

POSTED 11.08.12

Josh Wallaert

State of the Commons



Reeve Electric Association Plant, 1938, Hampton, Iowa; entry in the Wiki Loves Monuments USA contest. [Photo by [Ann Sullivan-Larson](#)]

In March 1936, *The Chronicle* in Hampton, Iowa, published this announcement by the American Farm Bureau:

Are you interested in getting a high line by your farm to enable you to have electricity on your farm? The federal government has made arrangements to finance this program for all interested farmers. To secure this aid we must have enough farmers in the county who are interested to make the construction of the line practical and to organize a cooperative to carry on the work. In order to get some idea of the amount of interest in this project we would like to have each farmer who would like to see this work started send us a card telling us the location of his farm and if possible the names of any neighbors who are interested. As soon the weather and roads permit we will have a series of meetings at which time we will have a representative of the federal government present to discuss the program with you. [1]

One year after that meeting, the [Reeve Electric Association](#) became the first farmer-owned cooperative to receive a loan for the purchase and distribution of electric power from the [Rural Electrification Administration](#), a centerpiece of Franklin Roosevelt's first term. In four years, the number of electrified farms in the United States more than doubled, from 789,000 in 1936 to 1.7 million in 1940. [2]

To my knowledge, this is the only online photo of the Reeve Plant that is freely available to publish. It was uploaded to Wikipedia in September by Ann Sullivan-Larson, a graphic designer at a print shop in Iowa, and tagged with a [creative commons license](#) that allows others to share and remix the image. Although the plant was listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) in 1990, the National Park Service has yet to digitize its photographs of the building.

Sullivan-Larson's photo was entered in the [Wiki Loves Monuments USA](#) contest held this fall by the Wikimedia Foundation, which received more than 22,000 photos of registered historic places in the United States. Many people submitted photos of popular monuments like the Jefferson Memorial. But many others documented obscure buildings and landscapes that would otherwise remain unseen. All of the images were released to the public domain or licensed to the creative commons, and many are now used to illustrate articles on Wikipedia. In this slideshow, we present a selection of the best.

While it's inspiring to see the coordinated release of [thousands of photographs](#) of historic places, it's a shame the contest was restricted to the narrow range of sites that tend to make the NRHP list (colonial mansions, lighthouses, military forts). More generally, the photo contest highlights a crucial problem facing public discourse and scholarship in the United States. Our visual culture, and indeed our public policy, depends on the wide circulation of images that support ideas. And yet most online publications cannot afford the fees charged by wire services and many professional photographers. Like our colleagues at [The Atlantic Cities](#), [Next American City](#), [Grist](#), et al, and like Wikipedia itself, Places relies heavily on images in the creative commons or [public domain](#). [3]

For most of the last decade, the greatest repository of freely available images has been [Flickr](#), a privately-owned public space that hosts more than [240 million creative commons images](#), dwarfing the 14 million items in the [Prints & Photographs Division](#) of the U.S. Library of Congress. Pick any Wikipedia article [at random](#); if it has an image, there's a good chance it comes from Flickr.

But Flickr has become a ghost town in recent years, [conservatively managed](#) by its corporate parent Yahoo, which has ceded ground to photo-sharing alternatives like [Facebook](#) (and its subsidiary Instagram), [Google Plus](#) (and Picasa and Panoramio), and Twitter services (TwitPic and Yfrog). [4] An increasing share of the Internet's visual resources are now locked away in private cabinets, untagged and unsearchable, shared with a public no wider than the photographer's personal sphere. Google's Picasa and Panoramio support creative commons licenses, but finding the settings is not easy. And Facebook, the most social place to share photos, is the least public. Hundreds of millions of people who have photographed culturally significant events, people, buildings and landscapes, and who would happily give their work to the commons if they were prompted, are locked into sites that don't even provide the option. The Internet (and the mobile appverse) is becoming a chain of walled gardens that trap even the most civic-minded person behind the hedges, with no view of the outside world.



Canton Public Library, 1903, Canton, Ohio; entry in the Wiki Loves Monuments USA contest. [Photo by [Bgottsab](#)]

Today it's hard to imagine [coordinated public action](#) on the scale of [Roosevelt's New Deal](#). The president we re-elected this week — certainly the most socially and economically progressive in my lifetime — has repeatedly missed opportunities to expand public programs and services. Meanwhile, the nonprofit Farm Bureau, which published that 1936 announcement, piddles around fighting enforcement of the Clean Water Act, lobbying for lower capital gains taxes, and challenging the scientific consensus on global climate change, instead of promoting socially responsible farming practices and rural cooperative structures. [5]

For better and worse, [public-making](#) in the early 21st-century has been consigned to private actors: to activists, [urban interventionists](#), [community organizations](#) and — here's the really strange thing — online corporations. The body politic has retreated to nominally public spaces controlled by Google, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, which now constitute a vital but imperfect substitute for the town square. [Jonathan Massey and Brett Snyder](#) draw an analogy between these online spaces and the privately-owned public space of Zuccotti Park, the nerve center for Occupy Wall Street, and indeed online tools have been used effectively to support direct actions and participatory democracies around the world. Still, the closest most Americans get to the messy social activity of cooperative farm planning is the exchange of digital carrots in Farmville.

Imagine a Roosevelt Administration in 2012 making massive investments in public information (words, images, data) as a form of infrastructure. What more would Roosevelt do with [Data.gov](#)? Imagine [Open Street Map](#) supported jointly by NASA and the U.S. Geological Survey. Imagine the Federal Writers Project dedicated to expanding [stub articles on Wikipedia](#). Imagine the photographers of the Farm Security Administration — Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, Marion Post Wolcott — uploading their work directly to [Wikimedia Commons](#). Many federal agencies do in fact have Flickr profiles where they release images into the public domain; Flickr has even created a special license ("United States Government Work") for the [White House photostream](#). [6] But imagine the federal government financially supporting a socially-networked photo-sharing site as it does the Library of Congress and giving it the resources to survive Facebook's

walled-garden challenge. It's easy to marvel at the powerful new tools the Internet has given us. But let's not forget how much better, [how much more public](#) they could be.

Design Observer © 2006-2011 Observer Omnimedia LLC

Notes

1. *The Chronicle*, Hampton, Iowa (March 12, 1936), 12

2. Robert T. Beall, "Rural Electrification," *Yearbook of Agriculture* (1940), 802.

3. Coincidentally, Places has published photos by members of the Wiki Loves Monuments USA jury. Just last month, the journal published a photo of Camden Yards Stadium by Carol Highsmith, who has donated her work to the Library of Congress since 1992. David Shankbone's photos have appeared in eight articles. And the Prelinger Archives, founded by a third judge, Rick Prelinger, has been an invaluable resource.

4. That could change. Yahoo's new chief, Marissa Mayer, is said to be enthusiastic about reviving Flickr, and she recently installed a former *National Geographic* photographer to oversee its development. See Michael Zhang, "Flickr's New Head Used to Be a National Geographic Wildlife Photographer," Petapixel, November 7, 2012.

5. Allison Winter, "Farm Bureau Fires Back Against Climate Bill's 'Power Grab'," January 11, 2010, *The New York Times*. See also the Farm Bureau's stated legislative priorities.

6. On the other hand, the 10,000 photos uploaded to Flickr by the National Register of Historic Places are tagged "all rights reserved."

Share This Story



COMMENTS (1) | [JUMP TO MOST RECENT >>](#)



It's shocking to me that you haven't mentioned MediaGoblin, which is a new federated service that includes easy ways to share your media under free licenses (or under All Rights Reserved, as you see fit).

MarkTraceur
11.08.12 at 07:28

LOG IN TO POST A COMMENT

Don't have an account? [Create an account](#). Forgot your password? [Click here](#).

Email

Password