

HISTORY COLORADO | SPRING/SUMMER 2024

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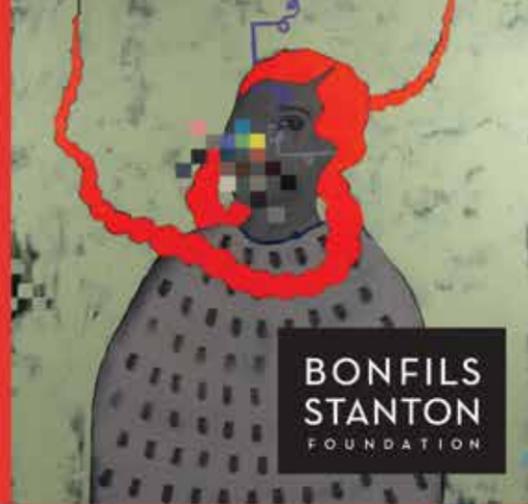
# THE COLORADO

MAGAZINE

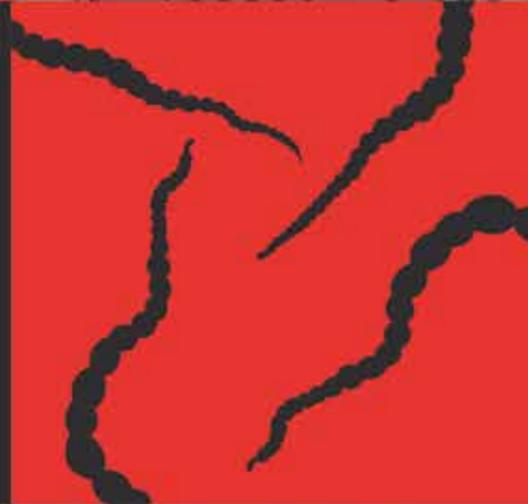
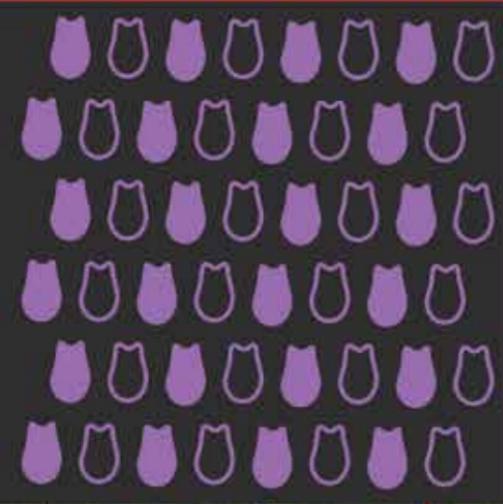
**A Song for the  
San Luis Valley**

Highline History / Last Chance / Mall Memories

**BUT WE  
HAVE  
SOME  
THING  
TO SAY**



*See Walker*



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BUT WE  
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**History  
Colorado**  
**FEB 29  
TO  
SEPT 15**

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## HISTORIC SITES AS WITNESS

This March, my family went on a self-guided exploration of civil rights history in the South. We walked the streets of Birmingham, Alabama, where interpretive signs detailed resistance against Jim Crow laws, and visited the Birmingham Baptist Church where four preteen girls were killed in a racially motivated bombing in 1963. We walked across the famous Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. And we visited the National Memorial, for Peace and Justice, sometimes called the National Lynching Memorial in Montgomery that acknowledges the murder of thousands of Black Americans in acts of post-Civil War racial terror.



These places are a form of collective memory, represented by what we, our predecessors and our successors, choose to preserve—or not preserve. Think about the buildings that have long existed, the monuments that stand, the names of our streets and schools. They are a more significant historical record than any textbook, and we exist within them in ways that should be impossible to ignore.

Which is why I was surprised that earlier this month the Boulder City Council rejected the creation of a historic district, in part because some conflated preserving with glorifying an exclusionary past. The district would have included Block Eleven, an early Black residential neighborhood along Boulder Creek that was displaced in 1921 to create a park. While no one would want to replicate these actions, we are—with a nod to the often-quoted saying—doomed to repeat what we pretend doesn't exist.

In February, History Colorado partnered with nonprofit Colorado Preservation, Inc. to bring in the inspiring, decorated, and relatively young preservation leader Monica Rhodes to Colorado as a keynote speaker. Rhodes asked Colorado's preservation community to think about how preservation can help us to refine our creation stories. She noted, "Preservation enables us to expand what we know about America."

In order to expand our knowledge, the historic record must be honest about the places where harm was enacted by some and endured and resisted by others. There is evidence of the profound importance of this type of preservation work here in Colorado, from the extant building foundations at the Amache Granada Relocation Center, to the death cellar at Ludlow and the bluff overlooking the Sand Creek Massacre site. Even as we work to preserve the sites that represent the most inspiring stories of our past, or the most beautiful designs, innovative advancements, or natural grandeur, we also must acknowledge and save places that tell us about our hard histories.

*Dawn DiPrince*

President/CEO & State Historic Preservation Officer

We acknowledge that the land currently known as Colorado has been the traditional homelands of Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. We are grateful to work in partnership with the fifty-one sovereign nations who continue to call this land home. Together, we plan exhibits; collect, preserve, and interpret artifacts; do archaeological work; and create educational programs to share the history of Colorado.

THE **COLORADO**  
MAGAZINE

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# THE COLORADO MAGAZINE

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ABOVE Former Owlettes, members of Denver's famous Black debutante society The Owl Club, during their Champagne Sip and Fashion Show at the clubhouse in 1962. Courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Burnis McCloud collection

COVER Capilla de San Acacio is the oldest chapel in Colorado. It was built between 1850 and 1860 in the village of the same name; the pitched roof and belfry were added in the 1920s. Photo by Miguel A. Gandert

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# THE FORUM

WE LOVE HEARING FROM YOU. Drop us a line at [publications@state.co.us](mailto:publications@state.co.us)

## Transcendent Tour

The Colorado Encyclopedia recently launched a virtual tour of the *Sociedad Protección Mutua de Trabajadores Unidos* (the Society for Mutual Protection of Workers United) building in Antonito, Colorado, which was recently renovated with the help of the State Historic Fund.

I just wanted to give kudos on your SPMDTU. virtual tour—not only was the renovation job admirable but you also have highlighted the experience for so many like myself by allowing us to view the interior as well as the overall town of Antonito. The building and town are in a part of the state not easily reached and it's wonderful to be able to enjoy all the work and local character in a way that would not otherwise be possible.

—Bob Chow, via email

## Villa Italia Remembered

Jeremy Morton's history of Villa Italia mall in this print issue was originally published online. One engaged reader wrote in to share her mall memories.

Thanks, Jeremy, for an excellent article on Villa Italia. I grew up in Lakewood only a few blocks away as well, we lived right behind Roller City. His memories are pretty close to the same as the memories I had. The arcade. Spencers and the food court getting the most attention from me. The years were just a little earlier—1985 to the 90's. I do remember things like the Circus coming to town and riding an elephant in the parking lot before the renovations. Later, finding my friends and I in the hallways and stairwells behind the stores. Doing things we probably shouldn't have. Not going to lie, it did bring a tear to my eye

remembering all the good times. Thanks for the memories! There were a lot of them. Weren't there?

—Nikki Lund, via email

## Digitizing the Past

History Colorado's vast catalog of past magazine issues is gradually being made available online! A former managing editor got in touch to suggest another title worthy of the same treatment.

History Colorado is to be commended for working to digitize all issues of its landmark journal, *The Colorado Magazine*, encompassing forty years of issues under the title *Colorado Heritage* (1980–2020). I hope, for the benefit of scholarship, that the program can be expanded to include the scholarly series *Essays and Monographs in Colorado History* (renamed *Colorado History*) as part of the entire body of literature that now numbers well over two thousand articles, monographs, catalogs, and books since *The Colorado Magazine's* founding in 1923.

—David Wetzell, via email

## Appreciation for the Weekly Digest

Thank you for the great information you provide! We at the Virtual Creative Factory in Colorado love and use this publication daily! Again, thanks for a great service!

—Franco Arteseros, via email

## Praise for Winter Warriors

In our last issue, Dr. Chris Juergens penned a new article telling the under-reported story of the 10th Mountain Division's heroic campaign in the Italian theater of World War II. Several readers wrote in to express their thanks, both for the article and for the heroic legacy of Colorado's most revered mountain troops.

The article "Winter Warriors" in the Winter/Spring 2024 edition was excellent! Growing up in Colorado, studying Colorado History, I do not remember ever hearing much about the 10th Mountain Division. Maybe I was sleeping or talking during those sessions. Anyway, thank you for publishing articles like this. Dr. Juergens has given me an education.

—Tim Bachicha, via email

I have lived in Colorado my whole life, and it seems like whenever I hear about the 10th Mountain Division, the focus is always on their training at Camp Hale or the ski industry some of the men helped kick off in Colorado after the war. You really don't hear much about their campaign or the incredible bravery of these men. Thank you to Dr. Juergens for highlighting their heroism.

—Arlene Simpson, via post

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# BLACK COWBOYS UNVEILED

BY ACOMA GAITHER

Popular culture has largely written Black cowboys out of the West. Evidence from History Colorado's archives reminds us of their centrality to the story.

Just thinking about the Old West can evoke images of vast landscapes dotted with canyons, cacti, and critters, occasionally presided over by a kettle of vultures. The people within them, at least in most popular portrayals, are usually mounted on horseback, often chasing herds of cattle over open prairie. And they're as mythic as the landscapes they inhabit.

These archetypal cowboys came into popular imagination in mass media and entertainment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dime novels, illustrations, paintings, and theatrical stage productions featured white European Americans. But these popular images obscured the true history of the American cowboy, one in which cowboys of color always played prominent parts in the diverse cultural tapestry of the American West.

Today, Black artists are working to recover and reclaim this history. Solange's album, *When I Get Home*, Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road," and Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter* album focus on Black cowboys in their lyrics and album covers. As I started thinking about these contemporary artists and their messages, I began wondering if any materials in the History Colorado Collection highlight the lineage

of African Americans in the American West. What I found reveals that History Colorado has played a role in preserving this important history in its collections even as it has struggled to represent the shrouded legacy of Black cowboys in Colorado.

## BLACK COWBOYS COME WEST

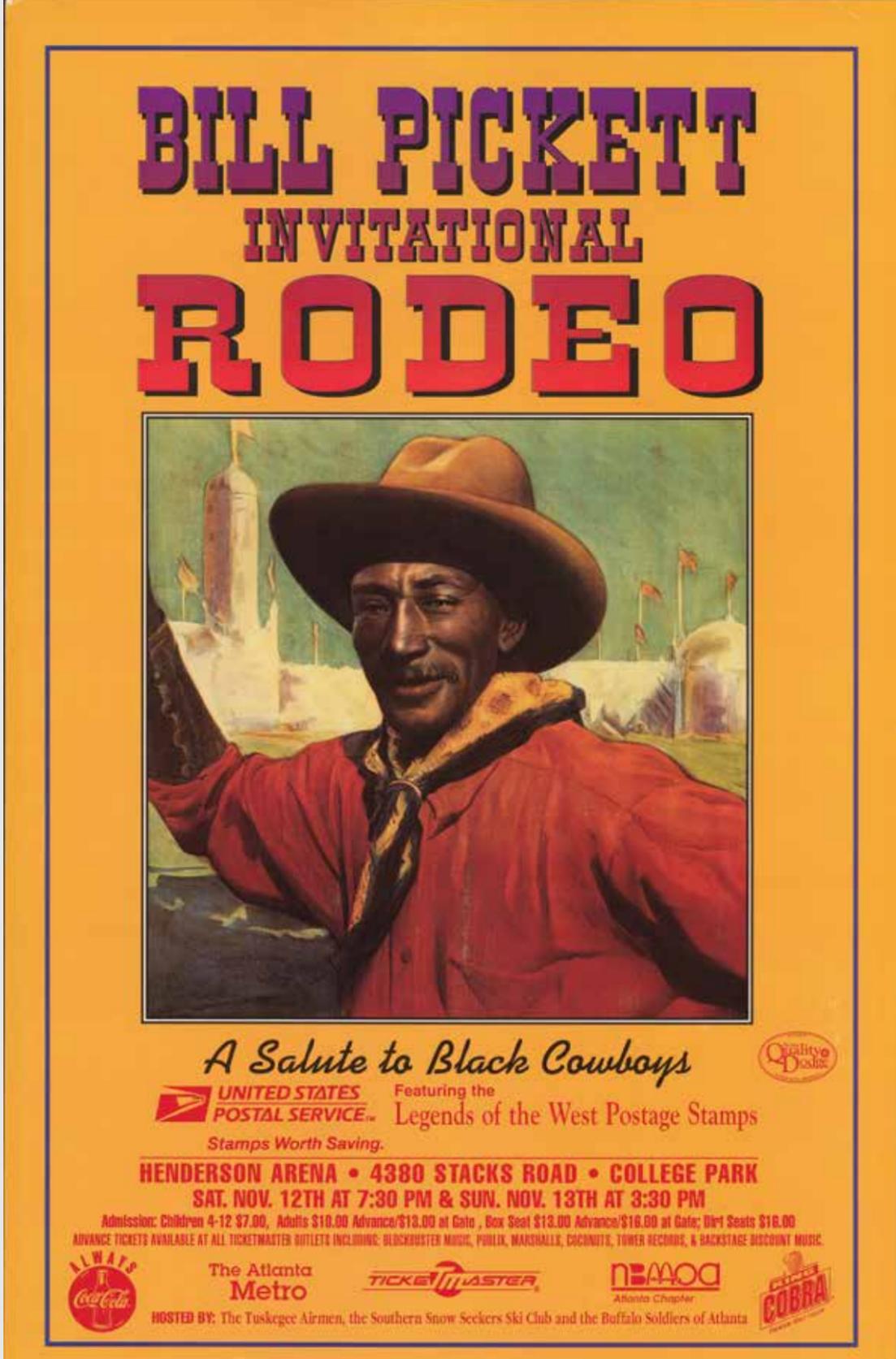
Archival records show that slave traders specifically targeted African tribes familiar with cattle herding, like the Fulani of modern day Cameroon. Transported to the Americas, the enslaved persons with such expertise were assigned tasks like catching and tending wild cattle, or driving long trains of steers led by oxen. This knowledge became even more valuable in the West, as African Americans took on various occupations including ranch handing, wrangling, gold mining, farming, trapping, and more.

**Following Emancipation and the Civil War, many African Americans ventured into territories that would later become Colorado.**

Following Emancipation and the Civil War, many African Americans ventured into territories that would later become Colorado. At least a quarter of cowboys in the late 1800s were Black, and alongside Native American and Mexican cowboys, were central in transforming the social, physical, and economic terrain. Laboring as a cowhand was definitely not an easy task, but it was more profitable than sharecropping, one of the only occupations for freedmen in the South. While instances of prejudice and racial violence were still common in western territories, the rules of racism and segregation weren't as rigid here as they were in the South. Combined with demand for skilled labor, for many, the West represented a chance for a new life and economic prosperity unavailable elsewhere in the country.

One of the most famous Black cowboys, William "Bill" Pickett, was probably born on December 5, 1870 in Texas. Pickett left school in fifth grade to begin working as a ranch hand where he started riding horses and learning rodeo performance

► Poster for the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo, about 1994. History Colorado, 2001.19.2



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techniques. His natural talent earned him victories in numerous rodeo contests and national competitions. Today, he is remembered as the creator of the “bulldogging” technique. Also known as steer wrestling, bulldogging involves grabbing the stock by the horns to wrestle the animal to the ground—an event still popular in modern rodeos. Pickett went on to establish the Pickett Brothers Bronco Busters and Rough Riders alongside his four brothers. In the early 1900s, he performed in the popular Miller Brothers 101 Ranch

Wild West Show, which also included famous cowboys like Buffalo Bill and Will Rogers. Some folklore even suggests he taught Rogers some of his most famous tricks. Pickett is credited as being the first Black cowboy star and later appeared in several motion pictures. Although Black cowboys like Pickett were involved in rodeos for decades, many had to endure the same hostile conditions on the road that greeted other Black performers.

Promoter Lu Vason decided to put Black cowboys front and center when

he moved to Denver in 1977. Upon arrival he toured the Black American West Museum and discovered a trove of materials about African American cowboys, in addition to the outlaws, lawmen, soldiers, and ordinary citizens who were a vital part of the region’s history. He was inspired to create the longest-running Black touring rodeo, which he rightfully named the

Cowboy from T-Bone Ranch on the Front Range. History Colorado, 92.320.733



*Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo* in Denver in 1984. This event alone drew thousands of African American fans to the sport, in tours that still crisscross the United States today. Some of the highlighted events that both cowgirls and cowboys participate in are bareback riding, bulldogging, calf roping, and ladies barrel racing. The season opener begins in Colorado in February and travels to Oakland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Washington DC, before ending in Fort Worth in September.

### BLACK COWBOYS IN THE COLLECTION

With this history in mind, I began surveying the collection at History Colorado for items that illuminate the Black experience. Peeking down one of the stacks in storage, a brightly colored shirt flashed out to me. As I drew closer I was immediately struck by the traditional African kente cloth sewn around the cuffs and shoulders.

This cloth has grown out of various weaving traditions that came from West Africa dating back to the eleventh century. Weavers of this cloth are known by alternating colors in a warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal) fashion, where complex patterns are valued for both their visual effect and symbolism.

When I took a step back, I noticed how the colors and patterns danced in a rhythm across the cloth. Traditionally, the colors and patterns are used to symbolize a festive occasion, portray a story, or set of values. The cloth now has an evolved meaning to displaced Africans and their descendants around the world, for whom it symbolizes a unity with their ancestors and the African diaspora’s ongoing work to overcome discrimination and prejudice.

As I started researching the donation records, I learned that Lu Vason donated the shirt to History Colorado himself. It would have been worn by a cowgirl who performed at a rodeo during the national anthem, and other women at the rodeo would open the day’s events by riding a horse



Women’s western wear shirt from the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo in 1994. History Colorado, 2001.191

throughout the arena carrying sponsor flags along with the Stars and Stripes.

Following the paper trail also revealed a publicity poster for the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo showing a colorful illustration of Pickett dressed in western wear in front of a towering arena. This eye-catching poster gives a nod to the history of Black cowboys with its playful artwork and storytelling. Posters like these are rare, highly valuable, and collectable. Fortunately, History Colorado was able to preserve this important piece of history.

The true history of the American cowboy has all too often been obscured

and veiled from collective memory. But the material record tells a different story. Photos and artifacts in the History Colorado Collection are indelible reminders that Black people have not only always been part of western stories, but that in many ways, the story of the West is also the story of Black Americans. 🇳🇵

**Acoma Gaither** is an Emmy-winning public historian, and serves as the Assistant Curator of Black History at History Colorado.

# Last Rites of Last Chance

TIME TRAVELING THROUGH AN ABANDONED GHOST TOWN ON COLORADO'S EASTERN PLAINS

BY BLAKE PFEIL

**W**hen I hear the words “ghost town,” I think of a manicured kind of roadside attraction, with a manufactured boardwalk and a gift shop. Or maybe it’s more of a legally preserved space, boasting protective fences and information placards providing a little bit of information on the town history, sponsored by the local or county or state history organization. That’s what I assumed I was going to get with Last Chance. I was wrong.

I first learned about Last Chance, Colorado on Reddit. I’d scrolled past

brief mentions about the abandoned ghost town before, but this was the first time the idea of it got my attention. “Oh, right,” I thought. “I remember this place.” I popped onto Google Maps, zoomed in on a site about an hour east of Denver, landed on a Street View of the unincorporated ruin, and knew, instantly, that my next adventure would be in Last Chance.

As the producer of the award-winning *abandoned: The All-American Ruins Podcast*—an immersive audio series where I fantastically recreate my experiences exploring abandoned places

through sonic storytelling—it’s my job to seek out places like Last Chance that look like they’ve been raptured or sound like they have a story to tell. With every visit to an abandoned place, there’s always that degree of uncertainty, those questions gnawing at the back of your mind: Will it still be there when I arrive? Will it still be intact? Still standing? Still look the way that I’ve dreamt it looks in real life, based on the hours and hours that I’ve spent perusing it on the web?

Or will it be totally destroyed, either by nature or by wrecking ball?

With Last Chance, though, I was

a bit more hopeful that I’d be able to explore — something. Anything. I initially missed my exit off I-70, which led me to explore a completely different abandoned space (and a story for another time), but when I finally got a mile outside of Last Chance, my anxiety mounted. Questions raced through my mind: Did I just drive an hour and change outside of Denver for nothing? Will I get in trouble for being here? Is there anything left?

The last one was immediately answered when I crested the final hill into the town.

## BACK THEN

The US Board on Geographic Names cites Last Chance, Colorado as one of six towns across the country bearing that name. Last Chance also makes appearances on maps in Idaho, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Iowa, and California. As the name suggests, the Colorado version was just that: leaving Denver, it was the last chance motorists had to get gas, food, or a bed before hitting the empty plains for miles and miles and miles. Officially established in 1925, the marketing efforts behind the town of Last Chance stoked the coals of its popularity through the mid-1960s when the first portions of I-70 opened to the public. Unfortunately, the interstate bypassed the town by almost forty miles to the south, and by the late 1970s, it was almost completely forgotten.

The last US Census to capture Last Chance’s population data was in 2000, at a whopping twenty-three people. Today, the town of Woodrow, fifteen minutes to the north of the ghost town, carries the mail for Last Chance, which sits on the corner of US Highway 36 and CO State Highway 71. In fact, the town begins with a gaggle of bygone mailboxes scrunched together, neighbored by an official US post office box that appears to still be active. The day I visited the site, the wind hollered across the plains, and it drew me back into my childhood, in the Colorado foothills, sleepless nights saturated



A town’s history written in mailboxes. Courtesy of the author

**I’d scrolled past brief mentions about the abandoned ghost town before, but this was the first time the idea of it got my attention.**

with endless gusts and gales blasting through the Continental Divide, up and over the Rocky Mountains where I grew up. I looked around for any “No Trespassing” signs, but seeing none, I proceeded, with caution.

What’s left of the town is difficult to quantify, but essentially, there are three remaining structures that are fully intact. In their various forms, they resemble houses, but at one point, they were a house, a motel, and the motel office. There was also a gas station (whose foundation is now overgrown and hard to see) and a diner (Dairy King, not Dairy Queen) that is now just a bunch of empty trailers. As I walked up the slight hill towards the first building, I thought, “How did the owners of this motel cope with the loss of business? What happened to them? Where are they now?”

It’s the kind of question I ask myself a lot when roaming the ruins of America. The untold stories behind these forgotten landmarks remain tiny thorns in my side, a large part of why I let my imagination run amuck when I’m exploring. I am naturally curious. I poked my head into the former office and learned that not much is left besides a chair or two. Each building is like that. The third one had furniture in it. I found myself staring at the few remaining pieces, chairs mostly, and noticed a mattress that had clearly been slept on, recently, a not-so-uncommon occurrence in these spaces. I could hear the sound of the moaning plains outside, the crickets, the cicadas. I thought about the boom-and-bust nature of the American economy and wondered about how the birth of the interstate highway system decimated towns all over the state, just like this one.

## THE FEDERAL-AID HIGHWAY ACT OF 1944

When I learned about The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944, the bill that funded the birth of I-70 (which was, incidentally, the first interstate highway to begin construction under that legislation), I never learned about the aftermath its introduction left behind for small communities just like



The last days of the Last Chance Cafe. History Colorado, 2000.168.394

Last Chance. In that light, the ghost town serves as more than an unusual travel destination; it also exists as a symbol of the mercurial American culture and society, a monument to the forceful churns of capitalism, and a stamp on a timeline of Colorado history that foreshadowed the state's extensive, more recent population growth.

When I hopped into my rental truck, I noticed a “For Sale” sign staked firmly in the ground on the corner of the town lot. I looked it up and learned that the entire plot of land was for sale. \$15,000. That’s it. The listing read: “Take a look at this quaint piece of land located by the busy intersection of Hwy 36 and Hwy 71. This could be a lucrative location for a gas station, convenience store, or other small business, as there is nothing for several miles in all directions. There used to be a house, a bustling motel, and a restaurant on this lot, many years ago. The structures still stand but are not able to be salvaged.”

For weeks after my visit to Last Chance, I couldn't stop thinking about that \$15,000 price tag. How can one possibly calculate the worth of a plot of land that, at one point, saw so much human activity, became a part of so many people's story? I also couldn't shake the last line of that sale listing from the Colorado Land Company out of my head, “The structures still stand but are not able to be salvaged.”

Somehow, hearing that sentence echo in my head over and over again made me feel very sad.

### SCRAP HEAP

In January 2023, I published an article in *The Colorado Magazine* called “All-American Ruins” about an abandoned dairy farm in Colorado Springs, its connection to the tuberculosis endemic of the early 1900s, and how, as a child, I spent a lot of time inside learning how to activate my imagination as a tool for healing. The digital version of the article was accompanied by a special podcast episode that I produced as part of my immersive audio series *All-American Ruins*, which documents my time exploring abandoned spaces.



▲ Noted photographer David DeHarport captured this image of the nearby town of Cope, Colorado in the 1990s. It was part of his effort to document what remains in many hollowed-out towns on Colorado's Eastern Plains. History Colorado, 2000.168.823.1

▼ All roads lead away from Last Chance. History Colorado, 2000.168.826



By June 2023, the team behind History Colorado's acclaimed podcast *Lost Highways* had invited me to help them out on producing a couple of episodes for season 5. They said that they hoped I would bring my personal sonic signature to the show. They liked the idea of incorporating delicate soundscapes into their audio world. I happily accepted their offer on one condition: in order for me to be able to bring that kind of ear-flavor to the show, I was going to have to take a trip to my home state, the place where I was born and still feel the most at ease, more than anywhere else in the world.

And I needed to bring my audio equipment. And borrow some of theirs.

As I landed at DIA, I became curious: It had been a minute since my last haunt of an abandoned space. I had given myself a couple days buffer time before my first day meeting the *Lost Highways* team, and I had a rental

car. After I got situated in my hotel, I immediately hopped on Reddit and began to research potential abandoned spaces to poke around in on my day off. I had heard about one particular ghost town about an hour east of Denver called Last Chance, and as I scrolled through Reddit, I noticed someone in a thread mentioning it. “Oh, right.” I thought. “I remember this place.” I popped onto Google Maps, landed into Street View of the ghost town, and I knew, instantly, that the fate of my next adventure rested in the hands of that American ruin. 🇺🇸

**Blake Pfeil** is a multidisciplinary musician, writer, and performance artist. He hosts *abandoned: The All-American Ruins* podcast and has contributed two guest episodes to History Colorado's *Lost Highways* podcast, available on a podcatcher near you.



▲ The almost-forgotten Cope Service Center, just a few miles down the road from Last Chance. History Colorado, 2000.168.827

▼ Hidden away on the Colorado Plains. Courtesy of the author



# THAT'S WHY THEY SAVED THE BRICKS: A HISTORY OF VILLA ITALIA MALL

Opened in 1966, Lakewood's Villa Italia Shopping Center was reputed to be one of the largest enclosed shopping malls between Chicago and Los Angeles. But it meant so much more than 800,000 square feet of retail heaven to two young boys growing up in the suburbs nearby.

BY JEREMY MORTON

It was a good thing there were free napkins at the food court. That was the only way my brother Josh and I were going to become Mortal Kombat legends. There were too many masters of the Kombat craft, too many tricks, too many special moves we didn't know. We couldn't keep pouring quarters into the machine only to mash the buttons. There was no glory in that, no flawless victory, no Pocket Change Arcade street cred. Our only hope was to find the cheat codes in the back of Waldenbooks. There, revealed in the pages of a Mortal Kombat strategy guide, we could find all the characters' special moves, learn how to make Scorpion shoot out his claw, or make Raiden electrocute the competition—and we might even be able to memorize a fatality. Since we were perpetually broke, we had to borrow a pen from the woman at Mrs. Field's Cookies, snag some napkins from the nearby table, then sneak past the teenaged-yet-hawkeyed staff at the front of the bookstore. Then, once hidden in the back, we could write down the necessary information: back-back-low punch, then voilà, "Get over here!"

Villa Italia Mall in the 1990s was a special place to be. It's where Josh and I grew up. We were mallrats, latch-key kids with no keys, so we'd head to Villa Italia. Sure it felt like a ten-mile walk, but once we were there, we were home. This was our domain. We stole coins out of the fountain to play more



▲ Villa Italia's main entrance in 1998. Courtesy of Heritage Lakewood

► Villa Italia's main entrance during demolition in 2001. Courtesy of Andrew Button



arcade games, and when only pennies remained we went to KB Toys to play the newest Super Nintendo games for free. We explored Spencer Gifts until the employees told us we shouldn't be in that part of the store. Then, we'd ride down the escalator, precariously perched on its banister, just so we could catch the glass elevator back to the second floor. Our eyes were always peeled for any sort of free giveaway, any raffle, or survey company that'd pay us just for answering questions. Maybe if we saved enough money we could buy

a pair of those new Reebok Pumps at Footaction. Little did we know, we were at the tailend of an epic retail run for Lakewood's favorite economic epicenter. We were the last of the mallrats. It was the end of the era of the American megamall, and it was a vital part of how so many of us grew up.

## MEMORIES ABOUT THE WAY WE WERE

Josh and I weren't the only ones to have our formative years shaped by our local mall. During the latter half of the twentieth century, shopping malls in Colorado and across the country played a significant role in shaping personal identity. Strategically situated



◀ May Bonfils Stanton enjoyed flaunting her wealth. Following her passing, her jewelry collection sold for \$1.2 million at auction, 1920s. Courtesy Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

▼ Ed Stanton in 1959 with May's Rolls Royce and prize steer. Courtesy of Heritage Lakewood



in burgeoning suburban areas, malls weren't merely commercial spaces. They served as cultural and social hubs. They were our central gathering places. They helped us define ourselves as individuals and communities. Malls weren't just about transactions, they were platforms for self-expression, where people could explore and showcase their lifestyle choices and their tastes in fashion and entertainment. The communal nature of malls fostered meaningful interactions, and they became integral to the social fabric of American cities.

When we reminisce about those Colorado malls from back in the day, there's a palpable sense of nostalgia. It doesn't matter whether it was Cinderella City, Westminster Mall, Buckingham Square, or so many others I could list. The exact mall is largely irrelevant. The important thing is that those malls were where we forged friendships, where we had our first dates, and where we shared

countless slices of pizza. There's a feeling of sentimental wistfulness, not for the shopping, but the experience. The shared moments. The rose-tinted view we sometimes get when thinking of the past. For Josh and me, Villa Italia wasn't just a place to shop (we didn't have any money anyway), it was the backdrop to an era of our lives. Sure, we've got the convenience of online shopping now, but it can't replace the tangible, sensory experience of being a mallrat. The memories made at Villa Italia linger in our minds like the scent of a freshly baked batch of Mrs. Field's Cookies.

## THE EXTRAVAGANT HEIRESS

Villa Italia would've never existed if the suburb of Lakewood hadn't grown to surround an heiress's massive mansion. Sensational stories and click-bait-level headlines in Fred Bonfils's *Denver Post* earned him a fortune by the early 1900s. When he passed, his daughter May Bonfils Stanton didn't get quite as much of the money as she thought she deserved, a penance for not marrying a Catholic as her father desired. But after some court battles, she did get enough to buy a 700-acre estate, and build a luxurious home modeled after Marie Antoinette's Petit Trianon. She named it Belmar.

Her property was as lavish as the name suggested. As she emerged from a chair once sat in by Queen Victoria, she'd walk past her piano previously tickled by Frédéric Chopin, and glance over the peacocks roaming her property. In the evenings, she'd throw extravagant parties in order to show off her expensive taste for antiquities and jewels. At one party she bedecked her beloved poodle with the Idol's Eye, a 70.21-carat blue diamond surrounded by thirty-five carats of smaller diamonds. Watching the proud pooch scamper around with a necklace once owned by Persian princes and Ottoman sultans, she instructed the servants, "Don't let the dog out." When she and her poodle weren't taking a ride in her Rolls Royce,



Burke's Aristocratic Canines performed at Villa Italia in August, 1967. Courtesy of Heritage Lakewood

Bonfils Stanton contemplated how her estate would be used once she was gone, and eventually began negotiations to turn the land she owned east of Wadsworth into a retail center. Those negotiations were ultimately finalized by her husband Ed Stanton after May Bonfils Stanton died in 1962.

The widowed Ed Stanton decided to donate the mansion to the Archdiocese of Denver, but they found it too hard to maintain. Belmar Mansion, the most palatial building ever constructed in the Denver metropolitan area, was eventually sold, demolished, and turned into a generic office park. The Idol's Eye was auctioned off, bought by a Chicago jeweler for \$375,000, and eventually found its way into the Smithsonian. Much of Bonfils's estate west of Wadsworth was donated to the City of Lakewood, and the land became the governmental center of Lakewood featuring a public library and the Heritage Lakewood center. Most of the land east of Wadsworth was sold or leased for retail use, paving the way for Villa Italia Shopping Center.

So, there you have it. If it weren't for an extravagant heiress and her resentful, strict Catholic parents, we wouldn't have a story about a blinged-out poodle, and my brother and I wouldn't have had a retail haven. As a

historian, it pains me to say that in the '90s I wasn't concerned with the area west of Wadsworth. I wouldn't truly discover Heritage Lakewood until I was researching this paper, and found a comprehensive collection of tear-sheet scrapbooks made by the former Villa Italia marketing manager. No, in the '90s I was more concerned with Orange Julius, checking my pockets to see if I had an extra dollar to add a raw egg to my smoothie. I mean Rocky drank raw eggs, and he beat Apollo Creed, so it was absolutely essential for us to find that extra dollar. Maybe we could find some quarters in the fountains, and use them for our nutrition this time instead of mashing buttons in the arcade? The Orange Julius stand was there from the beginning. It was one of the few stores that never changed locations, good old Orange Julius, right at the main entrance, a consistent capitalist canteen.

### THE MALL MAGNATE

That Orange Julius couldn't be built until Ed Stanton finished negotiating with an innovative mall magnate named Gerri Von Frellick. Born in a log cabin, Von Frellick was an Oklahoma farm boy who had already set the merchandising world on its ear by building one of the first air-conditioned, enclosed shopping malls in the United States. He called it the Lakeside Center, and it opened in 1956. Yes, that Lakeside—home to Denver's most famous or infamous amusement park, depending on who you're asking. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to say that northwest Denver was the birthplace of the modern mall.

When Von Frellick arrived in Denver in 1951, he had two dollars in his pocket, and was \$643,000 in debt. In hopes of clearing that debt, he helped develop a new trend in merchandising, an indoor one-stop-shop for all your retail needs. Von Frellick, and other entrepreneurs of the time, had a grand image of what the mall could be. It wasn't just a place for shop-

ping: It was a social center, an essential hub for any community. After the success of the Lakeside Center, he conceived a new project and code-named it Cinderella City. He wanted that mall to be built in southwest Denver. But Cinderella City was delayed because no matter how much Von Frellick insisted the citizens wanted a mall, they insisted that they did not. Eventually, Von Frellick convinced Englewood city officials that no matter how much the people of Englewood claimed they didn't want a mall, they really did. While Cinderella City was on hold, the savvy developer collaborated with a lavish spendthrift on a different project that eventually became Villa Italia Shopping Center.

If May Bonfils Stanton was going to have anything to do with building a mall, it couldn't just be a boring stucco square. No. It would have to be classy. She already had a regal Parisian palace, why not use Italy for inspiration this time around? With thoughts of the Galleria of Milan in their minds, Von Frellick and Bonfils Stanton envisioned a place where people could socialize near Roman statuary before picking up their prescription at Walgreens. They could walk down terrazzo aisles towards the newest JCPenney fashion. Leading up to its opening in March of 1966, the marketing team ran an ad with a photo of the plot of land saying, "This is how it looked before Villa. Just a huge parcel of swampy, unattractive land. A place of tall grass where birds clung precariously to gnarled, weather-beaten trees. Unlikely—but a start." Von Frellick had built a concrete consumer oasis, replacing the unseemly wildlife refuge that existed prior to construction. Von Frellick bragged, "This is a magnificently conceived commercial development with full attention to aesthetics, revolutionary in its field."

Villa's original walls were laid by Lakewood Brick Company, a business that had been around since 1919, delivering bricks by horse and wagon when Denver's first roads were being built. I'd like to think they were chosen since their

blonde brickwork evoked a Tuscan villa in the right sunlight. But it was probably because they were local, and the company was newly equipped with a 300-foot tunnel kiln. Today, those bricks are some of the only surviving reminders of what local advertisers referred to as "the beautiful one." They were saved when the mall was demolished, engraved with "Villa Italia 1966-2001," and distributed throughout the community.

### OLD WORLD CHARM AND NEW WORLD LAVISHNESS

After two years of construction, Von Frellick coordinated a three-day extravaganza to celebrate Villa Italia's opening. Each day, there was live music, a twenty-minute firework show, and \$100 bills given away every hour—a detective went to a safe to get the cash and then, using confidential instructions of where to go in the mall, delivered the prize. Von Frellick and his architects delivered what they promised. Visitors sauntered amid "Old World charm and New World lavishness." They were greeted by tall columns topped with statues of early Roman figures. They entered through graceful arches evocative of a Tuscan villa made of antiqued brick, stucco, and wrought iron. Below the Mediterranean tile roofing, crystal chandeliers from Europe lit a sunken area where a fountain bubbled. The ads the day before the opening were only slightly hyperbolic, "The fountains of Rome...the palaces of Venice...the markets of Naples. Elegantly rolled into one—VILLA ITALIA!"

The mall drew people with "shopping equal to one third of Downtown Denver." But in case that wasn't enough, there was an indoor merry-go-round, a ceiling-high concrete tree, and performers and events planned to make every visit new and exciting. Denver's public television celebrity Blinky the Clown made multiple appearances. There were car and art shows, days of gold panning, trained monkeys, and acrobatic canines. The open areas were occupied by temporary mini-golf courses and extravagant

holiday displays. Once there was even a real live polar bear equipped with penguin sidekicks. It was enough to keep the mall relevant and revenue high for about a decade.

More important than visitors passing through to get the latest Woolworth fashion were the local people that created lasting memories in the mall. Many of these memories were collected by Heritage Lakewood. People recalled the smell of caramel corn as they entered the building, first jobs, following their mom's giant steps as they maneuvered through crowds, buying wedding dresses, getting busted for skateboarding in the parking lot—and what a game-changer the food court was for family dinner.

By the '90s the food court was on the second floor, right across from

Sam Goody. Josh and I sought out free samples from sympathetic food court employees, and once our stomachs were satisfied, we set out to satiate our eardrums. Sam Goody was where we bought our first cassettes, Bush's "Glycerine" and Coolio's "1,2,3,4." We were cultured, with nuanced, respectable musical taste. There were headphone stations where we could listen to full albums by artists like The Smashing Pumpkins, Tupac, and Beck without paying a dime. We were standing in a store that should've never existed. Not just Sam Goody, the entire second story was never part of Von Frellick's plan.

### THE RENOVATION

If you grew up in the 1970s, '80s, or '90s, odds are you had a favorite mall. For me it's clearly Villa Italia, and I'll go



Inside Villa Italia looking towards the food court. Courtesy of Andrew Button



In the early 1980s Villa Italia underwent extensive renovations that gave the mall a second life. Courtesy of Heritage Lakewood

to my grave insisting there wasn't a better mall in the country. But if I'm objective, the truth is that most people could substitute a different mall with different stores, and a different food court. And they could wax on with a similar level of fondness and nostalgia. Malls represent a part of us, our narrative, our identity. But there is one thing that makes Villa particularly unique among its contemporaries, and that's its renovation.

As the '80s came roaring in, the malls of the '60s were struggling to keep up with a market oversaturated by similar places in nearby neighborhoods. It was tough for destinations like Villa Italia and Cinderella City (which eventually opened two years after Villa) to compete with new malls like Southwest Plaza and Southglenn Mall. Von Frellick eventually decided to sell Villa to a real estate group—Kravco—that breathed new life into “the beautiful one.”

Although the original design featured a small mezzanine on the second floor for the mall and security offices, there was no room to add more retail space. Kravco decided to change that. Rather than tearing it all down and starting from scratch (which would have been simpler and cheaper), they decided to build a second floor on top of the existing structure. They blew the roof off the entire main corridor and all of the courts. All the while they kept the mall open out of necessity, making Villa Italia not only one of the earliest

malls, but apparently one of the first open-air shopping centers, if only for a short time.

They added stores on the top of all the shops on the south side of the mall, which sounds like a simple thing until you take into account that the existing stores had to remain open the entire time. Since those stores weren't built to hold an entire floor, it was decided to build a truss that spanned the roof which was supported only by the columns at the front and back of the building. They basically built a bridge across the roof of the old stores which supported the entire second floor of the mall. As a result of being built on a bridge, that side of the mall was now three feet higher than everything else—so visitors would find small, random stairs and ramps that made it seem that the new stores were at the same height as everything else.

Not much was done on the north side of the building's roof. But if you remember shopping at Villa in the 1980s or '90s, then you remember that there were stores on both sides of the second floor. The company cleverly converted the existing mall offices into small, thin shops, and built similarly sized stores above the corridor to give somewhat of an illusion of a larger mall without having to build an entirely new roof deck on that side. I remember as a kid seeing a store in one of those spaces that sold only flags. And even as a child

I recognized that selling only flags was a terrible business proposition. Now, it makes a little more sense. Not much more, but the store was tiny, and leasing it must have been pretty cheap.

I think it speaks to the love the people of Lakewood had for the mall. The renovators could've just torn the entire thing down and built something new, and most likely that would've been cheaper. But by that time Villa Italia held a generation of memories, and had made Lakewood more than just an average suburb. It was more than a place for people to shop—it really was, as Von Frellick had hoped: “a central gathering space for the community.” I would like to think that, had they proposed tearing it down, the developers would've been chased out of town with pitchforks.

The result of the renovation was a modernized mall fit for the '80s. There were sharp angles, more fountains, palm trees, and neon—lots of neon. Nearly everything was changed except the location of the stores, some of the original brickwork, and, peculiarly, one small section at the northwest side of the building that remained essentially untouched. Maybe that was saved as an homage to the original concept, a fellow architect not wanting to completely delete the admirable work of their predecessor.

With so much money spent adding a second floor to the building, there wasn't much left for the exterior. The expressive, Italian-inspired concept became essentially a large stucco rectangle, something May Bonfils Stanton would've never been associated with. The architects did what they could given the budget, and kept large stucco arches at the main entrances. But it was clear that the intensive renovation was geared primarily toward the shopping experience once visitors were already in the building.

That's the building Josh and I remember. The glass elevator with a neon sign directing us to the food court. Thoughtful, kind food court employees

that would spot us from a distance, and put out a fresh plate of free samples as we approached. Patterned tile we could skip across on our way to make prank calls on pay phones. Tropical foliage fed by skylights, and a lingering smell of chlorine from all the fountains. It never even crossed our minds that the building had undergone an extensive renovation. Everything felt warm and inviting. Everything looked timeless and intentional.

## BELMAR'S RETURN

Villa Italia's impressive renovation gave it a second wind during the peak of mall culture. The Miami Vice aesthetic fit right in with the 1980s zeitgeist, and Villa's popularity only grew in the '90s. But the decline of malls came abruptly. Retail trends shifted. Consumers and retailers embraced open-air shopping centers and e-commerce. Malls lost one store, then another, then another, and when they lost one of their anchors—a big department store like Montgomery Ward or Joslins—that marked the beginning of the end. Without an anchor, entire sections of the mall went vacant, and the more the mall deteriorated, the harder it was to find retailers. At one point, Cinderella City had only two stores remaining open in a mall with 1.5 million square feet of retail space.

The City of Lakewood saw what happened to Cinderella City, and didn't want to wait for the same thing to happen to Villa Italia. In the late 1990s city officials began looking for ways to redevelop the area. Rather than the mall being their city center, they planned to create a downtown essentially from scratch. It was decided that they would tear down Villa Italia. “The beautiful one” shuttered its doors on July 15, 2001, and demolition began the following winter. On the land, the developers planned a mixed-use (residential and retail), open-air shopping center. Only one name made sense for Lakewood's new central business district. They called it Belmar.

As the fingers of a backhoe sifted through what had once been the pride of a neighborhood, the people who'd grown up in Lakewood knew that something intangible had been lost. That's why they saved the bricks. Anyone who's gone back to their childhood playground only to find that it's now a parking lot—they know the feeling. It's the feeling of loss, not just of place, but of time—a concrete demonstration that things won't be as they once were. Recollections that can never be recreated are now just remembered. Experiences shared with loved ones are now dusty footnotes of a bygone era. For me, it's a memory of when the mall was my third place, the spot where my brother and I could go with no money and no plan, and somehow spend hours that became days—a place and time that encapsulated our entire childhood.

I know Villa Italia Mall was built as a place to entice people to empty their wallets, to waste money on things they didn't need. But it became so much more than that for two brothers growing up in Section 8 Housing. It was a

place we could go to become equals, a place where we could escape poverty. We'd dream about what we'd buy once we had the money. We'd listen to albums we couldn't afford, read books without leaving the store, try on clothes we had no intention of buying. And all along we talked. We learned about each other and ourselves. We laid the foundation for what our relationship would be, two brothers that each understood the other like nobody else can or ever will. Eventually, we got our own Villa bricks. We went back, and standing in front of the only building from Villa to survive demolition we held up the bricks for a photo. All grown up on the outside, but still the same '90s mallrats on the inside. 🧱

**Jeremy Morton** is an exhibition developer and historian for History Colorado. He grew up in Lakewood going to the Villa Italia mall with his brother. Now he lives in Denver, and holds a master's degree in history from the University of Colorado, Denver.



Josh and Jeremy Morton holding their bricks in front of the only structure that survived Villa's demolition. December 30, 2023. Courtesy of Jeremy Morton

# THE HIGH LINE CANAL: A Nature Lover's Escape from the City

The West, wrote Colorado Poet Laureate Thomas Hornsby Ferril, "is a land where life is written in water."

BY THOMAS J. NOEL



A girl sits over the High Line Canal at Big Dry Creek in the summer of 1935. Courtesy of Denver Water

Countless acre-feet of that water and volumes of history have flowed through Colorado's longest and best-known water ditch ever since 1883.

The storied seventy-one-mile-long High Line Canal's name derives from an engineering principle that uses the contours of the land and elevation to pull water downhill by gravity. And a sort of gravity has also enticed hundreds of thousands of nearby residents who have walked, run, skated, cross-country skied, or ridden horses on what was originally the ditch riders' trail. Oldtimers may even remember tubing, swimming, and wading there on hot summer days.

The Canal begins in the South Platte River's Waterton Canyon, then meanders through today's Douglas, Arapahoe, Denver, and Adams Counties to end at the Green Valley Ranch

neighborhood. Before Green Valley's recent development, one of the Canal's two original laterals delivered water to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal—today's Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. The 100- to 150-foot-wide Canal and trail shelters wildlife and recreationists under ancient, towering cottonwoods. In between those stately trees is low, lush shrubbery: chokecherries, plum, scrub oak, willows, and wildflowers.

Denver Water, which owns the Canal, along with the High Line Canal Conservancy and local jurisdictional partners took a tree census of cottonwoods over twelve inches in diameter at breast height or above: 10,224 trees. As mature cottonwoods suck up about 10,000 gallons of water annually, they in turn soak up the water that would otherwise fill the ditch.

Cottonwoods are one of the only native trees on the dry High Plains, growing along natural waterways where they have reached world record-setting girths and heights in Colorado. Healthy trees grow as high as ninety feet, with trunks six feet in diameter. The leaves are heart shaped, and their fluffy white, cotton like seed gives the tree its name. Their sentinel ranks along western waterways have been a most welcome sight—promising shade, water, firewood, and building materials to Indigenous tribes such as the Arapaho and Cheyenne and later to Euro-American settlers. Today, this cottonwood-lined path offers respite from the heat and bustle of twenty-first century urban life.

Boys tube the High Line Canal. Courtesy of the Aurora History Museum



## COLORADO'S BIG CANAL

Joining Denver's City (aka Smith) Ditch as one of Colorado's first major canals, the High Line was undertaken by a British firm organized by the Scottish entrepreneur James Duff. Doing business as the Northern Colorado Irrigation Company, British investors based in London financed the Canal. Brits accustomed to their watery isles did not realize that the High Line Canal's Water Right No. 111, granted in 1879, meant that "the Englishmen's Folly" would often dry up. Even in years of normal precipitation, the Canal did not have enough water to serve all its customers. Farmers not receiving water they paid for were constantly suing, keeping the Canal in financial and legal trouble.

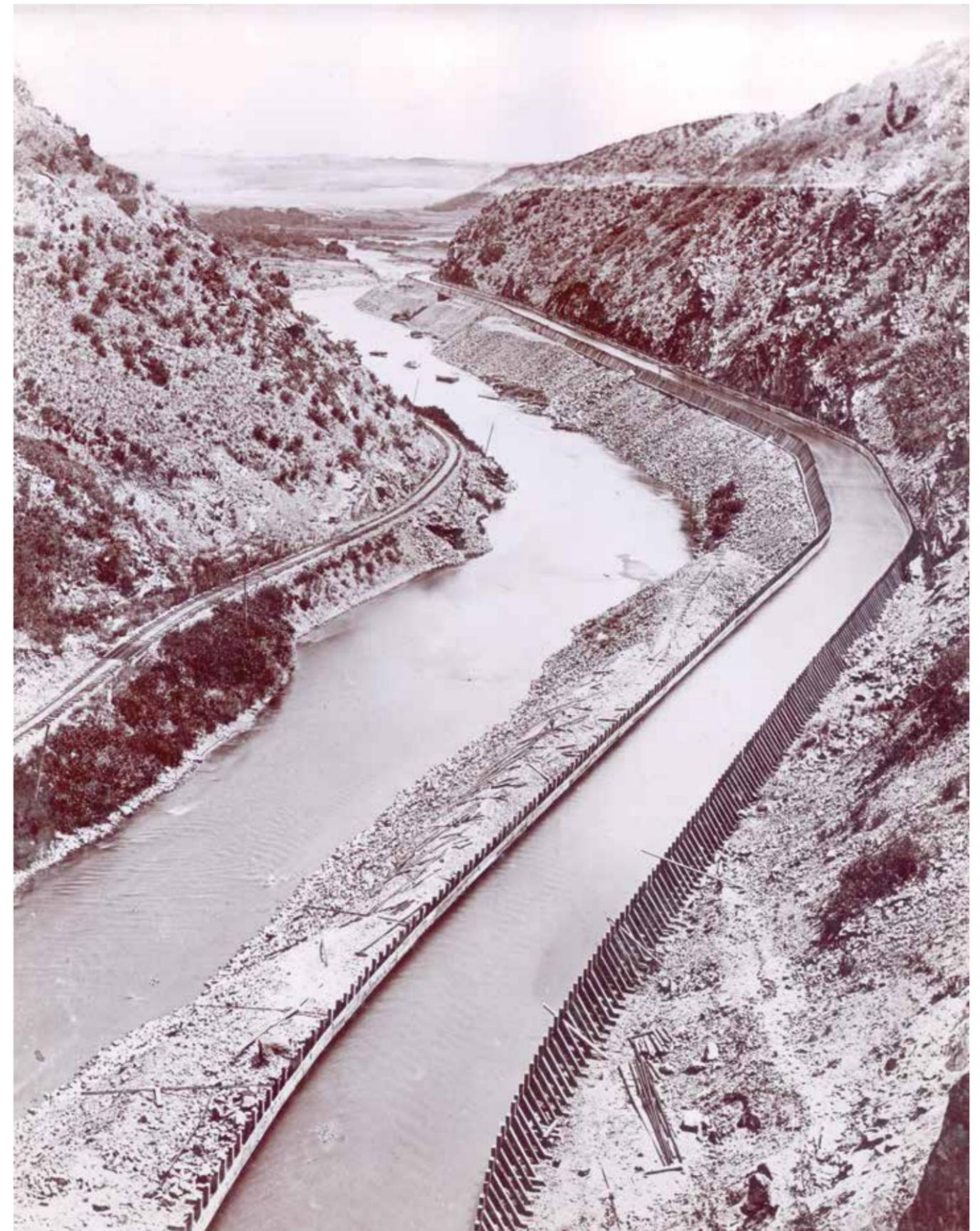
The High Line Canal was only one of many proposals to water the Great Plains. President Ulysses S. Grant and other visionaries championed a giant canal that would connect the skimpy South Platte with the wide Missouri.

Others suggested diverting some of the Columbia River south to the parched Great Plains. More realistic assistance came with the 1909 construction of

**The High Line Canal was only one of many proposals to water the Great Plains. President Ulysses S. Grant and other visionaries championed a giant canal that would connect the skimpy South Platte with the wide Missouri.**

▲ A crowd attends the launching of the High Line Canal. History Colorado 92.345.61

► To penetrate Waterton Canyon and keep water on the high line, the builders of the High Line Canal bored this 600-foot tunnel. Photo by William Henry Jackson, 1885. History Colorado



This 1885 shot of Waterton Canyon by William Henry Jackson shows the South Platte River, the High Line Canal, and the freshly laid Denver, South Park & Pacific Railway tracks. That narrow gauge railway was built through the canyon on its way to South Park and beyond. Photo by William Henry Jackson. History Colorado, 1624



Antero Reservoir in South Park as a new source of water to feed the High Line Canal. That, according to the project's prospectus, would mean "bountiful crops, good buildings, sleek cattle, intense farming, tree shaded suburbs," and even "polite bankers."

Completed in 1883 at a cost of \$650,000 (the equivalent of about \$20 million today), the original Canal included vast amounts of the Kansas Pacific Railroad land grant east of Denver. Engineered to follow the contours of the terrain, the High Line Canal has minimal drops of just two feet per mile on average and used wooden flumes over creeks and gullies along with its 165 original headgates to control the flow. Ditch riders policed the Canal, keeping it unobstructed and supervising the legitimate assignment of water to customers. When built, it was twenty to forty feet wide and from four to seven feet deep.

## PRESERVING THE HIGH LINE FOR RECREATION

In 1924 the City of Denver, through its water commissioners—the entity that would become today's Denver Water—bought the High Line Canal for \$1.05 million. Then, in the 1960s, Denver Water and other interested parties began focusing on recreational uses rather than agriculture. Preservation for recreational use began with the Arapahoe County Open Space and Trails program approved by the voters in 2002. In 2011, Arapahoe County and eleven surrounding governmental jurisdictions created the High Line Canal Working Group of elected officials, key staff, and members of the community to plan for the long-term future of the Canal.

This group in 2014 led to the creation of the nonprofit High Line Canal Conservancy, helmed by founding CEO Harriet Crittenden LaMair. The Conservancy has spearheaded comprehensive planning to ensure a vital future for the Canal as an 860-acre linear park and metro Denver's largest recreation

district. The Canal's many allies are working with Denver Water to keep it preserved and protected into the future.

The High Line Canal Conservancy's 2019 framework plan, *The Plan for the High Line Canal* identifies \$130 million in prioritized capital improvements over fifteen years. These improvements include access and infrastructure, landscape enhancements, user amenities, historical resources, stormwater management, and interpretive signage. While the Canal often runs dry, its trail continues to flow with people and their pets. Since 2018 water has not run past Hampden Avenue, leaving the northern half of the Canal mostly dry. This may change with a regional plan, led by the Mile High Flood District, to direct stormwater into the Canal. This could bring occasional flows of water back to sixty-two of the seventy-one Canal miles. More importantly, it would benefit north Aurora and northeast Denver's more economically disadvantaged neighborhoods that are short on recreational amenities and sit at the dry end of the Canal.

After Denver Water acquired the High Line Canal, it restricted access until 1970, when it partnered with surrounding municipalities to lease them sections of the Canal as a pedestrian, equestrian, and bicycle pathway. That partnership has evolved, with the leadership of the High Line Canal Conservancy, into the Canal Collaborative—a regional management structure with thirteen regional partners, including Arapahoe County Open Spaces, City of Aurora, City of Cherry Hills Village, City and County of Denver, Denver Water, Douglas County, City of Greenwood Village, Highlands Ranch Metro District, High Line Canal Conservancy, City of Littleton, Mile High Flood District, Southeast Metro Stormwater Authority, and South Suburban Parks and Recreation. Many parks, along with residential and commercial developments, have sprung up along this greenway. Nearly all of them are carpeted with the hard, brown cotton-

wood leaves that rustle and crackle in the slightest breeze.

Denver Water manages the Canal channel and its delivery system, while many of the above-listed public agencies maintain the adjacent High Line Canal trail and the Canal's emerging function as green stormwater infrastructure. For its historical and architectural significance, the site was designated a National Waterworks Landmark in 1975 (with the correct two-word spelling, not the often-used but incorrect "Highline"). Also listed in the Historic American Engineering Record, the Canal is celebrated as an engineering wonder built by hundreds of men and horses. They also constructed its 600-foot tunnel and more than 3,100 linear feet of flumes, 216 feet of dams, and many headgates. A 120-foot diversion dam at the head of the Canal redirects water for its tunnel intake.

Today's High Line Canal traverses the socioeconomic mosaic of metro Denver—from mega mansions to low-income housing. Hundreds of thousands enjoy it every year. Over 340,000 people live within a mile of the Canal, and twenty-four schools lie within a quarter mile. The Conservancy and its partners continue to improve the Canal path. In 2021, Arapahoe County and the City and County of Denver completed a major improvement by building tunnels for the trail under Colorado Boulevard and Hampden Avenue at a jammed intersection that trail users had to negotiate at street level.

To get the Canal trail over Interstate 70, Smith Road, and main-line rail to connect with the north end of the trail, a major project begun in 2023 is currently scheduled for completion in 2024. This will close the three-mile gap between East Colfax Avenue and north of I-70 with an eight-foot-wide

► The High Line Canal is metro Denver's longest regional trail. It is called the "High Line" because it flows by gravity from a high point in Waterton Canyon along a descending line. Created as an agricultural attraction, it has evolved into a recreational magnet. Photo by Evan Anderman



concrete trail with pedestrian bridges. The City of Aurora is the lead partner on this most extensive Conservancy improvement to date.

As the Canal is a treasured amenity and backyard, construction is constant along much of its winding route. All the more reason to connect people with a ribbon of nature in an increasingly denser urban corridor.

### TODAY'S TRAIL USERS

For his 2023 book *Colorado's High Line Canal: A Portrait*, Denver photographer and author John Abramson photographed more than 150 people along the Canal on behalf of the High Line Canal Conservancy. As Abramson spoke with his portrait subjects and corresponded with them afterwards, he learned that "Getting out on the trail for these people meant a connection with their neighbors and with nature, and regular exercise. A walk on the Canal was healing; it was quiet, calming, a place where they could reflect on and escape from the news or the concerns of home or the office." Many times he heard that the trail was a source of "solace."

He met people who had loved the High Line Canal all their lives. "There were stories of growing up when water flowed in the Canal, and of learning to swim in it," he writes. "The beauty of the Canal inspired photographers and painters who sent me samples of their work."

Abramson met people like Patti and James Keyworth, residents of Windsor Gardens in Denver's Lowry neighborhood, who share a deep, personal connection to the "ribbon of nature" that the Canal represents in their lives. They were both raised in Central Denver, and the High Line Canal was always a treasured place for them. The Keyworths chose to live in Windsor Gardens in large part because it backed up to the Canal. For Patti and James, the joys of cycling along the Canal offer a respite from big-city streets. They love that people from all walks of life share the Canal in harmony and even camaraderie. James puts it best when he says that he senses "a connection with nature in all its magnificence, a sense of perspective that is increasingly difficult to experience in our harried daily existence, an awareness of the universal harmony we

lose sight of in our daily lives.... And that, in today's world, is irreplaceable."

Among his many encounters, Abramson also met Allen Wong, the owner of a violin shop who found a "lifeline" in the Canal trail during the Covid-19 lockdowns: "With the advent of the pandemic," Wong told him, "I took myself off the treadmill and started a daily ritual of walking along the High Line Canal." Likewise Heesung Kim,



▲ Kariem Q. Muhammad in Del Mar Park, Aurora. Courtesy of the High Line Canal Conservancy  
 ◀ Heesung Kim at the South Quebec Way Trailhead. Courtesy of the High Line Canal Conservancy  
 ▶ Sergey and Kate Matyukevich in Expo Park. Courtesy of the High Line Canal Conservancy  
 Photos by John Abramson



whom Abramson met nearby at the South Quebec Way Trailhead, had walked or biked the Canal trail nearly every day of the pandemic. In Denver's James A. Bible Park, Abramson met Gracian Mariathasan, whose family immigrated from Sri Lanka some forty years ago after gaining political asylum. Now, his family lives in a home with a view of the Canal. In the same park, Wilson and Susan Kendall told Abramson that they had moved away from the Canal but came back regularly for walks. In Aurora's Del Mar Park, Abramson met Kariem Q. Muhammad carrying a Muslim prayer rug; Muhammad "often floated down the Canal as a child," he told Abramson. "He's seen a fox in this vicinity and is forever on the lookout to spot it again." And in Aurora's Expo Park he photographed Sergey Matyukevich, a software engineer from Belarus whose daughter, Kate, pets "every single dog" she meets along the trail.

"Despite all the differences among the people I photographed," Abramson writes, "there were common themes. The trail is common ground, a safe zone, even a state of mind. People can be themselves and feel comfortable there." In short, he says, the High Line Canal is "an essential part of their lives."

### THE FUTURE

In years to come, trail users will see even more enhancements to the Canal, such as new underpasses, more pedestrian bridges, and more benches, reports Harriet Crittenden LaMair, founding CEO of the High Line Canal Conservancy.

"Our world today demands innovative approaches that can preserve and reuse historic infrastructure for parks and open spaces," LaMair says. "The Canal, a cherished landmark of our agricultural history, serves as a living example of the changing climate and need for water conservation. *The Plan for the High Line Canal* is the result of thousands of voices, representing all 71 miles of the Canal, saying they want the Canal preserved and enhanced as a natural refuge.

It is through close and intimate contact with a particular patch of ground that we learn to respond to the earth."

Though made by humans and paved in places, the canal remains a bridge to nature. 🌍

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**Editor's Note:** Portions of this text originally appeared in the author's introduction to photographer John Abramson's book *Colorado's High Line Canal: A Portrait*, published by the High Line Canal Conservancy in 2023.

▶ Wilson and Susan Kendall in Bible Park. Courtesy of the High Line Canal Conservancy

▼ The Canal is a haven for wildlife where deer such as this fawn find forage and, sometimes, water. Courtesy of the High Line Canal Conservancy and Denver Public Library

Photos by John Abramson



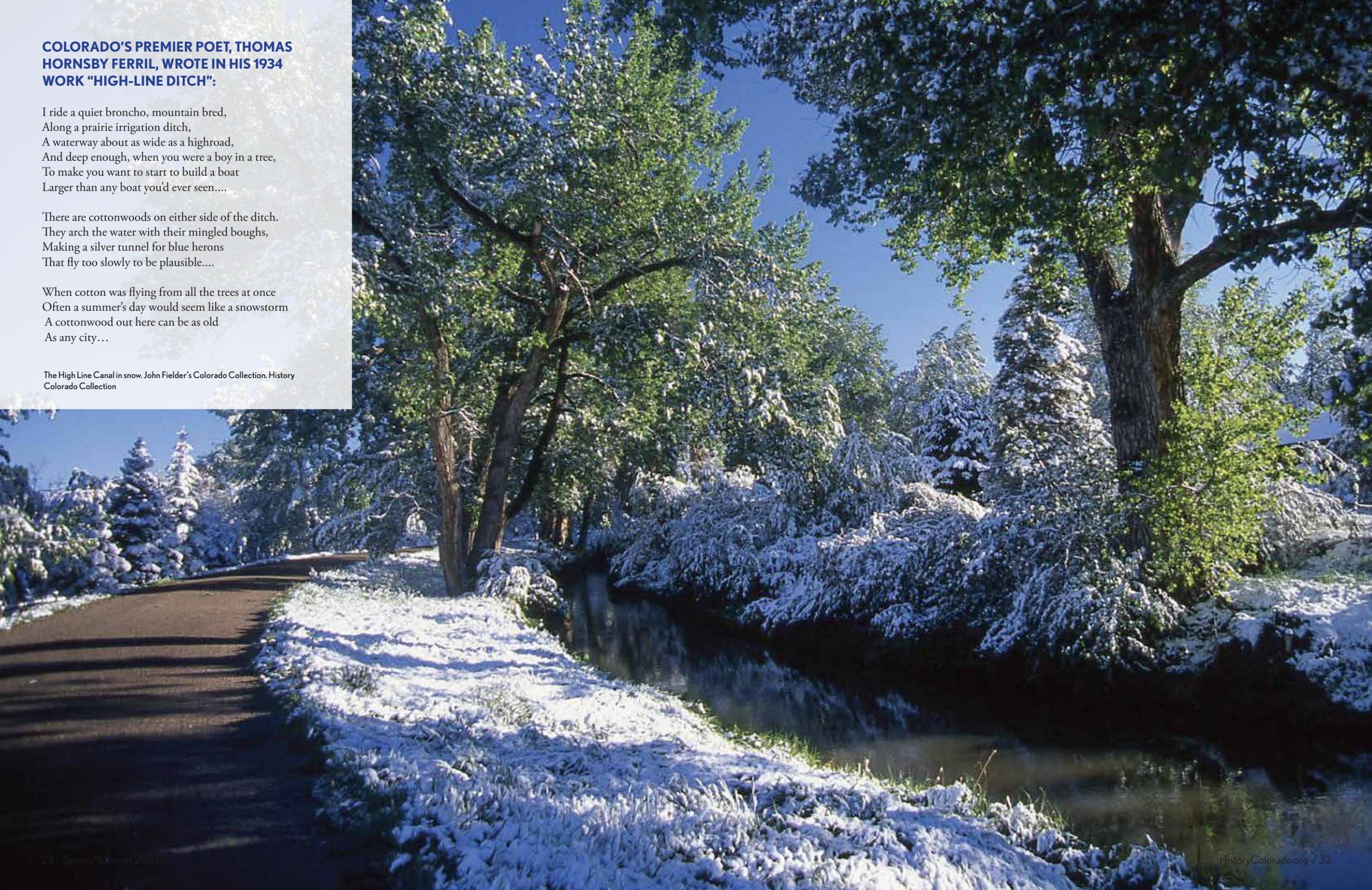
**COLORADO'S PREMIER POET, THOMAS HORNSBY FERRIL, WROTE IN HIS 1934 WORK "HIGH-LINE DITCH":**

I ride a quiet broncho, mountain bred,  
Along a prairie irrigation ditch,  
A waterway about as wide as a highroad,  
And deep enough, when you were a boy in a tree,  
To make you want to start to build a boat  
Larger than any boat you'd ever seen....

There are cottonwoods on either side of the ditch.  
They arch the water with their mingled boughs,  
Making a silver tunnel for blue herons  
That fly too slowly to be plausible....

When cotton was flying from all the trees at once  
Often a summer's day would seem like a snowstorm  
A cottonwood out here can be as old  
As any city...

The High Line Canal in snow. John Fielder's Colorado Collection. History Colorado Collection



# AURELIO M. ESPINOSA, COLORADO'S FIRST FOLKLORIST AND LINGUIST

Born just a few years after Colorado statehood, Espinosa's studies helped preserve some of the cultural traditions that predate our state.

**A**urelio Macedonio Espinosa was a pioneering linguist and folklorist. He was born in 1880 in El Carnero (The Ram), one of the villages at the northwest edge of the San Luis Valley, when the Spanish-speaking population was estimated at about three thousand.



Aurelio M. Espinosa, likely in the 1920s during one of his field work trips to Colorado. Courtesy of Michael Garcia

His grandfather José Julián Espinosa and his family were typical of many Hispanos Nuevomexicanos with their eye on the northern horizon for new opportunities to prosper in the high desert lands of the Río Grande del Norte and its tributaries. Aurelio's great-grandfather Juan Antonio chose the beautiful valley of El Rito to settle

with crops and flocks, but, as its name implies, it was only a little stream and could support just a few dozen families.

An enterprising trader and rancher, José Julián mustered the resources to take his large family, including his fourteen-year-old son, Celso, to the San Luis Valley in 1856. It must have been an inspiring sight after life in the smaller mountain valleys of New Mexico. They settled in the village of El Carnero below the Saguache Range, where there was ample room for their ganado (livestock), and upon which they built their ganancia (wealth).

That wealth included a family library. Celso tended his flocks, but he was also a dreamer who realized that education was the only treasure that could not be lost or confiscated by powerful strangers. In the little school at El Carnero he taught his children to read and write both Spanish and English.

As a young boy, Aurelio spent his summers in the mountains with his uncle tending the family flocks. He was naturally curious about all the songs and stories the shepherds knew to pass the time. Celso decided to relocate his family to Del Norte so his children could attend the high school there; Aurelio graduated in 1898. The family pulled up stakes again to go to Boulder to support the children who decided to attend university. There, Aurelio developed his passion for language and culture. Studying the literature of Europe and the Americas, he was amazed by the consistency and global reach of Castel-

BY ENRIQUE LAMADRID

lano, a regional dialect of central Spain that became a world language.

He studied the Romanceros, the great collections of Medieval and Renaissance romances, the millennial ballads named for the language in which they were recited, sung, and written—the earliest form of Castilian, on its journey from Latin to “Spanish.” He was astounded to hear many of them still on the lips of the people of the Upper Río Grande. They had learned them not from books but from the oral tradition. Similar discoveries were being made simultaneously in Spain and later in Mexico, in Chile, and in the Caribbean and the rest of the Hispanic (Spanish-speaking) world.



Capilla de San Acacio is the oldest chapel in Colorado. It was built between 1850 and 1860 in the village of the same name; the pitched roof and belfry were added in the 1920s. Photo by Miguel A. Gandert

## LOS CUENTOS

As a young scholar, Aurelio Espinosa was compelled, even obsessed, with writing down everything he heard in great phonological detail, especially his huge collection of traditional cuentos (folk stories) that comprised the corpus of his dialectological studies. There are hundreds of stories about courtly intrigues and romances of kings and princesses and commoners. These themes are quite popular in ballads, as we shall see. For some of them, he analyzed and reconstructed their dissemination over the globe. One of don Aurelio's favorites was the muñeco de trementina (piñón sap doll) stories, so similar to the sticky “Tar Baby” stories from the African American South. True to the Finnish Historical Geographical method in vogue in his day, he collected as many

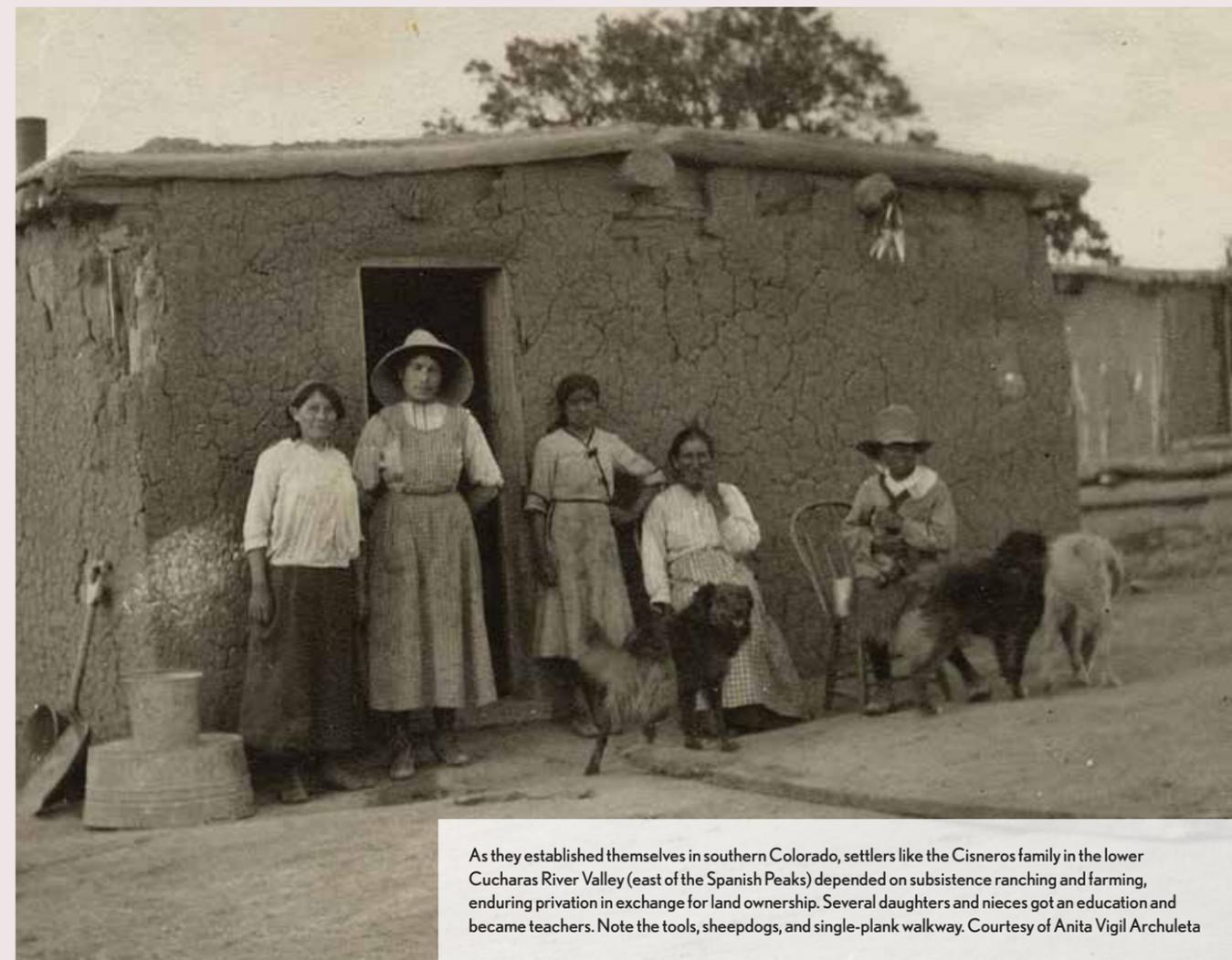
versions as he could find and compared them worldwide to conclude that this particular family of stories began in ancient India and then traveled to Spain and Africa independently.

Later a system of tale types was organized. Today folklorists pay much more attention to performance and contextual features.

Espinosa and all his students collected many versions of the following cuentos. These summaries are my own as I heard and learned the cuentos directly from storytellers. In full presentation mode, cuentos are not recited but performed interactively—retold every time as the teller monitors the reactions and backgrounds of the audience. Many, many more stories have animal characters with their deep roots in Aesop's Fables and more recent roots in the

Bible. Here is one about dogs that isn't in the holy book:

On the sixth day of Genesis, God decided that humans could use a faithful companion, so he created dogs. At first they all looked the same, medium sized and gray. They are so intelligent that they asked God for more. More sizes and shapes and colors. God obliged them. They looked at each other and immediately became jealous of each other. So a big fight broke out. God commanded them to stop and punished them by switching their tails around. Dogs spend their entire lives looking for their own tails, which is why they sniff each other's tails when they meet.



As they established themselves in southern Colorado, settlers like the Cisneros family in the lower Cucharas River Valley (east of the Spanish Peaks) depended on subsistence ranching and farming, enduring privation in exchange for land ownership. Several daughters and nieces got an education and became teachers. Note the tools, sheepdogs, and single-plank walkway. Courtesy of Anita Vigil Archuleta



Little Bear Peak in the Sangre de Cristo Range, photographed from the San Luis Valley in October 1940. History Colorado, 10023531

Espinosa trained several generations of his students (notably Juan B. Rael), his own son Juan Manuel, Rubén Cobos, and many other men and women to continue the task of collecting all the versions of all the stories that people were telling in the Upper Río Grande to compile linguistic data and to analyze their diffusion and origins.

With his growing corpus in hand, the young Aurelio amplified and published his dissertation as “The Spanish Language of New Mexico and Southern Colorado,” which caught the attention of anthropologists and philologists in the United States, in Spanish America, and in Spain. He became part of an international community of scholars with converging interests. Soon they would found a new academic discipline. From wherever his academic career led him—Albuquerque, Chicago, Palo Alto—Espinosa returned every summer he could to the Upper Río Grande.

His “Romancero Nuevomexicano” immediately attracted the attention and friendship of Ramón Menéndez Pidal, who was simultaneously compiling his own Romancero and language studies in Spain. Pidal’s generation was motivated by a catastrophe: the fall from grace of Spain as a global empire in 1898. After the long wars of independence in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, the United States claimed victory after participating in just the last three months.

The “Generación del ’98” arose from the ashes of the tarnished era of militarism, colonialism, slavery, and its ill-gotten wealth. A new generation of thinkers, artists, writers, and teachers asserted that the true wealth of Spain is not its imperial project but the language, culture, literature, and arts of its peoples, in the peninsula as well as the former colonies. At the universities a new discipline was born and christened “Hispanismo/Hispanism,” which centered and clustered these interests and not the promotion of the imagined glories of Spain. In the United States, new

academic units simply called “Spanish departments” emerged, and Espinosa founded Stanford University’s in 1910. He proudly authored a career total of twenty-two textbooks for use in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education. Many were filled with the folklore of his homeland that students read as they learned grammar, speaking, and writing.

Espinosa was deeply rooted in his patria chica, or homeland, the center place of his interest and research. He was born four years after the partition of the New Mexico Territory when Colorado became a state in 1876. New Mexico waited more than three decades longer before its statehood in 1912. In Santa Fe, impatient Anglo political leaders conspired with Hispano elites to promote a new Hispanophile discourse, which exaggerated and privileged Spanish cultural influence to disassociate the state and its people with Mexico. Some contemporary scholars see Espinosa’s work as overly complicit in promoting the agenda of this political process and have criticized an invented “Spanish fantasy heritage.” To the contrary, others have pointed out that his dedication to Hispanismo was not about identity formation or politics; it was about language and culture. Don Aurelio’s support for the nationalist cause in the Spanish Civil War decades later intensified the critique. He was ostracized by the American academy, and four decades of solid fieldwork was erased from the canon of US folklore studies, but not from linguistics.

## EL ROMANCERO

Espinosa was immersed in the issues of his own times, but a few more contemporary indita (Indian maiden) ballads also surface in his collections, and Native characters appear in the stories he heard. Narratives of captivity and mixed ancestry were part of the world of his ancestors but were buffered by silence.

The most famous indita is the legendary “La cautiva Marcelina,” about

the woman who witnessed the murder of her entire village and family and was taken away by her captors.

*La cautiva Marcelina  
cuando llegó a los cerritos,  
volteó la cara llorando,  
—Mataron a mis hijitos.*

The captive Marcelina when she got to the little hills, she turned back her face crying, “They killed my little children.”

*—Por eso ya no puedo  
en el mundo más amar,  
de mi querida patria  
me van a retirar.—*

“That is why I can never in this world love again, from my beloved homeland they are taking me away.”

The ballad is devastating in its pathos and hopelessness and is sung in solitary or ritual settings. In some communities the chorus of —La cautiva Marcelina, ya se va, ya se la llevan— “there she goes, there they take her” could be heard chanted by girls jumping rope. Tragedy is sometimes recalled or sublimated in play.

Sometimes serious, sometimes satirical, the older romances are narrative ballads dating back to Medieval and Renaissance Spain. Favorite themes include history and its heroes as well as courtly love, incest, religion, and pastoral themes. These ballads are often on the lips of children, but, in the Hispanic world, women are their primary keepers and singers. Their main mnemonic device is the sixteen-syllable line with assonance or vowel rhyming in the last two syllables. (When broken in half for easier reading, the assonance is in the second and fourth lines.)

Of the dozens of ballads in the Espinosa “Romancero Nuevomexicano,” several are of abiding interest. One of the oldest is “Gerineldo,” a Carolingian ballad from the court of Carlo Magno (Charlemagne), 748–814 CE. The king personally raised his beloved

page, but the princess is also enamored of him and orders him into personal service for only three hours (in her bed).

*—Gerineldo, Gerineldo, mi  
camarero aguerrido, ¡quien te  
pescara esta noche tres horas en  
mi servicio!—*

“Gerineldo, Gerineldo, my valiant steward, if I could snare your service for three hours tonight!”

That morning the king arises early and finds them asleep together. He is obliged by honor to punish them with death, but can’t bear the thought as he asks himself:

*—Si mato a mi Gerineldo, que  
es él que se crió conmigo, si mato  
a mi hija la infanta, queda mi  
reino perdido.—*

“If I kill Gerineldo he is the one whom I have raised, if I kill my daughter, the princess, my kingdom will be lost.”

Instead of taking just revenge, he leaves his sword between them in bed. The beloved page is pardoned, marries the princess, and joins the nobility. A rare story indeed, an old favorite among the Sephardim, the Jews of Spain. The Nuevo Mexicano versions are exceptionally complete.

As with the English Mother Goose rhymes and songs, political romances become satirical when children sing them. This fierce little ballad mocks the downfall of the British Duke of Lord Marlborough, a name difficult to pronounce. Spanish-speaking children the world over perform “Membruz” in singsong style, often while marching around or playing with toy soldiers.

*Membruz se fue a la guerra, no  
sé cuándo vendrá, si vendrá por  
la Pascua o por la Navidad.*

Membruz went to war, I don’t know when he’ll return, if he’ll come for Easter or for Christmas.

*Y veo venir un paje, miren,  
Dominus, ustedes (¡qué salvaje!).  
Ya veo venir un paje, ¿qué  
noticia traerá?*

I see a page coming, look, Good God, you all (what a savage!). I see a page coming, what news will he bring?

*La noticia que traigo, miren,  
Dominus, ustedes (¡qué me  
caigo!). La noticia que traigo,  
Membruz es muerto ya.*

The news I bring, look, Good God, you all (now I’m falling down!). The news I bring, Membruz is finally dead.

In 1709 Marlborough led 75,000 French troops against an alliance of 86,000 English and Spanish troops at Malplaquet, near Belgium, in the bloodiest battle of the bloodiest war in history up to that point. Twenty thousand soldiers died. The world was so horrified that the War of the Spanish Succession was settled by diplomacy, and Bourbons replaced the Hapsburg royals.

Sometimes called relaciones, other romances for children use the antics and crazy vocabulary of animal characters to brighten the world. An entire menagerie of beasts large and



Gerineldo doing his duty in service to the princess. Illustrations like these can be found in manuscript and printed Romancero collections popular in the courts and private libraries. Wikimedia Commons



small—insects, spiders, and mammals—gather for “La trejaria del piojo y la liendre” (The Wedding of the Louse and the Nit). The setting is San Luis, Colorado, with singer Abade Martínez. There is no priest for the unlikely ceremony, but the godparents are there and the banquet is legendary. The cow takes the bread, the calf provides money, a coyote brings meat, a bedbug offers to cook, and a cricket makes the music. A mouse and a spider agree to be the godparents:

Responde un ratón de su ratonal,  
—Amarren los gatos y yo iré a  
padrinear.—

Tirla, dirla, dirla, dirla dirla...

Responde una araña desde su  
arañal, —Síganse las bodas, yo iré  
a madrinear.—

A mouse answers from his mouse  
nest, “Tie up the cats and I’ll do  
the godfathering.”

Dee-da-la, dee-da-la, dee-  
da-la, dee-da-la...

A spider answers from her spidery  
realm, “Let the wedding go on,  
I’ll do the godmothering. The  
monkeys show up to dance, the  
wine flows, the cats get out and  
chew on the godfather, the dogs  
raise hell, and the lice end the fray  
by shooting their guns at dawn.

¡Ay, ay, ay!

“Membruz,” the Duke of Marlborough, rides  
valiantly and foolishly to his bloody battlefield.  
From a Mexican children’s song book.



*Mambrú se fue a la guerra  
¡qué dolor, qué dolor, qué pena!  
Mambrú se fue a la guerra  
No sé cuándo vendrá  
do re mi, do re fa;  
No sé cuándo vendrá*

## EL CANCIONERO

Your canción favorita, or favorite song, is an everyday usage. But “canción” is also a genre of folk music, the great lyric tradition. There are many hundreds of canciones, old and new, in every region of the Hispanic world, and some are known everywhere. They are beloved because they express every aspect of love and the end of love and life. Since early modern times, singers compiled *Cancioneros*, or collections of songs, as they did with the Romanceros. Scribes carefully wrote them down, and with the onset of printing they became available as single pages, pamphlets, and books to anyone who could afford them, from the courts to the streets. Narrative stories are much less important in songs than in ballads.

The most common poetic device of the canción is the language surrounding “tú y yo,” simply “you and I,” so we can easily identify with them. The basic building block is the copla, the easy-to-compose four-line couplet. Spanish features vowel rhyming, which is less imposing than the rhyme schemes of English. Our selection of songs was consolidated in the nineteenth century, under the influence of literary romanticism. *Bel canto*, “beautiful song,” is a fully voiced singing style borrowed from operas of the same era. Music teacher Alex Chávez projected this style when he sang most of these canciones he grew up with in the San Luis Valley.

The canciones Aurelio Espinosa was most interested in were about cultural change, whether the changes in taste between generations or the growing influence of Anglo American society. The earliest were bitter and resentful, but humor eventually took over. Everyone in the Spanish-speaking world has heard of don Simón, the elderly gentleman with his worries and complaints about social and cultural change. His barometer is the dress, hairstyles, and comportment of young women, presumably because their styles change faster. He is a character from a series of nineteenth-century zarzuelas, or Span-

ish light operas, that were popular in all the major cities of Spain and Latin America. In 1941 in Mexico, filmmaker Julio Bracho directed a movie about don Simón.

In the Upper Río Grande, versions of don Simón’s canción can be dated by women’s styles. In his own time, women were properly and modestly dressed, with long dresses. The old gentleman is scandalized with the outgoing behavior, short skirts, and “rat-tail” spit curls of the “flapper” style of the 1920s.

*Don Simón, los sesenta y cumplidos,  
bueno y sano doy gracias a Dios.  
Que me siento tan fuerte y fornido  
que me puedo casar con la flor.*

Don Simón, sixty years complete,  
healthy and happy, thanks to God.  
I feel so strong and robust that I  
can wed the youngest flower.

*En mis tiempos toda señorita  
se vestía con moderación,  
sus vestidos prendían desde  
el cuello y sus naguas al  
mero tacón.*

In my times all the young women  
dressed with moderation, their  
dresses hung from the collar  
and their skirts down to the heel.

*En mis tiempos las damas usaban  
su rosario en la procesión  
y sus ojos humildes mostraban  
que rezaban con gran devoción.*

In my times young women used  
their rosaries in the procession,  
and their eyes were so humble that  
they prayed with great devotion.

*Hoy las vemos todas encueradas  
y con pelo de estilo rabón,  
trote y trote atrás de los  
muchachos, ¡ay, qué tiempos,  
señor Don Simón!*

Today we see them with skin  
showing, and with their stylish  
hair all bobbed, trotting, trotting  
behind the guys, oh, what times  
are these, Don Simón!

Especially alarming to many was the infiltration of English, the second language that became our first language over time—although Spanish maintains its place right next to our heart. From all accounts, this “Cancioncita del inglés” (“Little English Song”) was used in schools across the region as the language of instruction shifted from Spanish to English. Bilingual humor was key in getting students used to studying English, and making fun of their mistakes. But shaming, punishments, and linguistic trauma were also on the fringes of the curriculum. The first lessons include “yes,” numbers, and greetings, and where there is bilingualism, code switching is always an in-group strategy. Since Spanish syntax is so flexible, both English and Spanish learners often comment that speakers of the other language “talk backwards.”

Bilingual love songs like “Me casé con una pocha” (“I Got Married to a Pocha”) were a common setting for language shift. English influence began in earnest with the opening of American commerce on the Santa Fe Trail in 1821 and new trade with California on the “Old Spanish Trail,” with its braided routes across southern Colorado. Again, the first new word is always “yes.” Mexicans south of the border were both fascinated and disturbed to witness the assimilation of their cousins across the border. “Pochos” is a word derived from Náhuatl that means pale. In vernacular Spanish it becomes a derogatory nickname for Mexican Americans. The Pochos of California already prefer white bread and butter to tortillas. What is the world coming to?



A fourth-century Christian martyr, San Acacio was a Roman centurion of Greek origin arrested after converting, taken to Byzantium, tortured, and crucified. Santera Marie Romero Cash created the main altar for the church and many images of the soldier saint. Photo by Karen Elwell

### TRADICIONES ESPIRITUALES

Any discussion of religious culture must begin with *querencia*, that notion of *tierra sagrada*, or sacred space, and the center space of beloved homeland. Historically, the San Luis Valley was a *valle de lágrimas*, but through a cultural transformation it was sanctified by a system of place naming, ritual celebration, and processions. In Iberian culture, landscapes and nature itself are wild and profane, just the opposite of the worldviews of Indigenous cultures.

The ambition of sixteenth-century settlers of the kingdom of Nueva México was to become *hidalgos*, literally *hijos de algo*—heirs of land and wealth—at almost any cost.

The price of arrogance was paid in blood in 1680 when the Río Grande Pueblos arose and reclaimed their heritage. In the space of a few mestizo generations, the newcomers who sought title to the land were instead possessed by the land after they returned. As they became indigenous to this place, the narrow

boundaries of their *Campo Santo*, the Sacred Ground, spread past churchyards and the bones of the dead towards valleys, plains, and the mountains beyond. Crosses were erected at sacred sites, and every settlement set up its own nearby *calvario* to commemorate the Crucifixion of Jesús. Some snowy crosses already graced great mountains such as Blanca Peak, a perpetual sign of hope. Villages were dedicated to saints such as Santiago, San Acacio, San Antonio, the archangel San Rafael, and the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, which automatically placed them in the sacred calendar. Feast-day processions to honor the *santos* were always celebrated with processions to bless and re-sacralize the landscape every year. The San Luis Valley is so vast that many became *cabalgatas*, or equestrian processions, sometimes with hundreds of horses. These traveling devotions feature *descansos*, or places of rest, where people pause, pray, and sing at sacred spots like the *camposanto* (graveyard), a chapel, a spring or *acequia* (irrigation canal), or a place where someone has met their death.

The religious poetry and stories of the people of the Río Grande del Norte abound with holy and ordinary persons in Biblical and local settings, since Bibles were so scarce. Woodcutters in the forest or shepherds in a meadow might encounter or even share their lunch with Jesus or Mary. Children hopelessly lost in a snowstorm were taken to safety by another child, who grateful parents realized was Santo Niño, the Child Jesús, by the description of his clothes. Saints were called upon and thanked for special favors. The beloved San Antonio had a talent for helping find things as small as a watch or as important as a spouse. He could also be punished and his face turned to the wall if he did not deliver his favors soon enough.

### LOS ALABADOS

Ancestral prayers and prayer poems to be sung had a special place in the memory, the hearts, and the notebooks of the people. A deep and culturally complex spirituality thrives in New Mexico

and can be heard in its many-layered religious romances. The ancient *alabados* (songs of praise) echo Medieval plainchant, sounding stark and spiritual because they are based on modal scales (like Gregorian chants). *Alabados* are antiphonal when sung in groups, and the people sing the chorus or first verse between all the subsequent ones. *Alabados* are often sung solo as well. They are not bound by time signature and also feature *melisma*, where a singer lingers on a note by wavering both above and below it, an ornament common to Jewish and Muslim sacred music and of course to flamenco. *Alabados* were originally communal, participatory devotions that could be heard in households, chapels, plazas, and at the *calvario* each community had for outdoor services. The faithful keepers of the *alabados* are the brothers and families of the *Hermanidad de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno*, or Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene, whose *moradas*, or sacred dwelling places, grace the landscapes of the Upper Río Grande. Some Easter-season services retreated into private spaces with mounting pressures of tourism and religious intolerance. But they were never secretive, as some would believe. *Alabados* are heard most often during the Lenten season, and they narrate the Passion of the Christ and the anguish of his mother, María.

Aurelio Espinosa identified “*Por el rastro de la cruz*,” or “Along the Trail of the Cross,” as one of the oldest and most widely distributed *alabados* in the entire Spanish-speaking world. As Jesus proceeds on the *Via Crucis* (the Way of the Cross), he leaves a trail of blood behind him. The bells of Belén (Bethlehem) are tolling for the dawn, and his Mother is desperately looking for him. She does not meet Jesus directly as she does in the Fourth Station of the Cross. Here, she meets her nephew San Juan Bautista (Saint John the Baptist) outside Jerusalem and faints when he tells her what is happening. Then they proceed to the Crucifixion. This is a sign that not only priests composed *alabados*, since they knew that

only John the Evangelist was present that morning. John the Baptist had already been executed by King Herod.

In “*Considera, alma perdida*” (“Consider, Lost Soul”), the singer appeals to the skeptical listener, the “lost soul” who is invited to explore the “mysteries of the Cross.” The chorus of this *alabado* can be heard as a sung refrain between the *Estaciones de la Cruz*, the fourteen Stations of the Cross, which are recited and intoned with prayers:

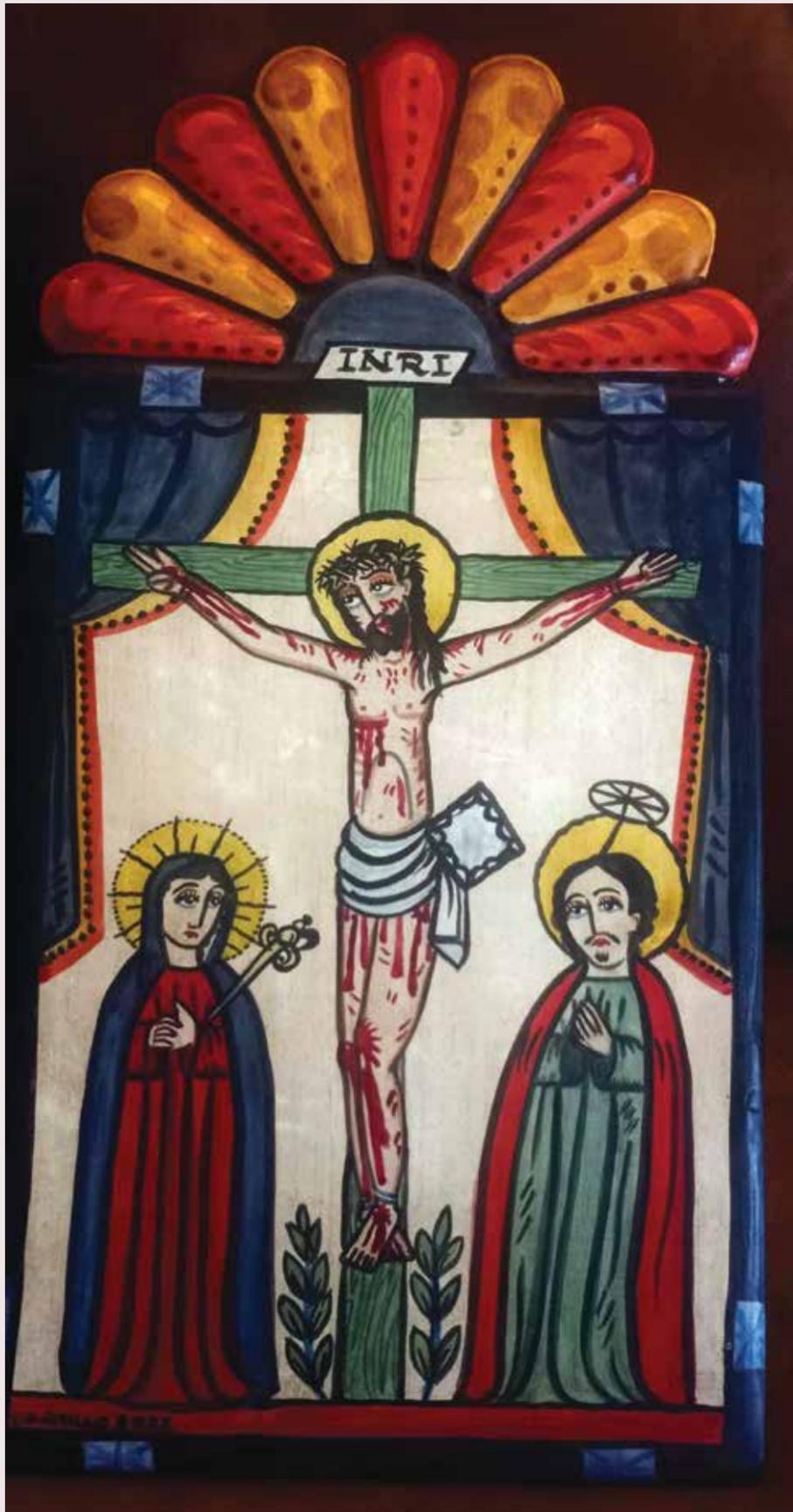
*Considera alma perdida,  
que en aqueste paso fuerte,  
dieron sentencia de muerte  
y al Redentor de la vida.*

Consider, lost soul,  
that in that fateful step,  
they gave sentence of death  
to the Redeemer of life.

*Él que a los cielo creó y a la  
tierra le dio el ser por tu amor  
quiso caer el tercer paso que dio.*



*Madre de Dolores*, Our Lady of Sorrows, with the sword of grief in her heart. Retablo painted and photographed by Charlie M. Carrillo



*Cristo Crucificado*, Jesus on the Cross, with his Mother and the apostle John. Retablo painted and photographed by renowned santero Charlie M. Carrillo

He who created the heavens and gave being to the earth, for your love he did fall on the third, the third step he took.

Considera cual sería en tan respiroso amor, la pena del Salvador y el martirio de María.

Consider how it would be, amidst such spiritual love, the agony of the Savior and torment, the torment of Mary.

Los clavos, ¡qué compasión, y espinas que le quitaron, segunda vez traspasaron de María el corazón!

The nails, what compassion, and spines they removed, the second piercing of Mary's heart!

Llegó al ocaso la luz, entre Cristiano y sin tosa en el sepulcro reposa los misterios de la cruz.

The light approached darkness, between Christians and without in the sepulcher rest the mysteries of the cross.

### NEO-MEXICANO AND CHICANO RENAISSANCE: VISIONS FOR A NEW FUTURE

By the 1890s Hispanos had realized the truth of the ancient adage and ideal of “*espada y pluma*”—that the pen was as strong as the sword. The sword holds sway over conflict in the moment, but the pen can carry truth into the future.

Before public schooling was available in Colorado and New Mexico, Hispanos embraced the written word, and they learned to read around kitchen tables and in one-room village schools.

By the turn of the century, all along the Río Grande corridor from El Paso to southern Colorado, dozens of Spanish-language newspapers were

available in cities and towns. Besides news, editorials, letters, advertisements, and legal notices, they offered farming and veterinary advice.

They were brimming with folklore and literature, too, and they offered a space in which oral traditions could be documented. They featured commemorative poems, songs, stories, aphorisms, riddles, stories, classics, and novels in serialized editions. A new generation of progressive journalists began to call themselves “Neo-Mexicanos” to project their voices into a new future. They believed the written word could change society, combat assaults on Hispano Mexicano culture, protect civil and property rights, and promote education and political participation. All over Latin America, newspapers created new virtual communities through print, one of the foundations of emerging nations. In the Upper Río Grande, neomexicanos were imagining a nation within a nation, with its own version of history, its own national heroes, its own literature. From the pages of newspapers emerged a cohort of creative writers, historians, and editors who forged their own intellectual tradition, with surprising similarities to El Movimiento, the Mexican American and Chicano cultural activism that emerged in the second half of the century.

A useful way to finalize our tour of traditional Hispano-Mexicano-Chicano culture is to ensure that we do not get sidetracked into fruitless and endless debates on “cultural authenticity,” since it is often dictated to us by outside authorities who benefit from dividing us and privileging some of us. Anthropologist John Bodine called it the “Tri-Ethnic Trap” in his studies of Taos and the ways Hispanos are relegated to the lowest rung of the ladder of cultural prestige there. In his ethnography of the community meetings that led to the formation of the Río Grande del Norte National Heritage Area, Thomas Guthrie offers a most useful concept of “hegemonic multiculturalism” after

noticing who defines the cultural framing and controls that critical process. Of what use is our cultural authenticity if it is policed and assigned to us by others?

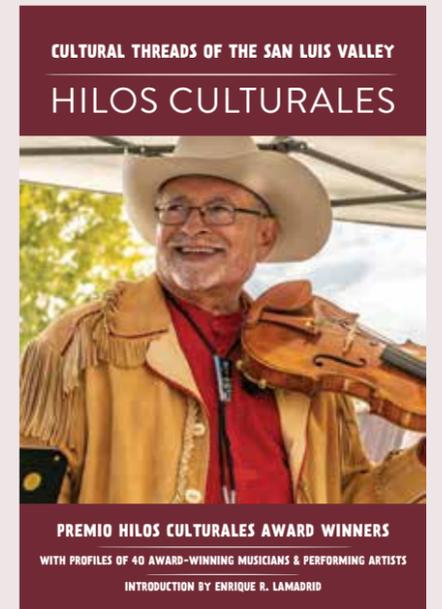
We could labor endlessly to construct cultural inventories of Hispano culture: How did our ancestors survive and thrive? What were the elements of their tangible and intangible culture? They were subsistence farmers, ranchers, and traders in a barter economy. They spoke Spanish, they practiced folk Catholicism, they maintained their own values and customs. Transportation was difficult, the frontier was dangerous, but they survived. How many items from that mid-nineteenth-century inventory do we share today when our dominant language is English, when we are part of a global economy, and when we benefit from modern transportation and communication networks?

Some basic values have survived. The importance of family is still paramount. Foodways are much more than nutrition as they form part of our cultural identity. We practice both old and new customs. We are people of faith, but now we live in an increasingly secularized world. We believe in education because it has economically and socially redeemed our families—without forgetting who we are, hopefully. The decline of the Spanish language ironically elevates it to iconic status, even though we have lost our fluency and deep knowledge of it and labor diligently to recover it as Spanish Heritage Language in Hispanic Studies—also known as Spanish departments and their international and regional exchange programs and field schools.

What abides is a strong sense of ourselves and our new ethnic status in a dominant society. Fredrick Barth offers us the concept of “ethnic boundaries.” We still have a strong sense of who we are even though our cultural inventory only remotely resembles the inventory of our ancestors. Those boundaries are totally permeable and we receive cultural influences from everyone and everything that surrounds us. We get to choose our

cultural influences and adopt musical and dance and literary traditions from other parts of the world. We get to define ourselves. 

**Enrique Lamadrid** is a historian and folklorist, Professor Emeritus of Spanish, and former director of Chicano Hispano Mexicano Studies at the University of New Mexico. His teaching and research interests include Southwest Hispanic and Latin American folklore and folk music, Chicano literature, and literary recovery projects. He has done fieldwork with students all over New Mexico, as well as in Mexico, Spain, Colombia, and Ecuador.



**Editor's note:** this is an excerpt from “New Perspectives on the Traditional Literary Folklore, Music, and Dance of the Río Grande del Norte,” the author’s extensive introduction to the recent book *Hilos Culturales: Cultural Threads of the San Luis Valley*. Available at the History Colorado Center and online at [historycolorado.org](http://historycolorado.org)

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## BUILT ON GIVING BACK

A Conversation with Rich Benenson, Managing Partner  
Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, LLP

### **Q** What was the legal and cultural landscape at the time of your firm's founding? How did that shape your organization?

Childhood friends Norm Brownstein, Jack Hyatt, and Steve Farber had no idea what the future held when they opened their law firm in 1968. Their entrepreneurial spirit and love for Colorado was strong and has stood the test of time as their firm is now one of the largest private companies in Colorado. Over the last fifty-five years, the firm has witnessed a complete evolution of the city of Denver and seen periods of economic recession and incredible growth. Through it all, Brownstein remains a steadfast and respected presence throughout the city and business communities of Denver and across the national political landscape. The firm's ability to not only survive but thrive through challenging times is a testament to our founders' entrepreneurial spirit and leadership.

### **Q** Can you introduce us to your work? What do you do, and how do you do it?

Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, LLP provides an integrated approach that combines sensible business solutions with a Capitol Hill perspective. The firm's 300 lawyers and policy

professionals have built a reputation for providing multidisciplinary legal counsel in the areas of corporate and business, gaming, government relations, intellectual property, litigation, natural resources and real estate that drives results and connects business leaders to the information they need to make decisions. An example of our work includes the History Colorado Center where we played a critical role in purchasing and funding the site for development. That project, celebrating its ten-year anniversary last year, helped launch History Colorado into the twenty-first century and transform Civic Center Park.

### **Q** How does your organization's history of community building shape your mission today?

Brownstein is built on the foundation of giving back, which began the day our firm opened its doors. Our founders had a special connection as recipients of community organizations' support. Today, we continue to invest in our communities through board service, volunteerism, sponsorships, donations, and pro bono legal services. Our attorneys and policy professionals have dedicated thousands of hours to pro bono work and this year alone, our employees donated more than 13,000 pro bono hours and nearly 6,000 volunteer hours. Pro bono work allows us to positively impact the lives of myriad individuals and organizations who could not otherwise afford superior, quality legal representation. Our pro bono services are extensive and we take on pro bono projects that align with our employees' passions.

### **Q** Can you tell us specifically about your firm's history of fighting antisemitism?

One of reasons we're so passionate about fighting antisemitism is because our founders faced it when they were young. Norm Brownstein has dedicated much of his career to fighting antisemitism. One outcome of his years of advocacy is when former President Donald Trump signed an executive order combatting antisemitism. Norm played a key role in advancing the effort along with an influential group of Democrats and was present when the president signed the order at the annual White House Hanukkah Reception on December 11, 2019. And Norm's efforts continue. In April 2024, Senate Bill 4127 (Antisemitism Awareness Act of 2024) was introduced, with Norm once again being a driving force. It would adopt the IHRA definition for the purposes of the federal anti-discrimination laws, especially as they are applied to education.

### **Q** What does the future look like for Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck?

Our firm has a strong history that will fuel an even stronger future. We will continue to focus on the power of relationships and put them at the heart of everything we do. We continue training the future leaders in our profession and within our communities.



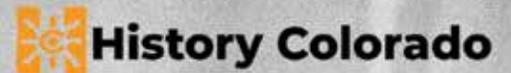
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