# How can archives and libraries collaborate with communities to preserve local history on the communities' own terms?

## The Antonito Community History Collection: Co-creation of a community-centered archival collection

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Antonito residents Jay Warner and Cletus Perea identify significant locations on a historical photo of Antonito's Main Street during Labor Day in, Antonito, CO. September 2022. Photo by María Islas-López

## Summary

The *Antonito Community History Collection* is part of a series of case studies emerging from History Colorado's Community Centered Collections Project (2021-2024), a project that prioritizes the interest of communities in interpreting, preserving, and making accessible their local histories on their own terms. With funds from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the project critically examines the role archives play in

the local history work of communities, particularly of those that have been systematically marginalized. The project explores History Colorado's evidence-based efforts to deepen the relationship between the archive and communities and to reconceive it as reciprocal and interdependent. Each case study aims to capture lessons learned about what works in co-creating a more inclusive and polyvocal local history.

This fact sheet tells the story of how *Antonito Together*, a local community-based organization, partnered with History Colorado to co-create a community collection that reflects the motivations, perspective and knowledge of the Antonito community and the surrounding villages. This approach to listening to the community about the stories that matter to them, and making sure their knowledge is the driving force behind the collecting and interpretive efforts is applicable to any archive and library looking to build alongside community members collections that are inclusive and representative of communities.

## About the Community

Antonito is a rural community in Conejos County in southern Colorado with a population of 647 people as of 2020. Formally known as San Antonio Junction it was founded in 1880 as a sheep herding camp. It is considered one of the oldest towns in the San Luis Valley in Colorado. Antonito was a main starting point for Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad which was responsible for the town's boom through the first half of the 20th century. After the closing of the train in 1968 the town steadily went into economic decline. The town of Antonito is a community with ties to early Hispano settlers and is currently home to small farms and ranches.

## Challenge

The initial goal of the project was to address inaccuracies, misrepresentation and offensive cataloging in existing collections by facilitating opportunities for community members to interact with the Antonito-related records available at History Colorado's permanent collection. When these records were shown to a group of community stakeholders, including the leadership team of Antonito Together (our community partner), it was clear that the available collection felt short in representing their community accurately on their own terms with the exceptions being two sets of oral histories collected by local youth as part of a prior collaboration with Antonito Together. This realization led to rethinking the priorities of the project and to engage in an iterative process of co-creation that addressed two questions:

- How to increase the intellectual content and context of archival collections in inclusive and not extractive ways through the prioritization of community authorship and self-representation?
- How to facilitate a process for community members to explore their cultural heritage as a means to support further community goals for community development and cohesiveness?

## Objectives

- To develop a participatory and community-centered approach to protecting, preserving and amplifying the history of Antonito and the surrounding villages--with decisions made by community members.
- To co-create alongside community members, through shared stewardship, an inclusive archival collection that centers their motivations, perspective and knowledge.

## Strategies

Three project phases organically resulted in the three year duration of the project, each phase built on the results and emerging opportunities of the last. The phases were: "Community engagement and listening" (Year 1), "Community Connections and community interpretation of the collection" (Year 2), and "Community-led collecting, curation and authorship" (Year 3). The strategies employed over the course of these phases included:

- Open houses for sharing, listening and connecting
- Collaboration with student fellow to facilitate initial community assessment
- Photo scanning and community interpretation events
- Grassroot level collecting of community stories
- Use of a post custodial archival model through the creation of digital copies of materials that prioritizes accessibility and preservation over archival possession of items.
- Communal storytelling in the form of memory circles
- Community mapping and profiles
- Tailored roadmaps and tools to facilitate the grassroots collecting effort.
- Postcards with community photos to distribute at community events.
- Training of community members to do individual grassroots collecting, curating and documenting.
- Financial support for community collaborators
- One-on-one weekly mentorship for community collaborators
- Participation in community events to provide project updates

- Community sharebacks: Photo panel exhibit, pop-up events to the community-authored collection and an online collection portal.
- Additional cataloging support to make sure the collection is ready available for the community in a timely manner.
- Emphasizing community expertise in the selection, attribution, interpretation and documentation of the collection.
- Regular meetings with project stakeholders to assess progress and identify emerging needs.



Antonito Labor Day event, September 2023. Photo by Melissa de Bie.

## Outcomes

- A community-defined collection of oral histories,archival documents and digital images that explore the lifeways, language, and culture of Antonito and the surrounding villages. This collection resulted from grassroots collecting efforts all done in collaboration with community members and co-curated by two community members.
- Community history collection portal: https://5008.sydneyplus.com/HistoryColorado_ArgusNet_Final/Portal/CommunityCollectionsAntonito.aspx
- Photo panel exhibit for the community to use in community spaces.
- An interactive digital map with pinned images, text and audio showcasing the archival collection resulting from this effort to continue the community sharing of memories as well as for the purposes of the activation of the archival collection:

- Community History Video showcasing project activities
- Community profile and an annotated bibliography

## Insights

- This work cannot be completed without honoring the process of relationship building and understanding that this takes time and trust.
- Providing project stakeholders with something tangible to assess progress is central to establishing trust and confidence. Visual manifestations of the work, whether it was paperwork or large prints from photos that were donated, became an enabler for community participation.
- It is essential to listen to community members and constantly innovate and create products and processes that speak to them, as opposed to developing products that only meet the goals of the institution. Listening to the community and following their cues and readiness is paramount for a successful project that is not extractive but reciprocal.
- Being a constant presence in the community is extremely important for trust building. Participation in community events is very meaningful for community members and allows for the alignment of project activities with the community's own experiences.
- Community knows best. Embracing the community's knowledge and expertise regarding what matters to them, how they identify themselves and their priorities is key to success.
- Providing stipends to our community fellows and collaborators was crucial. The stipends allowed them to feel seen and valued for the work that they were doing.
- Recruiting local community members to serve as lead collaborators and curators guaranteed success as it emphasized the project as being community-centered and driven by local knowledge. In addition, participation in the project gave a sense of place and belonging in their community to our collaborators, making their history relevant for them in the present.
- Committing to constant innovation and flexibility allowed us to adapt project activities to meet the organic evolution of the project. This meant co-creating resources, tools and processes as needed and holding weekly team meetings to assess progress and needs.

- Meeting weekly with our community fellow collaborators, co-creating resources in response to project needs and building the process according to the pacing and opportunities emerging from actual project implementation was key to success.

[Click here to explore the project timeline](#)

## Acknowledgements

This project is a collaborative effort with contributions from team members at History Colorado collaborating with Antonito Together and community members from Antonito and the surrounding villages. We thank these community members for the knowledge we have gained working with them. Special thanks go to the project's community co-curators Angela Montoya and Lisa Marie Sandoval as well as to our community partner Jay Warner.

## About History Colorado

History Colorado's mission is to create a better future for Colorado by inspiring wonder in our past. We serve as the state's memory, preserving and sharing the places, stories, and material culture of Colorado through educational programs, historic preservation grants, collecting, outreach to Colorado communities, the History Colorado Center and Stephen H. Hart Research Center in Denver, and 10 other museums and historic attractions statewide. History Colorado is one of only six Smithsonian Affiliates in Colorado.

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