

2025 SAA Research Forum

Curating Digital Exhibits in Community Archives

A Comparative Study of the Park County Local History
Archives and the Chinese Historical Society of Southern
California

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Digital Exhibits

- A new digital genre
 - Built on the tradition of physical displays in museums and libraries (Cannon et al., 2021; Marsh, 2023).
 - Adopted in archival, digital libraries, and digital humanities projects
- Goals of digital exhibits
 - Promote digital collections and enhance user engagement
 - Offer additional context and interpretation through narratives
 - Provide new avenues for addressing archival silences and uplifting stories of marginalized communities (Choi & Hastings, 2023)

Research Study

- Goal
 - To explore the approaches to curating digital exhibits in local community archives
- Problem statement
 - The role and structure of digital exhibits have been explored in the context of academic institutions or large public libraries (Choi & Hastings, 2023; 2024)
 - There is no research examining the methods and challenges of creating digital exhibits in local community archives

Questions & Methods

- Questions

R1. How are the topics of digital exhibits in community archives proposed and selected?

R2. What kinds of approaches or methods are used for constructing narratives and selecting objects to illuminate them?

R3. What strategies are undertaken to present social justice topics and address the omission or erasure of historically marginalized groups in archival collections?

- Methods

- Content analysis of selected digital exhibits in community archives
- Structured interviews with archivists, volunteers, and students involved in constructing digital exhibits

The Park County Local History Archive (PCLHA)



- Established by a group of volunteers in **2001**
- Focused on the history of mining, railroads, ranching, and community life in rural Colorado
- Located in Fairplay, Park County, Colorado
- The Chinese immigrant community lived in Park County at the turn of the 20th century
- [Digital Archive](#) launched in Omeka (classic) in **2019**
- Features **six** [digital exhibits](#)
- **One exhibit is focused on Chinese Immigrants in Park County**



The Chinese Historical Society of Southern California (CHSSC)



- Established by a group of volunteers in **1975**
- Focused on the history and historical role of Chinese and Chinese Americans in southern California
- Located in an urban area, L.A. California
- Has an active Chinese and Chinese American community
- [Digital Archive](#) launched in Omeka S in **2020**
- Features **ten** digital exhibits
 - [Chinatown Associations](#)
 - [Grandview Gardens Restaurant](#)



Topics & Sources of Materials

Exhibit topics:

Mostly community-driven

- PCLHA: Comments from community advisory board; evaluation study (Matusiak, 2022)
- CHSSC: Suggestions from funders and researchers; serendipitous discoveries in collections

Sources of Archival Materials:

Both internal and external materials, **local newspapers & oral histories** highly valuable

- PCLHA: Difficult to do additional collecting related to local Chinese immigrants; photographing traces at local sites
- CHSSC: May reach out to descendants to obtain permission/collect additional sources

Tools

- PCLHA: All exhibits built in Omeka, relatively standardized formatting
- CHSSC: Uses various tools and platforms to achieve different presentation goals-- Wordpress, StoryMaps, Prezi
- Key considerations: objectives, resources, sustainability, community feedback

Chinese Immigrants in Park County

Arrival in the United States

Colorado

Anti-Chinese Activities

Anti-Chinese Riot in Denver

Chin Lin Sou

Park County

Hamilton

Edward L. Thayer

Terrace Farming

Peabody Placer

Fairplay


Fairplay Water System

Mining

The Tong House

Many Marys

Many Marys



"China Mary" who reportedly operated a laundry in Fairplay (Park County Local History Digital Archive).

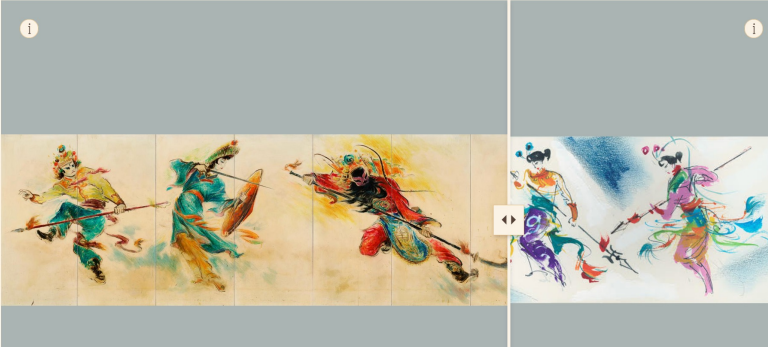
Tombstone, Arizona who was highly respected by her community.[4]

At least one Chinese woman ran a business in Fairplay, although the details among scholars are inconsistent. One author asserts that there were three Chinese women who worked in Fairplay, all of them named "Mary": "Big Mary" ran a laundry above the McLaughlin Livery & Feed Stable, "Little Mary" sold produce from her garden, and "China Mary" had a store "specializing in accoutrements particular to Chinese customs involving the use of opium." [1] A significant obstacle to documenting the stories of Chinese women in America during this time period arises from the white-American practice of referring to all Chinese women by the derogatory appellation of "China Mary" or "Mary" (just as Chinese men were referred to as "John" or "John Chinaman"). [2] This practice frustrates attempts to accurately identify historical figures and reinforces the historical erasure of Chinese women. Not only were there potentially multiple "Marys" in Fairplay, there were "China Marys" all over the western United States. There was a "China Mary" in Evanston, Wyoming (also known as Ah Yuen). [3] and a well-known "China Mary" in

[Chinese Immigrants in Park County: Many Marys page](#)

Side-by-Side of the Murals vs the Preliminary Sketch

Murals are color corrected to demonstrate how they would have looked in the past while they were mounted in Grandview Gardens.



[Grandview Gardens: The story of LA Chinatown's Grandview Gardens restaurant](#)

General Strategies

Constructing narratives:

- Complete solid and thoughtful historical research to provide rich context, also keeping information digestible
 - CHSSC: Hiring graduates from UCLA's Asian American Studies Department
 - PCLHA: Prioritizing secondary resources written by Chinese authors in research

Cultivating community relationships:

- Establishing connections with the community to gather more information

Collaborators and partnerships:

- Building partnerships with universities (MLIS programs, departments with subject expertise) and institutions, recruit and build a sustained network of students and researchers
 - **Specific makeup of the local community really matters**

Social Justice: Challenges and Techniques

- Working through biased sources, aim to provide nuanced historical analysis in narratives
 - Navigating positionalities of team members
- Ensuring cultural accuracy
 - CHSSC: Providing accurate translations, including proper Chinese characters
- Addressing absences: creating new visual evidence
 - PCLHA: Photographing traces of Chinese communities in the area (e.g., abandoned buildings, grave markers)



What used to be Sang Lung's laundry in Como, 2021. [Photo by Sam Carlson](#), Park County Local History Archive

Conclusion/Further Research

Conclusion:

Diverse range of approaches to curating digital exhibits at local community archives with some shared basic strategies

- Depends on goals, resources, personnel, characteristics of local community, community feedback, etc.

Further Research:

- Incorporating more cases for further analysis



Ah Yut's grave in the Fairplay cemetery. Ah Yut was the last Chinese miner to reside in Fairplay. The grave plaque reads "A Chinaman."
[Photo by Sam Carlson.](#)

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Questions

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