



My Flickr Meta-content

2004–2007

by Steve Portigal

I began using Flickr in October 2004 when it was the hot new thing among the digerati. Half a year later, with an upgraded Flickr Pro account and unlimited storage, I was posting current and archived images with gleeful determination. Experiments with tagging and creating contacts led to the discovery of wonderfully arcane, special interest groups, like “Rusty and Crusty.”

The more pictures I posted, the more I understood Flickr’s power. I began to take pictures to share them rather than letting them accumulate on my hard drive. Flickr facilitated a new function for photography—one that utilized my ability to notice and retell stories in amusing and provoking ways. It provided a forum that legitimized that vision. And my audience grew, including strangers and people I knew who used my pictures to keep in touch. At parties, instead of asking, “What’s up?” people would reference my Flickr pictures: “Looks like you had a great time in Banff!”

On my first trip to Hong Kong, Bangkok, and India, I took hundreds of pictures. Over several months I posted them all to Flickr with small stories about each. The photos accumulated responses from people familiar with those cultures and customs. People translated signs, explained local customs, and answered my frequent “What the heck is that?” questions. Taking and posting photos was a way to be informed.

In December 2007, I was the victim of a phishing scam. While in Japan (where I took 1300 pictures in 2 weeks) and uploading pictures, I received a comment that indicated I had won an “award” for a photograph. I clicked the link. It was a scam. The miscreant deleted my Flickr account. Although Flickr support reinstated my account, it came back blank. Everything was gone. Sure, my 5000 images still reside on my hard drive at home, multiply backed up, but the meta-content is gone. All the titles, descriptions, groups I had contributed to, tags, and viewers’ comments. All my contacts and anyone who had me as a contact lost me. All my blog entries that included Flickr images are broken. And on and on.

I am slowly re-uploading pictures, although there’s no way to recreate everything I had written or reclaim everything others had shared. And it’s not just the images—it’s the knowledge, the connections, the details. The actual loss is the gestalt of those pieces together: several years’ worth of my photos, my stories, and others’ comments and stories.

Now, I’m in a bit of a daze when I use Flickr. I’m emotionally disconnected, less interested in viewing others’ pictures, building connections, or telling stories. A powerful outlet for my creativity, storytelling, observation, and humor has been blunted. I’m left to think of Flickr as ephemeral, not archival; Twitter, not Wikipedia; a public hard drive for JPEG files, not a storybook of my life. And I really can’t let myself care too much about it. 🖐