

The Linden Hotel building in Fort Collins' Old Town district was one of the structures that Harper Goff used as a model for Disneyland's Main Street USA. The city's old courthouse, opposite, inspired Disneyland's City Hall but has since been demolished.

Joshua Hardin
(Right) Fort Collins Local History Archive



How Fort Collins inspired Disneyland

by MATT MASICH

HISTORIC OLD TOWN Fort Collins was world famous – it's just that nobody in Fort Collins knew it. That changed with an unexpected telephone call in 1994.

Rheba Massey was working as an archivist in the Fort Collins Public Library when her phone rang. On the other end was a college professor in Texas, Richard Francaviglia, who wanted Massey's help tracking down information on buildings in Old Town for a book he was writing.

It wasn't unusual for people to research Old Town's buildings – preservationists had spent the last two decades restoring the Victorian architecture there, and the neighborhood's revival was a source of local pride – but the reason for Francaviglia's call took Massey by surprise. Old Town Fort Collins, the professor revealed, was one of the main inspirations for Disneyland's Main Street USA.

"We were absolutely shocked," Massey said recently. "None of us had ever heard this before."

Main Street USA, which forms Disneyland's entryway, is a recreation of an American small town at the dawn of the 20th century. The nostalgic thoroughfare has welcomed hundreds of millions of visitors since its 1955 debut, and for many – including Massey – it represented the patriotic ideal of America at its best.

As Massey and others in Fort Collins would soon find out, their city became the model for Main Street USA thanks to a native son named Harper Goff, who worked closely with Walt Disney to design Disneyland. Goff also helped create classic films like *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate*

Factory. And almost no one in his hometown had heard of him.

Fort Collins is a thriving city of 150,000, but it was a small town of a little more than 8,000 when Goff was born there in 1911. His father owned the *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, forerunner of the city's daily newspaper, *The Coloradoan*. As a boy, Goff would ride the trolley all over Fort Collins, which to his young mind was the embodiment of what an American town should look like. "We had banks that looked like banks, you know, and there was a Victorian city hall," Goff said in a late-life interview in *E-Ticket* magazine. Goff's family moved to California when he was 12, but his fond memories of Fort Collins stayed with him.

Goff went to art school in California and eventually got a job as an artist and set designer for Warner Brothers in 1935. After working on movies for a decade, he started doing paintings and illustrations for magazines in New York City.

Goff had a number of hobbies – he was, for instance, an accomplished banjo player – but it was his passion for model trains that put his career on the fast track. He and his wife, Flossie, were on vacation in London in 1951 when he stopped in to a shop that sold miniature trains. Goff fell in love with an old-time locomotive and decided he had to have it. The shopkeeper said he'd promised the locomotive to another man, who was to come by that afternoon to purchase it, but if this other fellow didn't buy it, Goff could.

When Goff returned later that day, the mystery customer was in the store, having just bought the coveted steam engine. The man approached Goff and introduced himself. "I'm Walt Disney,"

Harper Goff's memories of Fort Collins' Colorado & Southern railroad station influenced the design of the train station at Disneyland's Main Street USA. The Colorado & Southern station has since been demolished, but many of the buildings that inspired Goff are still standing in Old Town Fort Collins.



Disneyland News

he said. "Are you the man that wanted to buy this engine?"

The two started chatting, and Disney asked what Goff did for a living – Goff, of course, already knew what Disney did. Goff said he was an artist and mentioned he'd also worked on movies. Disney, intrigued by his fellow train lover's talents, invited Goff to talk more when they got back stateside. They did, and Disney offered Goff a job on a new, live-action film series.

The first film was to be a short documentary about fish with the working title *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Though it shared its name with Jules Verne's science-fiction novel, the film was otherwise unrelated to the story of Captain Nemo and his giant-squid-battling submarine, the Nautilus. Goff wasn't wild about the documentary idea, so while Disney was out of the country on vacation, Goff abandoned his assignment and started working on a storyboard for a completely different *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* – a full-length action movie that followed the plot of the book. Disney was furious when he returned to find Goff had disobeyed his instructions, but Goff tried to sell his boss on his vision.

"Walt, this will make you a lot of money," Goff said, as recounted by his wife in a *Coloradoan* article.

"Harper, I don't even have a studio," Disney replied.

"Well, build one."

And sure enough, Disney came around to Goff's idea, building a new sound stage for the film. It was a big risk. Disney had only produced a handful of live-action movies before, mostly shot in England on a low budget. This was to be Disney's first big-budget spectacle starring big-name actors like Kirk Douglas. A worried Disney told Goff that all the money he had made in his life was "tied up in this one stupid picture."

The gamble paid off – the movie was a smash upon its 1954 release, launching Disney into increasingly ambitious live-action films. Goff earned praise for his work as creative director and set designer, and his retro-futuristic design for the Nautilus laid the foundation for the aesthetic now known as steampunk.

As Goff was working on the movie, he was also helping Disney plan something even bigger: Disneyland. The first place visitors would see when they arrived was to be Main Street USA, which Disney initially based on his childhood hometown of Marceline, Missouri. When Goff got the assignment to create a classic, all-American Main Street, he instantly thought of Fort Collins, even

though its buildings were taller and more ornate than the Missouri town. He showed photographs of Old Town Fort Collins to Disney, who thought the buildings had just the look he wanted.

Goff turned the photos into sketches, sometimes imitating buildings fairly closely, sometimes taking a few architectural elements and incorporating them into his designs. "Disneyland's City Hall was copied from Fort Collins," Goff said in the *E-Ticket* interview. "So was the bank building and some of the others." Among the buildings that inspired Main Street USA were Fort Collins' old courthouse, the firehouse on Walnut Street, the Linden Hotel, the First National Bank and the Colorado & Southern railroad station.

Goff left the company after Disneyland opened and had a successful career as an art director for movies. Post-Disney, he's best known for designing the sets for *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Goff died in California in 1993, a year before the people of Fort Collins learned he had immortalized the town at Disneyland.

Disneyland's City Hall was copied from Fort Collins. So was the bank building.

BY THE TIME RHEBA Massey got off the phone with Richard Francaviglia, she had agreed to give the professor a tour of Old Town when he arrived to see Goff's Fort Collins. They spent hours walking the streets that radiate from Old Town Square, finding buildings that served as Goff's kernels of inspiration. A lot had changed over the years. The Victorian courthouse, which had been the model for Disneyland's City Hall, and the Colorado & Southern railroad station had been demolished, and Colorado State University's Old Main was destroyed by arsonists in 1970.

Even so, for historians who study Disneyland, coming to Fort Collins is akin to a pilgrimage to Mecca, Francaviglia said. The analogy is particularly apt, because just as 21st-century Mecca now has high-rises that weren't there when the prophet Muhammad was, it still retains the essential spirit that made it special in the first place, just as Fort Collins has grown while keeping the Victorian charm that inspired Goff.

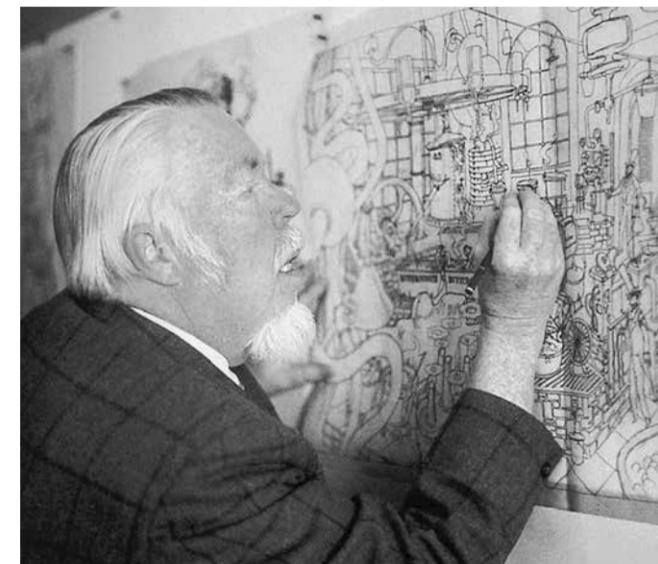
Fort Collins preserved many of its historic buildings by repurposing them. The 1882 Linden Hotel building, whose design elements Goff borrowed from, is now home to Nature's Own, a shop

where visitors can buy geodes, fossilized stingrays and mammoth teeth. On Old Town Square is the 1888 Miller Block, another of Goff's favorites, where people can buy fresh loaves of sourdough at the Little Bird Bakeshop, get a self-balancing unicycle at Science Toy Magic or catch happy hour at Bondi Beach Bar.

The remaining Fort Collins building that most closely resembles its Disneyland counterpart is the old firehouse on Walnut Street. The wide door which horses once pulled firefighting wagons through is now windowed over, but the distinctive arched doorway remains. Inside is Old Firehouse Books, where owner Susie Wilmer says customers often ask about the Disneyland connection. The firehouse in Disneyland has a special significance because that's where Walt Disney kept a personal apartment where he'd stay after working late nights at the park, and since his death an eternal lamp has burned in the window there.

A figurative memorial lamp burns for Harper Goff from Fort Collins' firehouse. At his office inside the historic building, Chad Van Derrick has spent more than a year researching Goff's life, and he is slated to publish a biography this year. (For more details on the book, visit harpergooff.com.) The book's release is to coincide with the 60th anniversary of Disneyland. "[Goff's] presence was all over that park," Van Derrick said. "No one else worked as closely with Walt taking Walt's dream from concept to reality."

There's far more to Goff and Fort Collins than their association with Main Street USA, but their roles in its creation show how one Colorado town can have an great impact on world culture – even if few people realize it. 🌿



Paramount Pictures

To see more Fort Collins' buildings that inspired Disneyland, visit ColoradoLifeMagazine.com.

Joshua Hardin





Jay Young wrestles Darth Gator at his family's Colorado Gators Reptile Park near Mosca, a haven for abandoned reptiles. In addition to its gator-wrestling classes, the park educates visitors about the dangers of choosing certain reptiles as pets.

San Luis VALLEY GATORS

Colorado family's fish farm is overrun with reptiles

STORY BY MATT MASICH PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA HARDIN



Floating calmly in their ponds, the alligators at Colorado Gators seem pretty easygoing, but they spring into action when caretakers try to move them. Students in Jay Young's gator-wrestling class might be thrill-seekers, but by wrestling the reptiles, they're also helping move the animals so they can be treated for illness or injuries.

JAY YOUNG LIVES on a farm in the San Luis Valley with his wife, two daughters and 300 alligators. Young has spent two decades caring for the alligators, and they show their gratitude by trying to eat him. It's nothing personal – it's just what gators do.

At the Colorado Gators Reptile Park, 17 miles north of Alamosa near the small town of Mosca, the Young family operates a tropical, swampy oasis in a high mountain valley with a clear view of the jagged peaks of the Sangre de Cristo range. While Colorado Gators' setting is not what most people would imagine when they think of alligator habitat, Young looks exactly like a man who owns hundreds of alligators should look – a wild-man glint in his eye and a brimmed, leather hat decorated with alligator teeth on his head.

Being an alligator owner means Young is an alligator wrestler, too, as he must grapple with gators to move them from one pond to another or check them for illness and injuries. He's the first to admit that jumping into a murky, alligator-infested pond might not seem like the best idea. "Alligator wrestling is not a thinking man's sport," Young often says, and while it sounds like self-deprecation, it's actually a pretty good encapsulation of a successful alligator wrestler's mindset. When you've got an alligator by the tail, there's no time to think – you just have to react.

Young's first rule of alligator wrestling? "Don't hesitate." The second rule applies after you've grabbed hold of the gator: "Don't let go." Breaking either rule gets you bitten, he tells people who attend the park's gator-wrestling classes. For \$100, Young and his fellow instructors will show anyone 18 or older how to jump on a gator's back and grab it by the head, which always sounds simple until it's time to actually try it.

Somehow, Young said, a lot of people have gotten the idea that alligators' jaws have a lot of closing strength but little opening strength, allowing intrepid wrestlers to easily clamp the reptiles' jaws shut with their hands. "Don't listen to those people – they've never done it," Young said. "Their jaws have a lot of opening strength, and their twisting strength is tremendous." And he has the scars to prove it.

THE EXISTENCE OF Colorado Gators seems outlandish, but it has its own weird logic. It began with Young's parents, Erwin and Lynne, who started the operation as a tilapia farm where Young and his three siblings grew up. The fish thrived thanks to a geothermal well that pumps in water at a constant 87 degrees, and the family made money selling tilapia to restaurants in Denver and other places.

To deal with an excess of dead fish, the family bought 100 baby alligators to serve as garbage disposals. Within a few years, the alligators had gotten pretty big, and people began showing up at the tilapia farm to see them. By 1990, the family started marketing the gators. Not long after that, Young left the family homestead for college. He had no plans to enter his parents' business – he was going to become an engineer.

As Young neared the end of his college studies, two things happened. First, he realized he hated sitting down and couldn't bear the thought of a desk job. Second, his dad hurt his back and needed help running the gator farm. Young returned to the alligators and has been there ever since. As word spread about the gator wranglers in the San Luis Valley, people began dropping alligators off on their doorstep



Most of the 300 alligators at Colorado Gators arrived as pets whose owners gave them up after realizing they were too dangerous. The park rescues all types of reptiles, including the leopard gecko that employee Amber Czarnetski is handling.

– it seems a lot of misguided souls buy alligators as pets without fully realizing the cute babies quickly become monsters. Today, most of the alligators at the park started out as someone's pet.

It wasn't just unwanted pet alligators that showed up at Colorado Gators. People brought giant monitor lizards, pythons and other reptiles, and Young never turned any of them away. A woman who was in the process of separating from her husband brought in her longtime pet rattlesnake, preemptively getting rid of the venomous snake in case her spurned spouse had any ideas about putting it in her bed while she slept. Colorado Gators added indoor habitats and new gator ponds to deal with the influx.

The park's most famous rescue is Morris, the Hollywood gator, who has starred in a number of feature films – you might recognize him as the alligator who bit off the hand of Chubbs, the golfing mentor of the title character in *Happy Gilmore*. Morris is big, at 10 ½ feet and 500 pounds, but the biggest gator there is Elvis, one of the original tilapia eaters, who comes in at 11 ½ feet and 600 pounds.

Young had been around reptiles since he was a boy (he got his first bite from his mom's pet caiman when he was 5) but his entry into

full-time gator wrangling brought its share of gator chomps. His first serious bite came when he was moving a 9-foot alligator from one pen to another. Young had jumped on the front end and another employee was on the tail. As Young attempted to hold the gator's

mouth shut, the employee sitting on its tail sat up too soon, allowing it to shake loose. The gator clamped down on Young's left thumb and thrashed violently. Fighting his instinct to pull his hand free, which would have cost him his thumb, Young followed along with the gator's wild movements until he was able to pop it on its snout, causing it to open its mouth just enough to get his right hand inside to pry the jaws open and extract his thumb.

A visitor witnessed the scene and ran to tell Young's mom, who was working the gift shop.

"Your son just got bitten by a big alligator," the terrified visitor said.

"Serves him right," his mother deadpanned.



YOUNG RECKONS HE gets serious alligator bites about once a year. The gators are dangerous, but the deadliest animals at Colorado Gators are probably the pythons. Once, while feeding rabbits to a 14-foot Burmese python, the massive constrictor

tor mistook Young for a rabbit. It sprung on his arm, clamped down with its barblike teeth and started coiling around him. Fortunately, Young never goes into the snake habitat without someone stationed nearby to save him. "Larry, I could use a hand," Young called to his assistant. As Larry uncoiled the python, Young got it to stop biting him by counterintuitively jamming his forearm further into the snake's mouth, causing it to gag and release him.

There's a trick to dealing with situations like this, Young said. "I never really panic about anything," he said. "It never helps."

The python isn't the only snake that nearly got the better of Young – he's also been bitten by a rattlesnake. He was cleaning the snake's cage and thought he was out of striking range. He wasn't. The snake bit him, but Young hoped it had been a "dry bite," one in which the snake doesn't inject venom. It wasn't. His hand swelled so much he could barely make out his fingers. He got a dose of antivenom, spent two nights in the hospital and went home. But that wasn't the end of the story.

Before the rattlesnake bite, Young had suffered for four years from the effects of the West Nile virus. He had gotten a particularly bad case that damaged his nervous system so badly that he could no longer sweat, which caused him to regularly run temperatures of 104 degrees. He was fatigued all the time and had to walk around with ice packs inside his hat.

As he was recovering from the snake bite, he realized he was doing something he hadn't done in four years – he was sweating!

The venom had cured his West Nile symptoms, at least temporarily. When the symptoms came back five months later, he milked venom from the rattlesnake, injected himself with a small amount and was back to normal again. For years afterward, Young injected himself with venom every few days, though now he's down to injecting every few weeks.

ADVENTURE RUNS IN Young's family. His dad wrestled gators until he was 70. His oldest brother spent years as a search-and-rescue helicopter pilot and his other brother is an expert at diving in dark, water-filled caves. Young's two daughters, Samantha, 14, and Lily, 3, each have pet alligators, and the elder daughter regularly wrestles midsize gators.

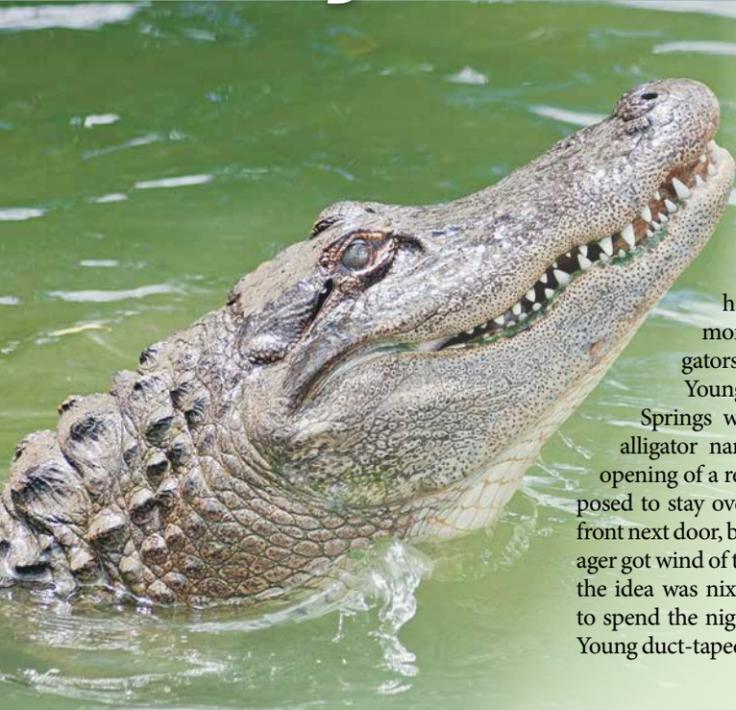
Young's wife, Erin, knew what she was getting into when she met him. They were at a bar in Creede for a mutual friend's birthday party when she saw him carving an alligator into the bar top. He took her gator wrestling on their third date – if she wasn't willing to at least give it a try, he figured they didn't have much of a future. Erin passed the bravery test with flying colors, and these days, she's every bit the alligator wrestler her husband is. The first time she got bitten, she was back wrestling within a few minutes. The bite in her arm wasn't so bad – only three teeth hit bone.

Erin has no qualms about raising a family in the company of gators. "There's never a dull moment," she said. "You just have to be ready for anything at any time."



Part of the course work for these gator-wrestling students involved moving the fearsome Darth Gator into a new pen.

Fluffy the alligator escapes



WHEN POLICE OR animal control officers come across a large, dangerous reptile in Colorado, they know Jay Young is the man to call for help. He found out just how rare his expertise is early one morning when one of his own gators escaped.

Young had traveled to Colorado Springs with a 600-pound, 12-foot alligator named Fluffy for the grand opening of a reptile store. Fluffy was supposed to stay overnight in an empty storefront next door, but when the property manager got wind of the proposed gator lodging, the idea was nixed. That meant Fluffy had to spend the night inside Young's minivan. Young duct-taped the animal's jaws shut and

rolled it up in a big carpet to keep warm – sort of like a gator burrito.

One of Young's fellow gator keepers checked on Fluffy throughout the night. At 3:30 a.m., the gator was sleeping soundly. At 5 a.m., there was a knock on the door of the house where the gator folk were staying. Three police officers were there, asking if anyone knew anything about the giant reptile wandering the neighborhood. Fluffy had broken through the van's windows and was exploring the neighbor's yard.

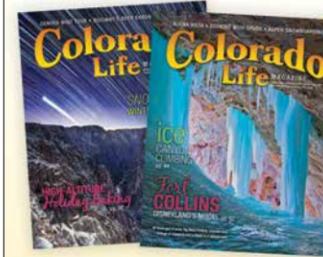
Young came out and corralled the gator, while the lead officer made a big commotion about whether he had the proper permits for having the animal in the city. Young had contacted the city of Colorado Springs, he said, but he was told he needed no permits if the gator wasn't a permanent resident. The officer was furious and wanted to confiscate the gator.

"You want the alligator, he's yours," Young said. "But the duct tape on his mouth is mine."

The police called the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo to take Fluffy, but the zoo demurred, saying it didn't have the right facilities. "Better call Jay at Colorado Gators," the zoo staff said. The exasperated officers explained that wouldn't work, because that was the guy they were trying to seize the alligator from. The police called the Division of Wildlife and got the same answer – "call Colorado Gators."

With no other recourse, the police released Fluffy into Young's custody, as long as he promised to remove the gator from the city immediately. Young did, but not quite immediately. He first took Fluffy to the grand opening event as originally planned – after all, he already knew that no one was going to confiscate his gator. 🐊

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La Capilla de Todos los Santos, or the Chapel of All Saints, sits at the top of the mesa overlooking San Luis at the Shrine of the Stations of the Cross. People from across the globe come to visit the shrine's bronze sculptures depicting the events leading to Jesus Christ's crucifixion.

San Luis

What's *new* in Colorado's
oldest town

story by MATT MASICH

photographs by JOSHUA HARDIN

The buildings are adobe, the language is Spanglish and the culture is ancient in this small town founded 25 years before Colorado became a state.



Many in San Luis grew up speaking a dialect of Spanish similar to the language spoken by the conquistadors.



became United States territory – in theory, at least.

The Utes still controlled the valley in 1848, when Don Dario joined a 16-person group that tried to settle San Luis. The Indians killed eight settlers, and the other eight fled back to Taos. Three years later, a second effort at establishing a village took root here at foothills of Culebra Peak.

San Luis and smaller villages along Culebra Creek were settled as part of a land grant issued by the Mexican government before the area became U.S. territory, so many Spanish-Mexican rules and traditions were grandfathered in. Residents share ownership of La Vega, a 600-acre pasture east of town where locals may freely graze small numbers of cattle. The Culebra valley's acequia system of shared irrigation ditches dates to medieval Spain. Even the way people speak is tied to the distant past. Many in San Luis grew up speaking a dialect of Spanish that is closer to the language of the Spanish conquistadors than it is to the language of present-day Mexico, though a hybrid form of Spanglish has become more common.

The first houses and businesses in San Luis were built of adobe bricks made from mud and straw in the style the Spanish borrowed from native peoples. Many adobe buildings remain, some of which look like ordinary houses save for the glimpse of mud bricks visible in cracks in the stucco. The adobe Sangre de Cristo Catholic Church is at the town's center, physically and spiritually. San Luis is majority Catholic, and even people who aren't Catholic see the church as a force that unites the community – a fact made especially clear during the tenure of parish priest Patricio Valdez, known to all as Father Pat.

HAILING FROM CAPULIN, a town across the San Luis Valley, Father Pat arrived as parish priest in 1985, when San Luis had fallen on hard economic times. He immediately got residents working with him to improve the town, inspired by his artistic and economic vision for San Luis. Nowhere is his legacy more visible than on the mesa north of town at the Shrine of the Stations

Cashier Carmelita Borrego greets Sabrina Martinez and little Norrina Soto at the state's oldest continuously operating business, the R&R Market, which opened in San Luis in 1857. A motorcyclist rumbles past conquistadors, priests and shepherds on one of San Luis' many murals.

ADOBE OVENS ARE almost as common in San Luis backyards as barbecue grills are elsewhere in Colorado. When September arrives, those dome-shaped ovens, or hornos, are fired up to make this town's best-loved food: chicos.

In a strictly literal sense, chicos are dried corn kernels. In a more poetic sense, they are hundreds of years of Hispanic and American Indian heritage in edible form. Many, if not most, of San Luis' 629 residents descend from Spanish settlers who came to this part of the world as early as 1598, mixing cultures and bloodlines with the Pueblo Indians of northern New Mexico. Chicos were a Pueblo staple that the Hispanos readily adopted.

On his ranch just west of town, Joe Gallegos makes chicos using the methods of his ancestors, who helped found San Luis in 1851. Gallegos used adobe bricks to build his two hornos, the oldest of which lasted 27 years before needing repairs this year. He grows his own concho corn, a rare heirloom variety passed down over generations, and harvests each ear by hand. Roasting the corn in the wood-fired horno takes all day, and drying the corn outside takes another week or two. The chicos are worth the wait. When it's time to eat them, Gallegos simmers them for a few hours and eats them plain or in chicken soup. Everyone has their own favorite way to enjoy chicos' sweet and smoky flavor. At the general store on Main Street, owner Felix Romero says they're best served with ham hocks and bolita beans, another local heirloom crop.

Gallegos and Romero share a great-great-grandfather, Don Dario Gallegos, who was among San Luis' first residents. The cousins experience Don Dario's legacy in quite tangible ways. Gallegos

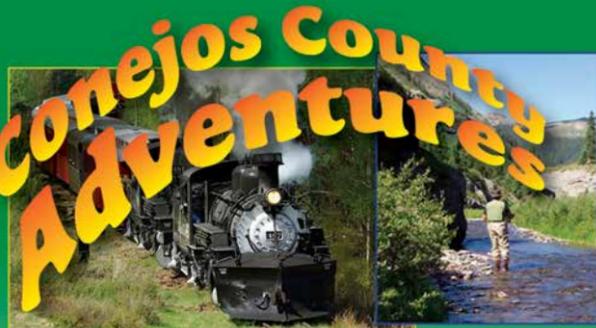
irrigates his farm with water from the San Luis People's Ditch, the state's oldest water right, which Don Dario helped create in 1852. Romero's R&R Market, the state's oldest continuously operating business, was founded by Don Dario in 1857. The past is present everywhere in San Luis, the state's oldest continuously inhabited town, settled some 25 years before Colorado became a state.

"OLDEST TOWN IN COLO." is spelled out in white-washed stones on the sage-dotted mesa overlooking San Luis. The giant letters are visible from the air, but even without that reminder, pilots can recognize San Luis' long history from the shape of its farm fields.

Farms dominate much of the San Luis Valley, a 75-by-125-mile stretch between the San Juan and Sangre de Cristo mountains near the New Mexico state line. Most land is platted in the big squares typical of American farms, with center-pivot irrigation filling those squares with distinctive circular patterns. A different pattern emerges at the valley's southeast edge, where San Luis lies along Culebra Creek. Rather than squares and circles, the farms here are divided into long, narrow strips that radiate like ribs from the spine of the creek. This is the long-lot system, a vestige of Spanish colonial rule.

The people who started San Luis came here from north of Taos, New Mexico, an area that had been part of New Spain from the time of the conquistadors until 1821, when Mexico won its independence. The Mexican era was short-lived, and by 1848, Taos, the San Luis Valley and much of the American West





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ARTIST *masquerades* as BARISTA

VENTERO OPEN PRESS on Main Street is a coffee shop only in the loosest sense of the term. Strangers stopping in for a cappuccino don't know that Randy Pijoan, the lanky man behind the espresso machine, is a nationally acclaimed painter, but they soon suspect something is different here. As they step onto the red mat in front of the coffee bar, Pijoan offers an unexpected greeting: "Don't leave the red carpet if you hate art."

There's a lot of art going on beyond that carpet. The walls are filled with paintings by Pijoan and others, and most of the room is occupied by a studio where artists – both professionals and local students – are hard at work creating beautifully rendered lithographs. Coffee is just the hook, Pijoan said. "Everybody knows what coffee is," he said. "If they step off the carpet, they learn about lithography."

Ventero Open Press is a nonprofit that Pijoan (pronounced pij-WAN) started in 2007 to give young people in San Luis a place to get hands-on art experience. Every day, students are here learning etching, block printing and lithography. They use Ventero's presses to create prints that they can sell in the storefront.

Pijoan grew up in the mountains near Bailey and went to school in Conifer, where he befriended *South Park* creator Trey Parker, with whom he worked on the show's pilot. Pijoan struggled early in his painting career, living in a cabin in the mountains above Boulder, where he was so malnourished he got rickets. A Boulder gallery discovered him, and soon he was selling out shows in Colorado before moving to Chicago and finding even more success.

He moved to a straw-bale home in the San Luis Valley to get back to his Colorado country roots. Soon after that, he suffered a medical emergency that left him clinically dead for 20 minutes. Recovering from surgery after his near-death experience at age 32, he dedicated his second chance to helping San Luis' students realize their artistic dreams. "If it turns out my last day is spent here helping these kids, I'm fine with that," Pijoan said.

Randy Pijoan jokingly strikes a Superman pose – one of Ventero's resident artists had just mentioned that this posture improves one's health.



Built by WPA workers in the 1930s in the area's traditional style, the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center is being revamped as a community center.

of the Cross. Following his lead, the town helped raise money to build the adobe Capilla de Todos los Santos, or Chapel of All Saints. On a long, zig-zagging trail leading up to the chapel are 15 awe-inspiring bronze sculptures depicting the events culminating in Jesus Christ's crucifixion. People from across the globe come to San Luis to visit the shrine.

These Stations of the Cross statues are the work of San Luis native Huberto Maestas, a sculptor whose studio fills the former Costilla County Shop on South Main Street. The works are the crowning achievement of Maestas' celebrated career, but he never would have created them if it weren't for Father Pat's persistence.

Maestas had been living in Colorado Springs when Father Pat first tried to contact him to work on the Stations of the Cross, but the artist didn't return his calls, thinking the priest wanted him to make stained-glass windows. Undeterred, Father Pat did some sleuthing and found out where Maestas would be fishing while in town visiting family for Thanksgiving. "I was out on the river when here comes this guy," Maestas remembered. "He said, 'I'm Father Pat,' and he went right to the point."

Father Pat's projects seemed endless, from turning a disused convent into El Convento Bed & Breakfast to repairing the mission churches in the villages surrounding San Luis. At Old San Acacio, a few miles down Culebra Creek, he assembled a make-

shift crew to save the crumbling adobe church there, which, like so many things in San Luis, is the state's oldest. There was a gaping hole in one of the walls that needed urgent care, said Teresa Vigil, who worked closely with Father Pat. "We put on jumpsuits and rubber gloves and plastered the adobe with our bare hands – a bunch of old ladies like me!" Vigil said. "One lady who couldn't work made a big meal for everybody."

After the building was saved, people in San Acacio found unfinished church pews sitting on their doorsteps, prompting the townsfolk to ask Father Pat why they were there. He explained that they each had to sand and finish a pew for the church.

Like the whole of San Luis, Vigil has dearly missed Father Pat since he left in 2006, first to recruit new priests in Nigeria and then to serve a new parish at Cortez in southwest Colorado. She hopes he will return to San Luis as his clerical career draws to a close.

Vigil continues to volunteer her time to the church, working in the Sangre de Cristo Church's gift shop in San Luis. The tiny store stocks the expected rosaries and icons, but it's also the go-to place to get traditional Hispanic and Native American folk remedies that Vigil picks in the wild – chokecherries, yerba buena and especially oshá, a root with a reputed power to cure almost anything. Some people even think oshá can ward off snake bites. Vigil learned herbal medicine from her grandmother, and she

'We grow up together, go to school together, live amongst each other, see each other on a daily basis. You're basically like family.' – Donna Madrid

passes down her wisdom by leading herb-picking expeditions for any who want to learn. She advises a cautious approach, both to preserve endangered plants and to preserve those who would pick them, as the wonder drug oshá looks dangerously similar to poisonous hemlock to the untrained eye.

There is more than one tradition of healing in San Luis. For decades, a group known as the Circle of Friendship has come to the aid of families who have just lost a loved one. Following San Luis tradition, the family of the deceased hosts a massive banquet for all mourners after the funeral, sometimes drawing as many as 350 people. To help grieving families, members of the Circle of Friendship, mostly women, donate their time to cook and serve the post-funeral meal in the parish hall to any who ask.

The Circle of Friendship requests a small fee to defray some expenses, but even that isn't set in stone. When a poor family didn't have the money to pay the fee, the ladies cooking and serving at the post-funeral banquet all pitched in to cover the cost of the meal.

People in San Luis have their quarrels, but when tragedy strikes,

people hurt for their grieving neighbors, said Donna Madrid, who has volunteered with the Circle of Friendship since the 1970s. "We grow up together, go to school together, live amongst each other, see each other on a daily basis," Madrid said. "You're basically like family."

That familial connection between neighbors was evident on a recent Thursday afternoon when Juanita Valdez dropped by La Rosa Mistica Coffeehouse. Valdez had just moved back to town after spending the better part of two decades living in Denver; like a number of younger people in San Luis, she had moved away to find work. As Valdez waited for her order to come up, a familiar face came through the door – Yolanda Martinez, an old classmate she hadn't seen in 20 years. They exclaimed, hugged and got a little teary-eyed. Martinez asked what brought her to town.

"I'm here to stay," Valdez replied.

"Are you serious? I heard the rumors – the rumors are true," Martinez said.

"Rumors in San Luis? I can't believe it," Valdez said, smiling.

Not only has Valdez returned, so has her sister, Evelyn, and they hope to entice other San Luis expatriates to come home by opening the Painted Sage Events Center in a restored Victorian house on Main Street. They hope it will be a draw for musicians, writers and artists.

There's a concerted effort in town to keep young people in the valley and draw San Luis natives back home by reinvigorating the economy. Bob Rael, executive director of the Costilla County Economic Council, has a full slate of initiatives toward that end. The most exciting project is the restoration of the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center, a massive WPA-built structure that will in a few years house a museum.

The museum and events center will likely draw people to San Luis. In the meantime, the coming of chicos season always brings people back to San Luis. At Joe Gallegos' ranch, he's likely to see brothers, sisters, friends and cousins from Denver and Wisconsin and beyond. "It's a time family comes together," Gallegos said, "to cook in this horno." 🌿



Longtime San Luis residents are free to graze their cattle on La Vega, a 600-acre commons east of town. Like the town itself, this communal space traces its origins to a Mexican land grant.

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