our pirate mementos. I feel like maybe one of the black triangular hats would be cool.

JOY: Yeah.

ELSA: But that's big, so maybe one of our pirate contracts.

JOY: Oh, yeah, that's a good idea. We'll hear what more listeners would put in the time capsule at the very end of the show after the credits. Send us your recording at foreverago.org/contact. We can't wait to hear what you come up with.

ELSA: More forever ago in just a moment. Don't go anywhere.

JOY: All right, Elsa, let's reveal which of our First Things First is actually the oldest. Drum roll, please. Singing roll, please. Oh, my gosh, I know all the answers now, and I'm not going to tell you. I'm just kidding. So the first one is Captain Hook. Could you believe this?

ELSA: Yay.

JOY: Yeah. Yeah, we're right.

ELSA: We're right.

JOY: Captain James Hook made his first appearance in the play "Peter Pan" by JM Barrie. This play made its debut in England in 1904.

ELSA: Oh, wow.

JOY: He was the villain, if you didn't know.

ELSA: Yeah.

JOY: You said it yourself, he was kind of mean, so Hook's famous name comes from the iron hook he wears where his hand once was. Peter Pan severed his hand and fed it to a crocodile.

ELSA: Oh.

JOY: Yikes. And so our second one was Captain Crunch, right? And we were wrong so the second one is Captain America.

ELSA: Oh, my goodness.

JOY: Yeah, I know. Captain America made his debut in Captain America Comics. Number one in 1941.

ELSA: Well, I guess that makes sense because if you think about how old comics are and that most Marvel and superhero things have come from comics, so I guess that makes sense.

JOY: That makes sense. And we were right the time frame, like '50s--

ELSA: '50s, '40s, yeah.

JOY: '40s, '50s, something like that. He's known as the first Avenger. Did you know that?

ELSA: What? Really?

JOY: Yeah, he's the first one.

ELSA: Wow.

JOY: Yeah, I know it. So number three, obviously, is our cereal guy, Captain Crunch. Captain Horatio Magellan Crunch is his name. Magellan. In the 1960s, they used him to sell cereal. And the Quaker Oats Company wanted a kid-friendly character to sell their new cereal, so they enlisted the help of Jay Ward, who is also the creator of the cartoon characters Rocky and Bullwinkle.

ELSA: I wonder why they made his name such a mouthful, though.

JOY: Yeah. Yeah. Captain Horatio Magellan Crunch. Well, Magellan, he sailed the seas. He was a discoverer around Columbus and all that, right?

ELSA: I think so.

JOY: That'll have to be a different episode of "Forever Ago." So we did it. We did it. And now, we're back with more "Forever Ago." I'm Joy.

ELSA: I'm Elsa.

JOY: We're here with pirate expert Laura Sook Duncombe.

CHENG I SAO: And me, an actual pirate, Change I Sao.

JOY: So Change I Sao, apparently, you're the pirateist pirate who ever pirated. How does one get such a title?

CHENG I SAO: Well, my story starts in the early 1800s.

ELSA: Right. Back then, there were boats, but telephones didn't exist and neither did refrigerators.

CHENG I SAO: But plenty of people lived on the South China coast, where I did my pirating.

LAURA: So the people on the coast are generally pretty poor. They're fishermen. They're making their living just day by day, living hand to mouth. And there are lots of pirates stealing things from fishing boats and merchant sailors.

CHENG I SAO: In the beginning, I was working with my husband Change. We were growing our fleet of ships to steal things, so we started color-coding our ships to keep track of them.

Over there, you're the Red Flag fleet.

PIRATES: We're are the Red Flag fleet.

CHENG I SAO: And to my left, you're the Black Flag fleet.

PIRATES: We're the Black Flag fleet.

CHENG I SAO: And the Blue Flag fleet is to my right. But you all can stop yelling back what I say.

PIRATES: Whatever you say, Cheng I Sao.

CHENG I SAO: So things were going pretty well. We made a bit of money stealing things from other ships and people. Then, my husband Cheng I died. And that's when I really got to work.

JOY: Oh, wow.

CHENG I SAO: Yup, first, I put my son in charge of our best fleet, the Red Flag fleet.

ELSA: Smart.

LAURA: So she's got somebody in her most powerful fleet who's completely loyal to her. So he's the boss.

CHENG I SAO: Then, I made some very, very strict rules.

PIRATES: We would love to follow your very strict rules, Cheng I Sao.

CHENG I SAO: That's right, you would.

LAURA: As we said before, codes of conduct on pirate ships were not unusual, but hers was unusual because of how strict it was. Basically, you disobey, you die.

PIRATES: We do not want to die.

JOY: Oh, my, that is strict.

ELSA: Well, she is a pirate after all, and pirates were criminals.

LAURA: And so, she kept her pirates scared. She kept them on edge, and she kept them ready. So she made this incredibly powerful fighting force who were completely loyal to her and completely terrified of her.

CHENG I SAO: Who's this Laura lady? I like her. She really gets what I was doing.

LAURA: And so, she was able to just take this little pirate club that she and her husband were building and then just turn it into an empire unlike anything the world has ever seen before or since.

CHENG I SAO: We're talking, like, 400 ships and around 50,000 pirates under my command.

JOY: 50,000?

ELSA: That's bigger than most countries navies at the time.

CHENG I SAO: And what did I do with my empire? Naturally, I made like a gajillion dollars. I often picked fights with ships in the Chinese Navy just so I could whoop them and steal all the supplies on their ships. But I had other moneymaking schemes, too.

LAURA: So Cheng I Sao sets up this insurance racket, where she says, if you pay me money, then people know that you're still under my protection, so no other ships are going to come after you, which I always joke, it's like a tornado selling you tornado insurance.

CHENG I SAO: Very funny. Jokes aside, that scheme worked really well. Anyways, the Chinese government was pretty upset about all this, and they tried to defeat me many times. Once, I'll give it to them. They even got close. So the Chinese Navy, they knew if they ever tried to fight me, that was a recipe for failure for them.

But one time, I'm sailing with my Red Flag fleet, right? We sailed into a very narrow bay, and that's when the Chinese Navy decides to try a different strategy to take me down. They lined up a bunch of ships, all next to each other, and block me in.

JOY: Oh, no. No escape.

CHENG I SAO: Yeah, it didn't look good. At first, my fleet and I just wait.

LAURA: And people were coming from all over China to watch. This is where, finally, Cheng I Sao was going to be taken down. There were government officials. People were very excited.

CHENG I SAO: So everyone's waiting for me to surrender. So rude. But I'd never budged. Seven days passed, honestly, it was tense. And then, the Chinese Navy upped the stakes. I'm still trapped. And now, they send in the fire ships.

LAURA: Fire ships are exactly what they sound like. You take a wooden ship. You take the people off of it, and you set it on fire.

CHENG I SAO: And these are wooden ships with cloth sails, very burny. So these ships are headed straight for me and my fleet. When they reach us, it's going to be curtains for me and my crew. Things did not look good.

LAURA: And it seems like, there's no way she's going to get away with it, and there's no way she could possibly survive.

CHENG I SAO: All my adventures, my triumphs are about to end. But then, something miraculous happened. The wind, it's shifted.

LAURA: And the ships turn off-course and veer back directly towards the Chinese Navy who had sent them. So the Chinese Navy is now suddenly faced, to their horror, with two burning ships coming directly towards them. Now, remember, they were all very tightly packed together because they were making a fence to keep Cheng I Sao from escaping.

CHENG I SAO: And the only way to move ships like this is just the sails to catch the wind.

LAURA: People are screaming. People are panicking. And in the absolute chaos, Cheng I Sao and her fleet sneak away, completely unharmed.

CHENG I SAO: That's right, we did, saved by the wind.

LAURA: No one or nothing on Earth could ever take Cheng I Sao down.

JOY: Wow. Elsa, what do you think of that story?

ELSA: I feel like-- I mean, it's one of those stories where you're on the edge of your seat. Like, that she was so brave to just stay there for days and not want to turn back and have that feeling of regret. And then, also, it was the luck of the draw that the wind came in and shifted everything.

JOY: Yeah, brave is a really great word to describe her. That's a really impressive tale, Cheng I Sao.

CHENG I SAO: Yup. And to this day, nobody ever beat me. But eventually-- get this-- I decided to take myself down. I retired.

JOY: Wait, really? I had no idea pirates could retire.

CHENG I SAO: Yeah, most couldn't. You'd be arrested for all your pirating if you tried. But after a long time at sea, I figured, maybe I'd quit while I was ahead. So I told the Chinese government.

LAURA: Now, this is funny because, at this point, the Chinese government knows that they are completely useless in stopping her.

CHENG I SAO: Yeah, but I still wrote them this letter. I said, basically, Dear Government/Navy/The Man, I, your humble servant, Cheng I Sao, am ready to surrender. But I'd like you to give me everything that I want. That would be so nice of you. Thank you so much in advance. Toodles. Signed, Cheng I Sao.

LAURA: And the whole thing is just absolute baloney and sarcasm because she knows that they will accept whatever terms that she gives them because there's no alternative.

CHENG I SAO: If they didn't do what I wanted, I could just keep battling them at sea and winning. So I get what I want, every single thing.

LAURA: So she gets to keep her money. She gets to keep a small fleet of ships for her own personal use.

CHENG I SAO: The Chinese government even sets aside money to help thousands of my pirates set up new lives for themselves off the sea. I feel really good about that.

LAURA: So not only is she the best at pirating. She is the best at quitting pirating as well. So everything she does, she's the best.

CHENG I SAO: That's right. It's not bragging. It's just true.

ELSA: Wowee. Cheng I Sao, it is truly an honor to meet you and to hear your story.

JOY: Honestly, I can't believe I've never heard about your story before. It's epic.

ELSA: Yeah. And even cooler because you absolutely don't fit our stereotypical image of pirates.

CHENG I SAO: What can I say? I'm one of a kind.

JOY: Yeah, and really, it's our loss when we overlook stories that don't fit the mold we're expecting.

CHENG I SAO: So true. But now that my story, it's time for me to get back to my retirement. I've been using my extra time to start a heavy metal band, where I mainly just yell.

JOY: Oh, of course. Thanks for joining us.

LAURA: Yes, good to see you. Bye.

CHENG I SAO: Bye.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JOY: Sing, hey, I'm sailing up to sea. Heave-ho, my mate is old. With my hat and a cow, and my pal Cheng I, a pirating we go. Oh, once I stayed upon the shore. He hold my matey's hey. Now, I'm a sea dog to my core and a pirate, I will stay. So hide your treasure, hide your loot. We sail the sea. Our ship is fast. Our compass true, and the pirate crew are we. Argh.

ELSA: Joy, that one sounds great.

JOY: All I needed was that pirate inspiration. So real pirates weren't exactly the way we think of them today. They sailed by their own rules with fewer parrots and eye patches and more livestock and pirate agreements.

ELSA: But they definitely had some awesome adventures.

JOY: And the pirate is pirateist pirate who ever pirated--

ELSA: --was Cheng I Sao who sailed in these South China Sea.

JOY: This episode was written by Monica Wilhelm and produced by Tara Anderson, Sanden Totten, and Molly Bloom, with additional production support from Kailash Satyarthi, Grace Tanner, and Anna Goldfield. Sound design by Eduardo Perez. Theme music by Mark Sanchez.

Beth Perlman is our executive producer. Voice acting by Lilly Tung Crystal. We had engineering help from Jess Berg and Alex Simpson. The executives in charge of APM Studios are Chandra Khavari, Joan Griffith, and Alex Shafer. Special thanks to Susan Hawkes, Nathan Duncan, and to Laura Sook Duncombe, who wrote the very awesome book, "Pirate Women." And now, it's time to add things to our time capsule.

ELSA: Here's what we're putting in this week.

YAHTZEE: My name is Yetsy, and I live in Lincolnshire, Illinois. My idea for what I can put in the time capsule is a mask to represent COVID-19.

PHILIP: My name is Philip. I live in Berkeley, California. And if I put something into a time capsule for people to see in the future, it will be my Pokemon card collection.

CASSIE: My name is Cassie from Lyndhurst, New Jersey. And my idea for what to put in a time capsule is our writing and drawing tools that we have now. Because in the future, we might not need to use the same kind of ones. Like, how in the past, we had feathered quills. And now, we have regular pencils.

JOY: Thanks to Yahtzee, Philip, and Cassie for those excellent time capsule ideas.

ELSA: Send us your time capsule idea at foreverago.org/contact. We'll feature new answers in every episode.

JOY: And of course, as always, we'll go way back. Thanks for listening. Argh. Argh. Ahoy.