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Bringing You A "Library 2.0" Perspective, by Michael Casey

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Photography and the National Archives

I attended a presentation yesterday by James McSweeney, the regional administrator of the [National Archives Southeast Region](#). The presentation was sponsored by [North Georgia Associated Libraries](#) and hosted by the [Sequoyah Regional Library System](#). The presentation was excellent, and McSweeney gave a wonderful talk about the archive's new 115,000 square foot facility in Morrow, Georgia, which just opened this past April.

But what really jumped out was the realization that so much of what has been captured on film over the past 75 years may not be captured in the next 75. McSweeney's presentation included many photographs by both famous and unknown photographers who were working under the New Deal's [Works Progress Administration](#) (WPA). There were numerous other federal programs that employed photographers and artists, but WPA was by far the largest. WPA paid many now famous photographers such as Walker Evans and Berenice Abbott to travel the country and document the social and economic conditions of the time. The resulting collection of images numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Those images now serve as historical evidence, and they provide students and researchers with a priceless resource.

But where now? Those images, all public domain because they were contracted by the U.S. government, will serve as official record for that era. But what images will students be viewing in another fifty or one-hundred years to look back at this era and learn from? I'm not so sure that this is a question of archiving so much as it's a question of copyright and control. The vaults of [AP](#), [Corbis](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), [Magnum](#), and so many other repositories are full of images reflecting this era. But those images are copyrighted, and unavailable to use in the same manner as the images in the archive's collection.

I am not an archivist. There may be projects underway that address just this need. But I am a librarian that is very interested in photography and history, and I hope that there are projects being planned to bring contemporary images into the NARA collection, whether this is through individual or corporate donations of collections, or through the hiring of photographers to travel and document the contemporary U.S. much as they did under WPA.

Posted by Michael on January 18, 2006 07:34 AM | [Permalink](#)

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If Flickr lasts 75 years, there will be an enormous quantity of nicely tagged and categorized and copyright-marked photos available there.

Posted by: [Edward Vielmetti](#) | [January 19, 2006 02:52 AM](#)

Check out the National Archives' "The Way We Worked" photograph exhibit at <http://www.archives.gov/press/press-kits/way-we-worked/way-we-worked-photos.html>

The exhibit will be coming to the National Archives Southeast Region (Morrow, GA) in spring 2007!

Posted by: Jim McSweeney | [February 11, 2006 01:40 PM](#)

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