

How can archives and libraries collaborate with communities to make local history collections accessible on the communities' own terms?

Access and Activation for the Avondale Community Collection: Developing products to connect the community with their own archival records.

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Lynn Soto, from the Avondale Resident Team, at the Community Photo Scanning event in Avondale, CO. October, 2023. Photo by Daniel Martinez.

Summary

The *Access and Activation for the Avondale Community 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 the *Avondale Resident Team*, a local community-based organization, collaborated with History Colorado to identify and co-design access and dissemination strategies for their community-defined collection already housed at History Colorado's archive. This approach to listening to the community about what they need to activate and use their own records—and making sure the community's expertise and lived experience is the driving force behind the accessibility and dissemination efforts—is applicable to any archive and library interested in developing inclusive methods for connecting communities to the collections they have co-authored or that feature them.

About the Community

Avondale is a predominantly rural community and census-designated place in Pueblo County in southern Colorado with a population of 594 people as of 2020. Initially named Concord, Avondale was founded in 1892 by early settlers who raised cattle and grew hay because of the ideal grazing land located in the area by the Arkansas River Valley. Avondale is primarily a Hispano, Mexican American and Italian American community. It was once an affluent town that boasted the Pueblo Army Depot, high-producing-generational farms, and a vibrant main street. Avondale went into economic decline after the downturn of Pueblo's steel industry and the downscaling of the Pueblo Army Depot towards the end of the twentieth century. It currently faces challenges from lack of infrastructure, transportation, food access and little to no economic opportunity. Avondale has a rich history of veterans, military service, agriculture, religion, and sports.

Challenge

Since 2028 the Avondale Resident Team has been collaborating with History Colorado's Museum of Memory program to facilitate a community memory project to broaden Avondale's historical narrative from the perspective of those who have lived it. For the Avondale Resident Team this cultural engagement effort was necessary to support their community development efforts and to create the awareness needed to

bring attention to the community's most pressing needs. This collaboration involved a grassroots collecting effort of photos that resulted in a community collection of 543 digital photos from various community members with descriptions provided by Avondale residents. The general public could access this community collection of photos through History Colorado's online collection portal. However, Avondale suffers from a lack of internet infrastructure. Many residents do not have reliable internet access, making access to online resources unfeasible. In addition, the pandemic put on hold the oral history collecting component of the community memory project. The Avondale Resident Team needed to show to community members the product of their collecting efforts to reactivate engagement and buy-in.

Objectives

- To support the Avondale community in the activation of their already existing community-defined collection at History Colorado's archive through the development of tangible (analog) products for the community to access and use their own records.
- To facilitate opportunities that improve the use of the community collection as a tool for community engagement.

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), "Development of Resources for Community Access" (Year 2), and "Activation of the Collection for Community Connections and Further Storytelling" (Year 3). The strategies employed over the course of these phases included:

- Listening sessions with community partners for sharing, learning and connecting.
- Collaboration with student fellow to facilitate community engagement, co-creation of resources and collecting efforts
- Photo scanning event and grassroots level collecting of community stories in response to an increased community interest to contribute to the existing collection.
- Hosting information booths with collection highlights and project updates at community events.
- Emphasizing the lived experience of community members and their community context in the design of products for collection access.
- Regular meetings with community partners to assess progress and identify emerging needs.

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- Financial support for community collaborators
 - Community sharebacks (all co-created with community partners): 1) Coffee table style book to showcase the community collection and 2) a pre-packaged co-curated exhibit with selected items from Avondale's community collection. All products are for use by the Avondale Resident Team and the community.



Daniel Martinez, community student fellow (further right), during the community engagement phase in Avondale, CO. Summer 2022. Photo courtesy of Daniel Martinez.

Outcomes

- A coffee style book that highlights the Avondale community-defined collection of photos donated by community members.
- A community-defined collection of oral histories to add to the community collection of photos resulting from a regained community interest in the project after the creation of the photo collection book.
- Community Lending Resource: A pre-packaged curated exhibit provides access to selected items from Avondale's community-defined collection. This includes reproduction photos, interpretive labels, oral history audio clips and programming ideas around central themes. This resource is for community use.
- Community profile and an annotated bibliography.
- Increased participation of community members, community buy-in and re-establishment of trust with community stakeholders.

Insights

- Avondale's internet limitations were actually advantages. Because it was so important to accommodate the community's lived experience, the final products

remained true to the core of the community and felt authentic and tailored to them. This made the efforts stand out from other standardized access efforts History Colorado implements.

- Providing community stakeholders with a tangible product to show the outcomes of collaborative archive efforts is central for accountability. This transforms the abstract concepts of an “archival collection” into a concrete reality that recognizes their effort.
- Constant presence in the community is crucial as well as locating opportunities to bring community collections back into community spaces. Participation in community events was very beneficial to building trust and strengthening collaboration.
- It is clear that the success of the project is the result of multiple relationships and this work cannot be completed without honoring the process of relationship building and understanding that this takes time and trust. Listening to the community’s concerns and working towards addressing them is a core element for trust building.
- Including the target demographic in the planning and development of products to access and disseminate collections was important. This led to effective out-of-the box thinking that allowed to break access barriers between the archive and the community.
- A commitment to reciprocity needs to be a guiding force when working with communities to collect and disseminate their local history. It is not enough to tell communities that their cultural heritage is being cared for in the archive. Reciprocity is built with ongoing clear communication and open dialogue. But more important, emphasis would be put on developing outcomes that would benefit all partners on their own terms and in ways that matter to them.

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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.