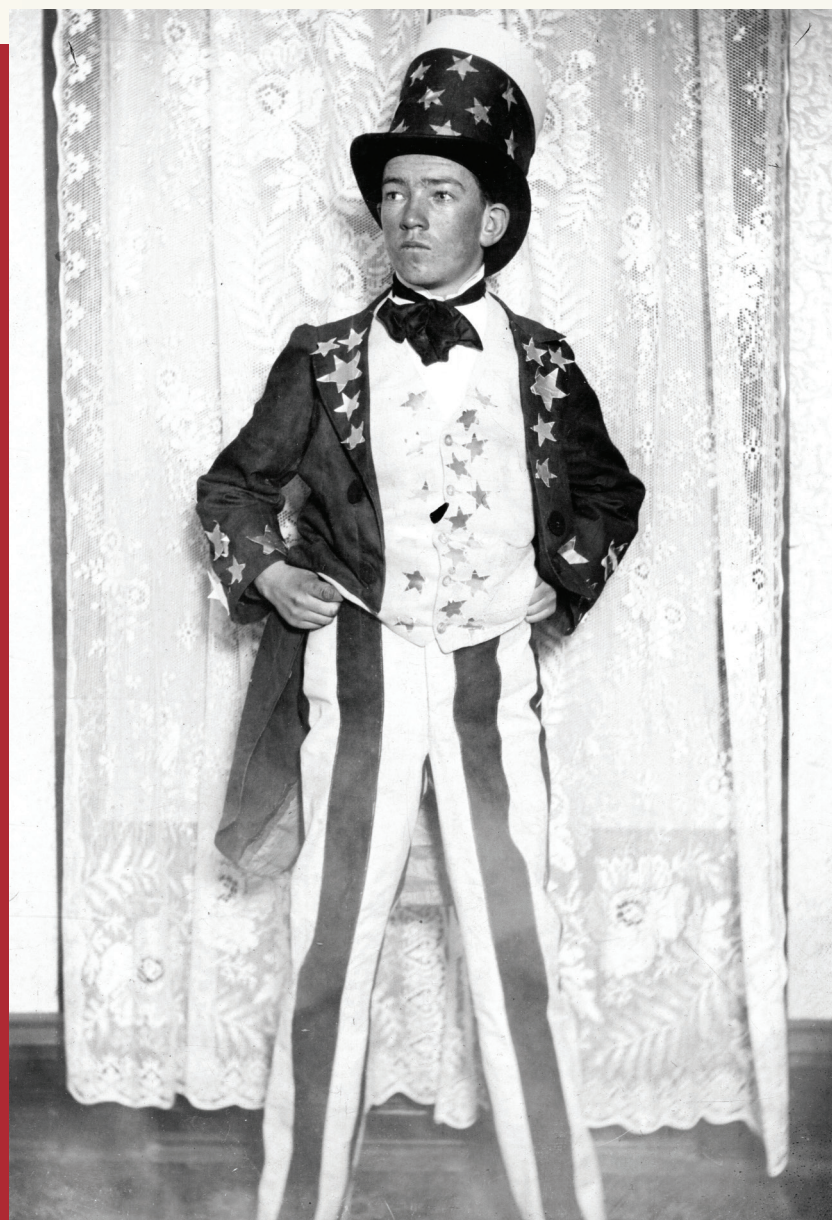


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History La Plata

A Publication of the La Plata County Historical Society



Moments That Made US

Our story was never inevitable. We shaped it at every turn.

On the Cover



▲ Young man, possibly Hans Aspaas Jr., dressed as Uncle Sam, the personification of the United States. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 89.19.15

From the Board

This year, we have much to celebrate. As our nation marks the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and Colorado commemorates 150 years of statehood, the La Plata County Historical Society is proud to embrace the theme originally developed by History Colorado—*Moments that Made US*—for our newly opened exhibit and this edition of History La Plata. We invite you to explore the ideals at the heart of the Declaration and discover how they have shaped the character and story of La Plata County across generations.

More than 50 years ago, a group of dedicated community members founded the La Plata County Historical Society to preserve and share our county's rich culture and history. Their work stands as a shining example of what it means to "mutually pledge to each other" in pursuit of the common good, the very spirit that inspired the founders in 1776.

Today, the Animas Museum stands at a pivotal moment. Its future is not guaranteed, and we currently face difficult challenges. The path forward depends on the engagement and generosity of people like you. Whether through membership, volunteering, or financial support, your involvement will help determine what this institution becomes for the next generation of La Plata County residents.

Here's to the future!

The La Plata County Historical Society Board of Directors

Moments That Made US

This issue of History La Plata follows the framework of History Colorado's *Moments That Made US* exhibition. Five central themes of the Declaration of Independence are explored in La Plata County's history through photos and artifacts preserved by the Animas Museum. It also includes a section examining key events that shaped La Plata County.

The photos and artifacts are paired with interpretive labels that were researched and written by members of the HLP 2026 team. Their contributions are identified by initials following each entry: Susan Jones (**SHJ**), Charles DiFerdinando (**CAD**), Robert McDaniels (**RLM**), and Kelsey Reeder (**KGR**).

Intro to Sidebars

Maybe you are old enough to remember the "Bicentennial Minutes" broadcast by CBS from 1974 to 1976? These were a popular series of short videos that highlighted moments in the American Revolution. At the Animas Museum, we were inspired to do something similar based on the *Moments That Made US* themes. Watch these videos on our YouTube channel @animasmuseum or via the QR codes you will find in this publication to learn more about some of the characters who helped shape La Plata County's story.



▲ Mayor Pro-tem Ian "Sandy" Thompson speaks at the podium during the closing ceremonies of Durango's centennial celebration in August 1981. This year-long celebration did as much or more than the 1976 bicentennial celebration to promote an awareness of our history and the importance of instituting historic preservation policies in the city. Dignitaries in the front row include Mayor Bob Hatfield (far left), Gayle Maloy (on Thompson's right), Colorado Governor Dick Lamm (on Thompson's left), Southern Ute Tribal Chairman Leonard Burch, and Mr. & Mrs. Alva Lyons. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Image courtesy of Robert McDaniel



In recognition of America's 250 - Colorado's 150 Anniversary Seizing the Sesquicentennial Moment

BY JASON L. HANSON, *Chief Creative Officer and Director of Interpretation and Research, History Colorado*

The Declaration of Independence announced a bold proposition: that all people possess certain unalienable rights and that governments derive their powers from the consent of the governed. The American experiment, begun on the East Coast, was crystallized in that Declaration 250 years ago, but it was often as the nation moved west that we determined what we meant by the promise of equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It's a Western perspective to bring to this commemorative year, when alongside 250 years of American independence—the nation's Semiquincentennial—we mark the 150th anniversary of Colorado joining the Union as the Centennial State—our Sesquicentennial. The bespoke term we've coined in Colorado for our twin anniversaries is our Sesquicentennial, and it serves as

a tongue-twisting reminder (if you say it loud enough, you'll always sound precocious!) that the land we call home did not simply enter the American story in 1876.

As the founders debated independence in Philadelphia, Indigenous nations, Spanish explorers, and colonial communities were shaping the history of this region in ways that continue to resonate today. The Domínguez-Escalante expedition that travelled along Colorado's Western Slope in 1776 is one of many interwoven narratives that invite us to approach the American 250th anniversary differently in the West. Here we can widen our focus beyond the Revolution while still spotlighting those American ideals articulated in the Declaration, exploring their meaning as we reckon with overlapping histories that can seem more tangibly present in this region.

The *Moments That Made US* exhibition, currently on view at the History Colorado Center and at a museum near you, is organized

around five central themes drawn from the Declaration. It invites visitors to investigate how the ideas in the Declaration have shaped our lives through consequential moments that different people experienced in profoundly different ways. Rather than presenting history as a simple march toward the present, it is designed to empower visitors to take action, as our ancestors did, to shape the outcome of turning point moments in our own generation, and to do so with empathy and understanding that others may experience the same moment differently.

As Colorado marks our Sesquicentennial, these dual commemorations invite more than reflection on the past. They invite participation in an ongoing American project. Each generation faces its own turning points. Each generation has the opportunity—and the responsibility—to help determine what the Declaration of Independence will mean for the next.

Life, Liberty, and the

Promises of “glittering flakes” lured prospectors and miners to what would become La Plata County. Trespassing on Ute Territory, prospectors and miners put pressure on the federal government to sign treaties like the Brunot Agreement that would allow them to pursue “freedom, fortune, and a better way of life.”

Transportation was key to this pursuit in the river valleys and rugged mountains. Railroads followed ancient trails; later, roads and highways followed those same paths and are still in use today.

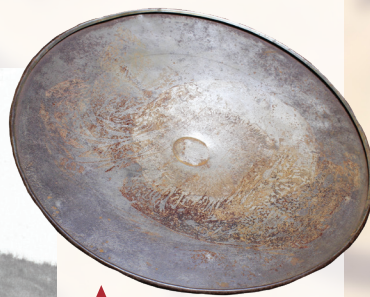
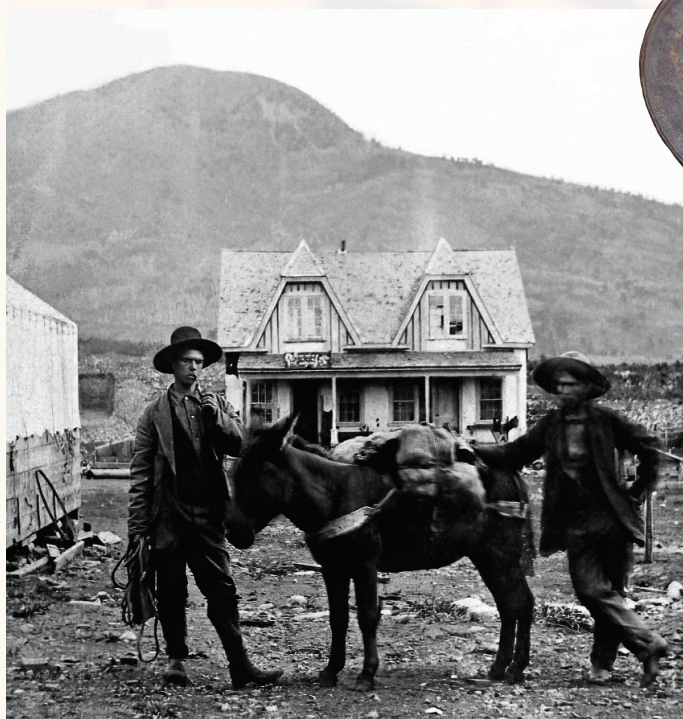
Today, recreational pursuits bring many people to La Plata County. From skiing in the winter to mountain biking to riding the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, tourism provides 30% of the county’s revenue.

The Lure of Gold

The quest for gold in the San Juan and La Plata mountain ranges drew the first permanent Euro-American settlers to southwest Colorado. With picks, shovels, gold pans, a few other tools, and personal necessities, prospectors sought gold in placer deposits in streams like the La Plata River. The enigmatic John Moss, financed by San Francisco banker Tiburcio Parrott, led a prospecting

group into the La Plata Mountains in 1873, and Parrott City was soon founded near the mouth of La Plata Canyon. It became the La Plata County seat in 1876 and remained so until the new town of Durango outvoted tiny Parrott City to move the county government there. Parrott City languished and was largely abandoned by the 1890s.

RLM



▲ Eric Aspaas inherited this gold pan from his grandfather, Ralph Aspaas, and used it while living on the family homestead on the La Plata River between Hesperus and Breen. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum’s Collection 03.33.4

◀ Two prospectors and their pack burro pose in Parrott City with Baldy Peak looming in the background, circa late 1870s. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 89.15.2



▲ The San Juan Express picking up passengers at the Ignacio depot in the 1940s. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Image courtesy of Robert McDaniel.

All Aboard!

Many people believed the gold, silver, and other riches hiding in the San Juan Mountains could fulfill their dreams of a better life. The forbidding landscape made transportation in and out of the area difficult and expensive. Mule teams and wagons were slow, stopped by heavy snow in winter, and could only transport the highest-grade ores. After the Civil War, the United States focused on building railroads across the country, and William Jackson Palmer realized their potential for Colorado. He pioneered using coal for fuel and narrow-gauge technology to bring the iron rails into remote mining districts like those in the San Juans.

The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad created Durango in 1881, and with it came jobs and economic opportunity. Following ancient indigenous trails that had been used by Spanish explorers, traders, survey teams, wagons, and stagecoaches, the railroad drastically lowered the cost of bringing supplies in and ore out of the region. The railroad survived the Silver Crash of 1893, the Panic of 1907, the Great Depression, and two world wars. In the mid-twentieth century, the D&RGW’s Silverton Branch was rebranded as a tourist railroad, bringing a new kind of gold into the county.

SHJ

▶ Jim Connor checking the headlight on D&RG locomotive #160 in the Durango yard around 1914. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 03.58.18



Pursuit of Happiness

The Rise of Recreation

The post-World War II era saw major shifts in society and the priorities of everyday life. More free time and discretionary income encouraged people to look for new recreational opportunities and created an expectation that public money should fund recreation for all economic levels of society. This shift in thinking began during the Great Depression, when federally funded programs were created to support people at all economic levels. La Plata County experienced an economic boom, with an influx of new residents from across the country, the return of military



▲ Picture postcard showing the Durango-La Plata Aquatic Center in the 1960s. PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 03.53.55



▲ Recreation Director Dolph Kuss (2nd from left) prepares to shoot marbles with David Bell, Leon Turnell, Larry Martinez, and Pete Phillips (2nd from right). PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 92.06.1.24

veterans, and the Ballentine family's purchase of the Durango newspapers. The idea of a recreation department and community center was discussed and promoted by local civic groups and the newspapers. This led to the hiring of Dolph Kuss as recreation director and the beginning of public recreation programs for all ages. The community center was voted down, but a public swimming pool was funded along with many other forms of recreation.

CAD

Selection of marbles found during restoration work at the Animas City School, now the Museum. ▶

PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum's Collection 80.04.10



Recreational Skiing Timeline

1937-38 Durango-area skiers installed the area's first rope tow in Cascade Meadows, north of the present-day Purgatory ski area.

The San Juan Ski Club was organized (renamed the Durango Ski Club in 1941).

1939 Rope tow moved to Lechner Field, aka Chipmunk Hill, along Hwy 550 north of Haviland Lake. San Juan Ski Club members began slope work at Durango's Third Avenue ski hill on Florida Road.



▲ Long-time local Dave Oswald races in a dual giant slalom pro race on Purgatory's Pandemonium run in 1979. PHOTO CREDIT: Image courtesy of Robert McDaniel



▲ Durango Ski Club and Calico Hill patches ca. 1960s-1970s.

PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum's Collection 22.30.1 and 24.26.1

1943 Gas and tire rationing resulted in the cessation of skiing at Lechner Field. The City of Durango purchased the ski club's rope tow and installed it at the Third Avenue ski hill in town. Third Avenue was renamed Calico Hill in 1967, then Chapman Hill in 1979.

1946-60 Rope tows sprang up from Jarvis Meadows (near present-day Cascade Village) on the north to Barney Yeager's tow west of Durango.

1955 Dolph Kuss secured an army surplus rope tow from historic Camp Hale to replace the ski club's old tow at the Third Avenue ski hill.

Don Demarest and Sandy Scott installed the original rope tow at Hesperus Ski Area.

1960 The Hare brothers installed a T-bar at the Hesperus Ski Area.

1965 Purgatory ski area built with a lone Riblet chairlift and a day lodge.

RLM



▲ Men standing outside the Kellenberger Saloon and Wholesale Liquor Store at 951 Main Ave., around 1900.

PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 86.03.38

John Kellenberger

Nothing speaks to the "pursuit of happiness" in the West like alcoholic beverages! John Kellenberger, a Swiss immigrant, was a Durango businessman who did his best to provide his customers with the best products, even during Prohibition. Watch our video about Kellenberger on our YouTube channel @animasmuseum or via the QR code.



◀ Jug that once contained John Kellenberger's whiskey. PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum's Collection 96.01.1



Consent of the Governed

Brunot Agreement

Conflicts between Utes and white settlers in Colorado began as soon as Euro-Americans invaded the Utes' traditional homeland. Seeking to restrict the Utes to a reservation, a meaningless treaty in 1864 was soon followed by another in 1868 that designated about the western third of Colorado as a Ute reservation. Within a year, prospectors began to trespass on that reservation, searching for gold in the San Juan Mountains.

Attempts to remove the trespassers soon gave way to the desire to remove the Utes from the mining areas. Negotiations in 1872 initially failed, but

in 1873, U.S. Commissioner Felix Brunot finally secured the Utes' agreement to cede about 3.7 million acres to the United States, opening the area that now includes Pagosa Springs, Durango, Cortez, Silverton, Telluride, Ouray, and Ridgway. Within five years of the Brunot Agreement, the Meeker Incident in 1879 prompted the removal of the Northern Utes to Utah, leaving a 15-mile-wide strip of land along the Colorado-New Mexico border that contains the modern-day Southern Ute and Ute Mountain reservations.

RLM



PROSPECTING ON THE UTE RESERVATION—AN OMINOUS MEETING.—DRAWN BY W. A. ROGERS.

◀ The Brunot Agreement resulted directly from conflicts created by miners trespassing on the Ute Reservation, as illustrated in this 1870s edition of *Harper's Weekly*. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Image courtesy of Robert McDaniel

The land that became La Plata County was Ute Territory, so Felix Brunot's agreement with Chief Ouray on behalf of the Utes was a crucial step in "legitimizing" mining and settlement in the county. La Plata County was created even before the Brunot Agreement was ratified by Congress in April 1874, and the U.S. Government never fulfilled all the promises it made to the Utes.

Newspapers represented the "Fourth Estate" in La Plata County, reporting on local, state, and federal government affairs. One of the first newspapers, *The Durango Record*, boasted a female publisher, Caroline Romney. David Day, publisher of *The Durango Democrat*, was an outspoken example of how newspapers could keep government in check.

More than anything over the past 150 years, civic clubs and associations have shaped La Plata County, far from the center of state government in Denver. Representing and supporting veterans, women, miners, farmers and ranchers, laborers, and minorities, these organizations ensure that their members' voices are heard in local and state government.

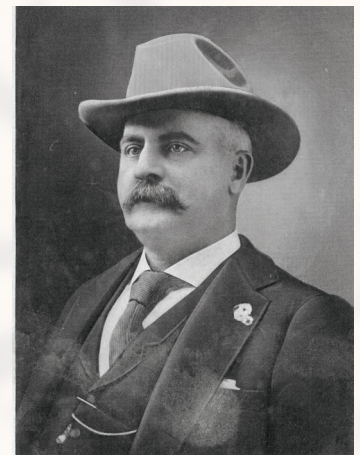


▲ Masthead of *The Durango Democrat*. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Collection 92.19.231

The Fourth Estate

In the days before radio, TV, and social media, Americans were dependent on newspapers. They provided perspective on local, national, and global events and, in the words of Durango's first newspaper editor, Caroline Romney, "a permanent record of the growth and prosperity of the town." While Romney's *The Durango Record* was the first newspaper in town, by 1881 several other papers followed, including *The Southwest* from Animas City, *The Durango Democrat*, the *Republican*, and the *Durango Herald*. Newspapers were decidedly political; the *Record*, *Republican*, and *Herald* were aligned with the Republican party, while, of course, the *Democrat* represented the other party.

In 1892, Civil War veteran David F. Day moved to Durango from Ouray, bringing his newspaper, *The Solid Muldoon*, with him. *The Muldoon* was infamous in Colorado and across the nation; it was said even Queen Victoria read it for Day's acerbic writing



▲ David Day, editor of *The Durango Democrat*. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 21.28.1

style. Although his paper soon took over the *Democrat*, Day questioned and held politicians on both sides of the aisle accountable. Today, these newspapers provide invaluable primary sources to help understand how the county and the nation have evolved over the past 150 years.

SHJ



▲ The Animas Valley Grange's Fiesta Parade float on Main Ave., around 1950.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 24.43.90

Granges

If agriculture was the backbone of the La Plata County economy, the granges were the backbone of our farmers and ranchers. The Colorado Grange was organized in the Colorado Territory in 1874. The national- and state-level organizations supported and advocated for farmers and ranchers with economic assistance and training, as well as providing social activities for rural families. Early granges met in community schoolhouses until they could raise the money to build their own buildings. The grange would host box suppers, dances, and other

entertainments to raise money for projects and attract new members. The first granges in La Plata County were Animas Valley, Pine River, and Ignacio Grange, all established in 1911. Sixteen other granges were subsequently established, including Florida Mesa, Sunnyside, Red Mesa, Breen, Marvel, and Oxford. Granges advocated for the rural agricultural community to help solve issues such as road building and maintenance, pest control, shipping rates, and marketing of produce and livestock. The national and state grange organizations also provided affordable fire and life insurance to agricultural communities.

CAD



▲ Members of Durango's Federated Women's Club pose for a group photo.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 89.19.151



▲ Commemorative plate made for the Colorado State Grange's Centennial in 1974.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum's Collection 04.10.20



▲ Meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Helen M. Searcy is seated at far left.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 02.70.1

Civic Clubs and Community Building

The Reading Club of Durango was an elite women's club in early Durango that spawned other groups, such as the Durango Civic Club and Garden Club, which advocated for civic improvement projects in the new town. Their efforts led to improved streets and parks, as well as the planting of trees and landscaping. The library association created the first public library and reading room and helped to secure a grant from the Carnegie Foundation to build a permanent

library in 1906. Food safety, clean water, and sanitation were other initiatives. Civic clubs such as the Lions Club and Rotary International were active in La Plata County starting in the late 1920s. Established soon after Durango became a town, the Durango Board of Trade—a forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce—promoted business interests and boosted investment in the area.

CAD

Helen Searcy

Through her work with the Daughters of the American Revolution, Helen Searcy helped to influence what our community has become. She was a teacher in the Americanization school that helped immigrants prepare for their citizenship tests. We owe a great debt to her work in preserving the history of the San Juan Country and as the regional vice-president of the Colorado State Historical Society (now History Colorado). Watch our video about Searcy on our YouTube channel @animasmuseum or via the QR code.



Created Equal

Perhaps the most famous line of the Declaration of Independence reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” The founders understood equality as a collective right, that no person was inherently superior to another, not even a king.

The world remained divided by race, gender, and class, even as Americans broke free from monarchy. But the promise of equality was powerful. Those excluded from the meaning of

these words in 1776 still recognized that, by the founders’ logic, equality meant that all people deserve access to the ideals promised by the Declaration of Independence.

La Plata County history is filled with fights both for and against equality. From racial divisions and tensions, labor unions and strikes, and the powerful presence of local advocates for equality, the quest for equality has left its mark on the history of La Plata County.



▲ Smelter workers at the A.S. & R. Smelter around 1905. PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 06.48.20

Smelter Strike

Workers at the American Smelting & Refining Company’s smelter in Durango joined the Western Federation of Miners (a labor union) in 1888. In 1899, under pressure from the union, the Colorado legislature passed a



▲ Twelve of the clerks who were forced to fill in for striking laborers at the A.S. & R. Smelter in 1899. PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 84.01.1.36.

law mandating an eight-hour workday. The smelting company responded by cutting workers’ wages from \$1.41 to \$1.32 a day and gave the workers two weeks to agree. The next day, the workers walked out and headed to the county courthouse, where they shared their story with the supportive *Durango Democrat* newspaper. This emboldened smelter workers throughout Colorado, and more than 2,000 men walked off the job as well. However, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled the eight-hour day unconstitutional, bringing the strike to an end. Work resumed, although many of the striking workers were replaced with “scabs”—office workers and new, inexperienced immigrants. In Durango, a group of armed and masked men broke into a cabin where four of the newly hired smelter workers were sleeping. They threatened the four men and shot one of them, who later died of his injuries. No one was held accountable for the murder.

CAD

League of Women Voters

When the writers of the Declaration of Independence declared that “all men are created equal”, they certainly did not consider the term “men” to encompass black men, Native Americans, or women of any color. Seventy-two years later, in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton introduced the “Declaration of Sentiments” at the Seneca Convention, which called for women to have the same rights and privileges the Declaration accorded to men. It took another 72 years before the 19th Amendment was passed, giving at least white women the right to vote.

Colorado was a bit more progressive in the concept of women’s suffrage. In 1893, male voters approved a referendum to amend the constitution, granting women the right to vote. (That referendum did not pass in La Plata County by a vote of 791 to 397!) This made Colorado the first state (not territory) to grant women’s suffrage by popular vote rather than executive or legislative order.

Founded nationally in 1920, just before the 19th Amendment was passed, the League of Women Voters was established in Durango in 1945. They work “in the hope and belief that a more thorough knowledge of local affairs will encourage citizens to participate more actively and intelligently in them.”

SHJ



▲ Members of the League of Women Voters marched in the 1962 Spanish Trails Fiesta Parade wearing long skirts reminiscent of those worn by suffragists before the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920. PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 23.44.9



▲ The King Coal Mine near Hesperus in the 1990s.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 16.20.13

United Mine Workers of America

While not quite as “glamorous” as gold and silver mining, coal mining was perhaps more critical in La Plata County for keeping the railroads and smelters operating, electricity flowing, and homes warm. When John Porter unexpectedly found coal outcroppings in Horse Gulch in 1875, the future site of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad’s new town was foreordained. Once Durango was established in 1880, coal mines opened in Horse Gulch and on Smelter Mountain, to the west of town.

At first, coal mining was the largest industry in town. It was dirty and dangerous work, requiring long hours with little protection. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was established on the Front Range of Colorado in 1890 to help miners fight for better working conditions and wages. It officially reached La Plata County in 1906, despite opposition from local mine owners, including the Porter Fuel Company. Fortunately, the

county never experienced the strikes and horrors that occurred at similar mines in Fremont, Huerfano, and Las Animas counties, such as the Ludlow Massacre. Workers at King Coal Mine, the county’s last active mine, were represented by the UMWA and donated these artifacts.

SHJ



▲ Cap worn by a member of the United Mine Workers who worked at King Coal Mine.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum’s Collection 16.19.1

Play Like a Girl

Girls were able to participate in some sports in La Plata County early on. In 1907, Durango High School gained a girls’ basketball team after a confrontation between



▲ Lillian McCormick’s Durango High School letter. Lillian was captain of the basketball team, played tennis, and ran track. She graduated in 1930. PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum’s Collection 13.34.6



▲ The Durango High School Girls’ Basketball Team in 1907. Their coach, Mr. Skaggs, is shown with Hazel Cozad, Nola McKinney, Lota Todd, Myrtle McKinney, Newtie Wall, and Laura Burwell (clockwise from top left).
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 01.33.3

Goldie Hocker (later Smiley) and the combined forces of the school principal, the superintendent of schools, and the school board. Bayfield boasted a girls’ team in 1911. The Animas City School possessed a girls’ team in 1923, coached by the principal, a Mr. Scott. Warren Buckley coached the women’s team at Bayfield High School in 1936, but by 1960, girls were only allowed to be cheerleaders. Compared to boys’ sports, opportunities for girls in La Plata County were limited.

The 1972 passage of the landmark federal law known as Title IX mandated equal opportunities for girls and boys. Durango, like other school districts across the country, resisted compliance, fearing that girls’ sports would take away funding from popular boys’ programs. The efforts of people like Mary Ruth Bowman, the former Director of Durango 9R’s Health Department and swimming and tennis coach, have helped girls achieve more equality in sports.

SHJ



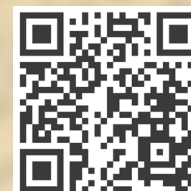
▲ Mary Hansen, riding sidesaddle, leads a parade on 6th St. heading towards Main Ave. This was probably a parade held by the Oddfellows Grand Lodge in 1899, the first parade in Durango.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 95.03.12

Mary Hansen

Although women in her day did not have the same rights and expectations as men, Mary Hansen did not let that stop her. She mastered the difficult art of riding sidesaddle and frequently rode her horse into town to help support her family by bringing products to market. Watch our video about Hansen on our YouTube channel @animasmuseum or via the QR code.



▲ Mary Hansen’s sidesaddle.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum’s Collection 95.03.218



Free and Independent States

The CCC

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was a federal program designed to put unemployed young men to work during the Great Depression. Their work consisted of various improvement projects on public lands across the nation—from planting trees to building campgrounds. This federal program contributed greatly to local infrastructure and public works in La Plata County and the surrounding areas.

One of the three CCC camps in La Plata County was located on Reservoir Hill (now Fort Lewis College and Hillcrest Golf Course). Among the projects that the CCC men stationed



▲ This knapsack belonged to Hans Aspaas, who was a superintendent for several CCC projects in southwest Colorado. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Collection 06.33.10

at Reservoir Hill completed is the "Lion's Den" on the Fort Lewis College campus; other men were temporarily sent to help at Aztec Ruins.

KGR



▲ Aerial photograph taken around 1934 showing the CCC camp on top of Reservoir Hill above Durango. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 24.13.6.5

The Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 to consider independence from Great Britain. But whose independence did the delegates have in mind? Were Americans one people held together by common bonds, or residents of a collection of free and independent states?

The Declaration of Independence only began to address the balance of power between the states and the nation, a balance that continued to shift and evolve. Colorado was no exception. The actions of La Plata County's local leaders and governments influenced the state's development, just as state and federal decisions shaped the county's own history.



▲ NYA crew at work, photographed by Helen Sloan Daniels. From *Adventures with the Anasazi of Falls Creek* by Helen Sloan Daniels, Center of Southwest Studies, 1976.

New Deal Archeology

During the Depression, federal programs supported various construction projects to fortify the country's infrastructure. In Durango, some of these projects unearthed evidence of the Ancestral Pueblo people who lived in this area nearly one thousand years ago. In the days before cultural resource management archeology, Helen Sloan Daniels took it upon herself to try to preserve what she could. As a trustee of the Durango Public Library, Daniels was in a position to secure funding from the National Youth Administration (NYA), a federal program established under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal agencies. Between 1936 and 1940, Daniels employed 36 "boys" to dig ahead of the bulldozers and 18 "girls" to clean and reconstruct the artifacts, including pottery. The "girls" also helped Daniels type and illustrate the report she submitted on behalf of the Durango Public Library in 1940, which included



▲ Sketch of rock art found in the Falls Creek Shelters. Created by the NYA team for the report that the Durango Public Library produced about the project. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Research Library

the illustrations of petroglyphs found at Falls Creek, seen here. Federal funds, via the NYA, not only supported local youth but helped to preserve Durango's archeological heritage.

SHJ

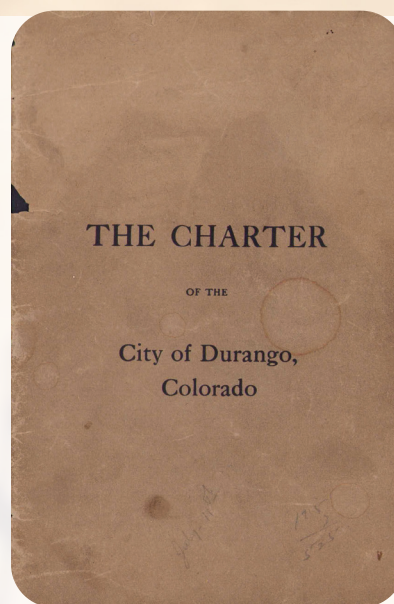


▲ Photograph taken in 1951 of the barracks and Quonset huts used to house veterans and their families at “old” Fort Lewis College after World War II. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 23.42.17

Veteran's Village

After World War II, many veterans came home and took advantage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the G.I. Bill. It provided employment, housing, and education opportunities to those returning from the war and helped to prevent an economic depression. Fort Lewis A&M College, the small two-year school located in Hesperus, faced a housing shortage as many veterans were taking advantage of those educational opportunities by enrolling in classes, bringing their young families in tow. The school set up several converted army barracks for them to live in, known collectively as “Vet Village.” One- to three-bedroom units were available with basic furnishings.

CAD



▲ Copy of The Charter of the City of Durango, adopted in 1912, amended in 1925. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Collection 89.19.66

Durango Charter

In 1912, Durango became a home rule city by an overwhelming vote, the fourth city in Colorado to do so. That meant that, according to the Colorado Constitution, its citizens have “the full right of self-government in local and municipal matters.” The City Charter, first adopted in 1912, outlines the officers to be elected, the powers of the City Council, the various city departments, the procedures for municipal elections, and more. The Charter has been amended several times since 1912; the last changes were approved in 1986.

SHJ

John Wingate's Hat

The Republican National Convention was held in Chicago in 1888, and future Durango businessman John Wingate was there, wearing this top hat. Wingate was a delegate representing Southwest Colorado when Benjamin Harrison was elected as the presidential candidate on the Republican ticket. A Civil War veteran, Wingate came to the San Juans in 1873, dabbled in mining, then opened a successful hardware store with his partner Oliver Posey. He invested in and became secretary of Otto Mear's Silverton Railroad in 1887, about the time he was selected as a delegate to the convention. He moved to Durango in 1895, where he was active in several civic organizations.

SHJ



◀ Top hat worn by John Wingate at the 1888 Republican National Convention. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Collection 07.03.12

▲ Gavel used by Durango Mayor John Wegher in the early 1960s. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Collection 99.01.29

Mayor's gavel

In the United States, a small ceremonial hammer, or gavel, has become the symbol of authority granted to a duly elected government official. It is used to call official proceedings to order. John Wegher, Mayor of the City of Durango, used this gavel during his term of office between 1960 and 1961.

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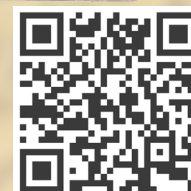
▲ Otto Mears, in white hat and coat, on horseback in Silverton, 1910. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 02.70.66

Otto Mears

The story of Otto Mears, the “Pathfinder of the San Juans”, exemplifies the archetypal orphaned immigrant who not only survives but thrives in the West. Mears became involved in politics when Colorado was still a territory; he recognized that those political connections could positively influence his community, the formation of the state, and ultimately, his business opportunities. His toll roads and railroads provided the backbone for communities in the southwest and continue to shape Colorado's future. Watch our video about Mears on our YouTube channel @animasmuseum or via the QR code.



▲ Silver pass for Otto Mear's Silverton Railroad from 1889. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Collection 01.22.1



We Mutually Pledge to Each Other

La Plata County was built by purposeful people with a deep commitment to one another and the nation, including many Civil War veterans. Working together to invest in public projects that improved residents' lives—such as hospitals, libraries, and fire stations—the community quickly grew from a small frontier settlement to a thriving regional center. Individuals who served in those institutions exemplified dedication and public service but were sometimes colorful characters as well. During wartime, men and women from La Plata County served with distinction in both World Wars. Community has long been central to the county's story and remains vital to its future.

Serving Our Country

The Civil War had a huge impact on the nation's westward movement. Many veterans looked to escape the horrors of what they had seen and experienced during the war, hoping perhaps for a new and better life. As one old timer said, "these men were hardened veterans used to the greatest of privations," so coming to the remote San Juan Country in search of gold and silver was not a hardship. Perhaps because so many settlers were veterans, the notion of serving one's country was firmly embedded in their La Plata County descendants.

When the USS Maine exploded in Havana Harbor in 1898, The Durango Evening Herald claimed there were "several hundred Durangoites" ready to form a company and go to war, although we can find only seven that actually went to fight in the Spanish-American War. In 1917, La Plata County registered over 800 men eager to serve in World War I. In World War II, the Durango News claimed that a Victory ship, the SS Durango Victory, was named in the town's honor because Durango had more men serving (per capita) than other U.S. towns. Many men from La



▲ Studio portrait of Alma Stransky in her Marine Corps uniform. She was stationed in California during World War II. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 14.19.5

Plata County served in various branches of the military. Several did not come home, like Elmer Wieland. Women also served as nurses and in clerical or transport services, like Alma Stransky. La Plata County's tradition of service continues to this day.

SHJ



▲ U.S. Army Air Corps pilot's insignia and campaign patch for the China-Burma-India Theater belonging to Elmer Wieland. He was posthumously awarded this Purple Heart near the end of World War II. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Collection 11.13.13 and 11.13.22.



▲ Durango firefighters and their chief, Henry Dietrich, proudly pose in front of the station at 134 E. 10th St. in their horse-drawn fire wagon around 1904. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 01.09.10

Facing Fire

Fire has long shaped La Plata County. From the Lime Creek Burn in 1879 to the Missionary Ridge Fire in 2002 to the 416 Fire in 2018, wildfires have changed our natural landscape. The Great Fire of July 1889 changed the Durango townsite. In the face of all of these fires, the people of La Plata County have come together to minimize the damage, rebuild, and thrive.

The first volunteer fire department was organized in Durango in 1881. By 1893, there were five volunteer hook and ladder companies. That same year, the department started the transition to a paid organization supplemented by volunteers, which became official on February 1, 1894. George Goodman was fire chief at the time and holds the distinction of being the last volunteer and first paid chief. A grateful City Council presented him with a gold badge in 1895 for his service. In 1894, The Durango Herald claimed: "(t)he city boasts of one of the most practical, efficient and best equipped fire departments in the West." To this day, the Durango Fire and Rescue Authority works with our community to ensure that "(c)itizens now retire and rise with a sense of security from the danger which each felt, for many months, was personally imminent."

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▲ Solid gold badge presented to the last volunteer and first paid Durango Fire Chief, George Goodman, in 1895. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum's Collection 12.26.1

The Importance of Education

Animas City organized the first school district in La Plata County soon after the town's founding. Parrott City, then the county seat located north of present-day Hesperus, was also trying to establish a school. As the county's population grew, new districts were organized, and by the time Durango was founded in 1880, there were eight school districts in La Plata County; Durango became District #9. Schools were seen as a necessary part of establishing new communities and served as the center of community life. The schoolhouse provided a public space for social

activities like dances, suppers, concerts, and a polling place for elections. In rural communities that lacked a church, schoolhouses were also used for Sunday School and religious services if a traveling clergyman was passing through on a circuit.

At one time, there were 36 school districts in La Plata County before consolidation was mandated by the Colorado legislature beginning in 1949. Three districts exist today: Durango, Bayfield, and Ignacio.

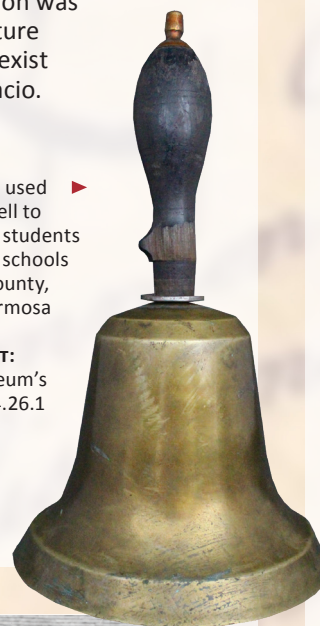
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▲ Rare indoor photograph of a class in the Animas City School between 1905 and 1908. The photo was taken by the teacher, Cloa Steineger (shown).
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 00.41.1 and 00.41.4

▶ Roberta Barr used this school bell to summon her students at one-room schools in La Plata County, including Hermosa and Falga.

PHOTO CREDIT:
 Animas Museum's
 Collection 14.26.1



Hospitals & Nurses

La Plata County commissioners funded a short-lived county hospital that was closed soon after the Sisters of Mercy established Mercy Hospital in 1882. They saw no reason to spend tax money when the Sisters provided the hospital as a charity. The Sisters struggled to raise money to operate the hospital, and the county agreed to pay a fixed rate for the care of indigents. The Sisters started one of the first prepaid healthcare programs in Colorado by soliciting the railroad and mining companies to pay a monthly premium to cover their employees if they were injured or became ill. The Sisters started a nursing school as part of the hospital operation.



▲ Picture postcard showing the Ochsner Hospital when it was located at 353 W. Park Ave. around 1910.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 92.14.3



▲ Kathaleen Wethington's 1943 graduation pin from Mercy Hospital's nurses' training program in Denver.
PHOTO CREDIT: Image courtesy of Robert McDaniel



▲ Mercy Hospital nurse Kathaleen Wethington (left) and an unidentified nurse cut boards for splints behind the old stone hospital, circa 1947. **PHOTO CREDIT:** Image courtesy of Robert McDaniel

As the United States geared up in preparation for World War II, hospitals and schools offering nursing training began participating in Cadet Nurse Corps programs to prepare nurses for entry into wartime military service. La Plata County did not fund a county hospital again until World War II, when it purchased the former Ochsner private hospital from Drs. Lloyd and Martin, who were drafted into military service. This county hospital couldn't compete with Mercy and closed its acute care facilities in 1987.

CAD

Peacekeepers

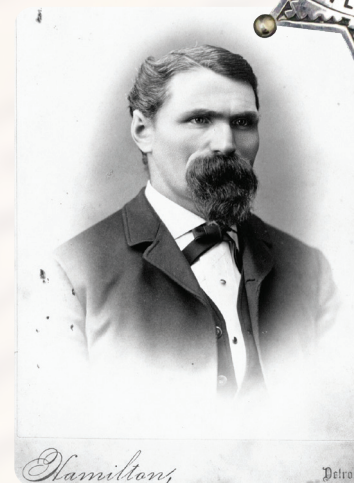
Law and order were among the most urgent necessities in establishing communities in southwest Colorado. With the birth of Parrott City and Animas City in the mid-1870s, law enforcement was vested in the county sheriff. Pioneer homesteader Robert Dwyer became the second La Plata County sheriff, succeeding Richard Giles, who had died in office. Dwyer later served as the new town of Durango's first marshal. His career ended when a stray bullet struck him on the side of his nose and lodged against his jugular vein!

Another La Plata County pioneer, Timothy J. McCluer, Jr., born in 1876 (the first white child born in the county), was elected county sheriff in 1910. His brief two-year term witnessed one of the most sensational feuds in county history—the Cox-Truby feud. On April 23, 1911, Ike Cox shot and killed Bill Truby in a confrontation near Bondad, punctuating a years-long family feud with overtones of a sheepmen-cattlemen range dispute. Before the feud ended, a Truby partisan attempted to assassinate Cox in Durango, and Bill Truby's brother, Sam, was killed in another related conflict in November 1912. The saga, which included multiple trials, finally ended in 1913. Through it all, Andy Ruple received the only conviction for the attempted murder of Ike Cox.

RLM



▲ Tim McCluer's badge.
PHOTO CREDIT:
 Animas
 Museum's
 Collection
 12.17.1



▲ Penciled on the back of this photo of Robert Dwyer: "Must have been taken when Robert had that bullet taken out." **PHOTO CREDIT:** Animas Museum Photo Archives 92.19.18

Moments That Made La Plata County



▲ Rock made of Styrofoam, used in the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.
PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum's Collection 22.22



A QUIET MOMENT IN A BUSY DAY. President Ford Museum during the dedication ceremonies there early chats with his wife, Betty, on the steps of the Animas School Wednesday afternoon.

▲ Gerald and Betty Ford on the steps of the Animas Museum.
PHOTO CREDIT: *The Durango Herald*, August 14, 1980.

Preserving Our Past

In the 1950s, prominent Durango citizens dreamed of a museum that would preserve the area's rich cultural heritage. Several attempts failed until the La Plata County Historical Society was established in 1972. Caught up in the grassroots Bicentennial fervor for historical preservation sweeping the United States, the Society's intent was to operate a museum to preserve artifacts, documents, and photographs and share them with the public.

Finally, on June 10, 1980, the Animas City School became the property of the Historical Society

at the 9-R School Board meeting. Much work was needed to make the building habitable and turn it into a functioning museum. Even before renovations were complete, former President Gerald Ford and his wife, Betty—in town at the behest of former Ambassador and local radio entrepreneur Leonard Firestone—dedicated the building as part of local Durango Centennial activities in August 1980. Over the years, with much hard work and grant support from the State Historical Fund, the building has become the home of La Plata County's history.

SHJ

Roll Cameras!

After the Second World War, moviegoers couldn't get enough of Western cowboy movies. About that time, Hollywood discovered the incredible scenery in and around La Plata County and the "antiquated" narrow-gauge Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad. *Ticket to Tomahawk* was the first big movie filmed here in 1949, starring Dan Dailey, Anne Baxter, and a Rio Grande Southern locomotive dressed up as the "Emma Sweeney." It debuted in 1950, and fans trekked out to southwest Colorado to experience the views they saw on the big screen. More movies followed, including

Denver and Rio Grande, Around the World in Eighty Days, Night Passage, and perhaps most famous of all, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

As Durango became known as the "Hollywood of the Rockies," the D&RGW was trying to abandon the old narrow-gauge lines. However, they couldn't ignore the tourists now flocking to ride the rails and money flowing into town to support the film crews. Arguably, Hollywood helped to save the railroad and make La Plata County the tourism destination it is today.

SHJ



▲ The cast and railroad crew of the movie *Ticket to Tomahawk* posed in front of the "Emma Sweeney" (the Rio Grande Southern's #20) at Rockwood. Seen left to right are Roy Buchanan, writer/director Richard Sale, Tom Cummins, actress Anne Baxter, Wesley Hanna, W.L. Bruce, George Morgan, W.N. Squires, Henry (Hank) Rodgers Phillips, actor Dan Dailey, actor Walter Brennan, and F.D. Gibbs. PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 07.31.1

Smelter City

When Durango was founded in 1880, the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad brought not only the rails to town but also established a smelter to process ores from mines around Silverton. Nearby extensive coal deposits ensured the success of the smelter; by 1901, Durango was known as the “Smelter City.” The smelter’s fortunes followed the boom-and-bust cycles of mining, but during the Great Depression, it closed, seemingly for good. The vegetation on Smelter Mountain started to return. After Pearl Harbor, the United States entered the war in 1942, needing vast quantities of steel for ships, tanks, jeeps, and weapons. As it turns out, the Four Corners area has one of the highest concentrations of carnotite ore containing vanadium, an alloy to harden steel. The smelter was retooled, ostensibly to produce vanadium. Carnotite, however, also contains uranium. Secretly, the plant began to produce uranium for the Manhattan Project and Los Alamos, giving new life to Durango’s railroads.

After the war, the U.S. Atomic



▲ Photograph taken by Helen Nossaman on the first day of the tailing’s removal from “Vanadium Hill,” August 12, 1987.

PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 04.05.351

Energy Commission bought the plant and leased it to the Vanadium Corporation of America (VCA). By 1959, the plant was producing 700 tons of ore a day, and Durango was considered a target during the Cold War. At the same time, the San Juan Basin Health Department recognized the health issues caused by the radioactive tailings leaching into the Animas River and being used for building new roads. The plant was shut down in 1963 when the value of uranium collapsed, but the tailings pile remained. Finally, in 1986, a Superfund cleanup began, removing 15 million cubic yards of uranium tailings by 1991.

SHJ

New High School Building

By 1915, Durango’s high school, built in 1891, was overcrowded. An impressive new school was proposed, with the design entrusted to respected Front Range architects Charles Thomas and Thomas MacLaren. The building was meant to be a community center with the latest in home economics, chemistry, and science labs, a gymnasium, and even a swimming pool. The vote on the bond issue was contentious; many felt that spending \$175,000 on a new school in a small town, with a war raging in Europe, was not necessary. The final tally was close, but the bond passed. The building was situated on a high point above town, and 2nd Avenue was closed off to accommodate it.

When the new building opened in 1917, it was a showplace for the entire community. People enjoyed

attending plays and movies in the new auditorium. Because of the quality of the educational opportunities, a higher percentage of students went on to higher education. It was the heart and pride of Durango and served as the high school until it was outgrown in 1976.

SHJ



▲ The 1916 Durango High School is seen here soon after it opened around 1918.

PHOTO CREDIT: Animas Museum Photo Archives 04.34.10

At the Museum

This year, 2026, is the culmination of three years of preparations for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the 150th anniversary of Colorado statehood. Since Animas City was founded 150 years ago this year, we opened a new exhibit, *Animas City: Looking Down on Durango Since 1876*, in our Main Gallery. The Museum is especially proud to be hosting *Moments That Made US*, a special exhibit that explores how generations of Americans have given meaning to the ideals set out in the Declaration of Independence. The exhibit was developed through a multi-state collaboration to ensure that Americans throughout the nation would have the opportunity to meaningfully engage in the nation’s 250th anniversary. It adapts the acclaimed *Moments That Made US* exhibition created by History Colorado into a format that allows hosts like the Animas Museum to customize it and connect local history to the nation’s story. In August, the final pieces of the exhibit will come together in an examination of *Crossroads: 1776–2026*, exploring how the land shaped our history and highlighting the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition of 1776.

Through permanent exhibits in the Museum’s main building, explore its history as the Animas City School in the restored 1905 classroom. Other exhibits examine the history of La Plata County. *Wish You Were Here* tells how (and why) folks came to the area. *Law & Disorder* tells the stories of local outlaws and the brave lawmen who brought stability to La Plata County. *Working on the Railroad* spotlights the railroad workers who were the lifeblood of this critical local industry. Be sure to visit the 1930s in the charming Peterson House on the Museum grounds, where the Great Depression comes to life. Step back further in time as you visit the Joy Cabin. Just steps from the Peterson house, it provides a glimpse into life in 1870s Animas City.



▲ PHOTO CREDIT: Image courtesy of Visit Durango/Hans Hollenbeck

September is History Live! month with events presented by Southwest Colorado Humanities Roundtable. The Animas Museum is proud to be part of the Roundtable, and we support several programs, including “Meet Caroline Romney” and a talk at the Durango Public Library on the Falls Creek Rock Shelters. Learn more about the myriad events planned on their website: swcohumanities.org.

Our *Second Saturday Seminar Series* continues into its sixth year with programs every month, both live in the *Classroom at the Museum* and on Zoom. This year’s topics include a virtual walk up Main Avenue, “The Bank Robbery that Wasn’t,” Durango women’s role in the founding of Mesa Verde, “Public Lands Patriotism,” La Plata County history, and a fascinating look at the truth of the founding of Durango in “Railhead Animas City: To Be or Not to Be.” On August 8th, 250 years after the Spanish explorers Dominguez and Escalante left their camp on the banks of the Animas River in what would later become Durango, Robert McDaniel, the Museum’s founding director, will be presenting. Our recorded programs are available on our YouTube channel, @AnimasMuseum.

The Animas Museum is located at 3065 West 2nd Avenue and is open Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays from 10 a.m.–4 p.m. and Wednesdays and Fridays from 1–4 p.m. Visit www.animasmuseum.org or call 970-259-2402 for the latest information. There is no admission charge, but donations are appreciated. Be sure to follow us on Facebook and Instagram, @animasmuseum.



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▲ Old friends gathering at Baker's Bridge on July 4th, 1900.
PHOTO CREDIT: From the Animas Museum Photo Archives 01.36.23

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Join!

In 2026, our nation marks 250 years of American history, and Colorado celebrates 150 years of statehood. Anniversaries like these invite reflection—but they also demand responsibility. La Plata County has stories worth telling. Some have been repeated for generations; others have barely been heard. At the La Plata County Historical Society, we believe

this milestone is not about nostalgia. It's about getting the story right.

This work doesn't happen by accident. History doesn't preserve itself. It takes people who are willing to stand behind it. It happens because members make it possible. We invite you to stand with us and be part of something big. **Join the La Plata County Historical Society.**

LA PLATA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANIMAS MUSEUM DURANGO • COLORADO

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