

How can archives and libraries support communities and local cultural organizations to care for their own historical and cultural property?

Caring for Collections in San Luis: Resource sharing and capacity building for collections care and management.

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Shaun Boyd, History Colorado's Curator of Archives, holding a preservation workshop at the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center in San Luis, CO. October, 2023. Photo by Melissa de Bie.

Summary

Caring for Collections in San Luis 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 community members in San Luis, Colorado, and the *Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center*, a local town museum, worked with History Colorado to learn, implement best practices and identify opportunities to better care for their collections of artifacts, oral histories, objects, and images. This approach to listening to the community about what they need to care for their own historical and cultural property—as opposed to making assumptions that these should be placed in hands of larger repositories—is applicable to any archive and library interested in supporting community members, smaller cultural organizations and community based repositories to build, strengthen or improve their collections stewardship capacity.

About the Community

San Luis is a rural community, predominantly Hispano and Catholic, in Costilla County in the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado, with a population of 622 people as of 2023. San Luis is considered the oldest occupied town in the state. Initially known as San Luis de la Culebra, it was founded in 1851 by Hispano farmers from the Taos Valley in New Mexico. The community continues to be predominantly farmers and ranchers. Community land grants and a system of communal irrigation ditches called acequias has historically shaped the governance and ways of life in San Luis. It was a self-sufficient agricultural community until the second half of the 20th century when a private landowner illegally closed a huge portion of historic land used for fishing, hunting and grazing animals. The consequences of this cut off of land continues to affect the community to this date, which keeps on fighting for the right to access the land. San Luis is one of Colorado’s most economically challenged communities, but it is rich in cultural heritage, the arts and activism. Still spoken in San Luis is a unique Spanish dialect, which results from the complex geopolitical history of the area.

Challenge

The initial goal of the project was to facilitate opportunities for San Luis community members to interact with records available at History Colorado’s permanent collection relevant to the community and engage in a process of community authorship and reparative description. After an intentional process of listening and learning from the

San Luis community it was clear that their priority was to provide care and facilitate the access and preservation of the collections owned by families and the community.

On the one hand, community members are increasingly concerned with how to preserve their personal archives that document the town's unique history. On the other, like many other communities, San Luis has a local museum (i.e. The Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center) that grew out of the interest of the community to preserve their own history with donations and loans from many long-time San Luis families. The building had been closed for at least 10 years and after a series of administrative changes, ownership and legal procedures the town was ready to bring it back to life. The museum had a number of unorganized rooms with artifacts piled on top of each other and covered in dust. There was no clear roadmap for collection care and catalogs and inventories could not be located. Organizing, cataloging and cleaning the museum was a significant and urgent challenge for the community.

Objectives

- To support San Luis community members in the care and preservation of their personal archives and community collections through training opportunities and the sharing of knowledge and resources available at History Colorado.
- To improve the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center's practices for collections care and management to support the planned reopening of the museum to the public.

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), "Identifying local archival collections and preservation opportunities" (Year 2), and "Collection Care at the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center" (Year 3). The strategies employed over the course of these phases included:

- Open house and listening sessions with the community for learning and connecting.
- Emphasizing community expertise in assessing what they need.
- Serving as a repository for a collection of community-originated oral histories for accessibility and preservation.
- Creation of digital copies of personal archives for access and preservation and facilitation of a portal for crowdsourced transcription for community exploration.

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- Organizing an interdisciplinary event with workshops and resources for community members to gain skills, knowledge and resources for the preservation of their stories and places.
 - Training of a community fellow collaborator in best practices for collection stewardship to support the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center in making sure their collection of artifacts, objects, and images are properly stored and cataloged.
 - Development of roadmaps and tools tailored to the work.
 - One-on-one weekly mentorship for the community collaborator on item-level cataloging in order to develop a collection database and generate data for further collection management and recommendations.
 - Regular meetings with project stakeholders to assess progress and identify emerging needs.
 - Financial support for community collaborators
 - Community sharebacks: Crowdsourced transcription portal, museum catalog.



Sample of the collection at the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center in need of cataloging. San Luis, CO.
Photo by Dana Maestes, Community Fellow

Outcomes

- A collection database for the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center with item-level descriptions and photos of 451 objects and photos.
- An organized and clean museum that is safe for the collection that is on display and that is potentially ready to receive visitors.
- The preservation of a community-defined collection of oral histories, now housed at History Colorado, that explores the lifeways, language, and culture of San Luis.

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- Preservation and access of digital copies of administrative and financial documents that preserve the contributions of Hispana and Mexican American women.
 - A crowdsourced transcription page:
<https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/madebie/documentos-y-cartas-de-las-feminas-feminilas-documents-and-letters>
 - An interactive digital map with pinned images, text and audio for the community to share community memories:
<https://www.historypin.org/en/san-luis-memory-project/geo/37.200848,-105.423901,11/bounds/37.054677,-105.56432,37.346736,-105.283482/paging/1>
 - Community History Video
 - Evidence-based practice recommendations to provide a foundation on which the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center can identify next steps and move forward.

[Click here to learn more about the work completed at the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center](#)

Insights

- Patience is important and making space for reflecting on the actions and steps of the work is crucial. In supporting the community fellow collaborator working at the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center, investing time in creation of processes and resources proved to be key for achieving outcomes.
- Committing to regular meetings both with the community fellow collaborator leading the work in San Luis and with the team at History Colorado led to greater success. We were able to make tweaks to the work as needed.
- Especially in small towns like San Luis, partnering with local museums and archives to share resources and knowledge to build capacity can be very impactful. It is important, however, to be mindful that they do not exist in a vacuum and that they are impacted by the local politics, relationships and the many ways the communities are navigating through limited resources. Being respectful of these is of utmost importance. Work of this type requires gaining a deep understanding of the community context, meeting the community where it is at and a willingness to be open to results that might not match the expectations set in the first place.
- Involving a local community member to complete the cataloging work for the local museum was the key to developing a collection database that was relevant to the community and representative of its people, values and knowledge.
- Every community context is unique and there is no one approach that fits all.

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- Greater community ownership of the work and providing support through training, mentorship and resource sharing ultimately translates into more potential for the sustainability of the effort.
 - Communities like San Luis are very proud of their cultural heritage and want to care for it on their own terms. It is important for them that their objects, images and artifacts remain in the community for the continuity of their culture, especially when funding cuts, government policies and other systemic challenges are threatening community sustainability. At the same time they recognize that they cannot do it without the archival resources, credentials and expertise of larger cultural archives and libraries. When larger organizations are willing to demonstrate that they can set aside their own goals for the goals of the community and envision a shared goal, opportunities can open for authentic collaboration that could be truly impactful for the community.

Acknowledgements

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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.