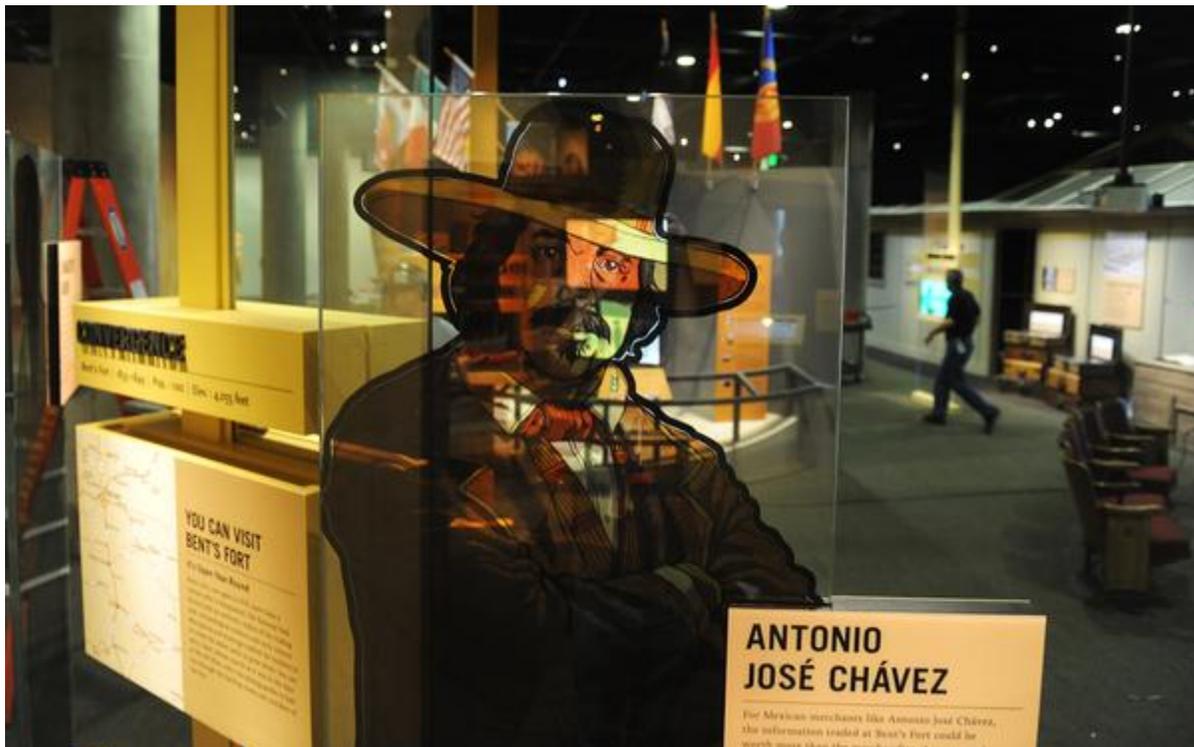


ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Colorado history museum lures visitors with new insights and interactive, fun activities

Posted: 04/22/2012 01:00:00 AM MDT
Updated: 04/27/2012 02:24:12 PM MDT

By Ray Mark Rinaldi
The Denver Post



Mexican merchant Anotonio José Chávez greets visitors to the Bent's Fort display in the "Colorado Stories" section at the History Colorado Center, which opens Saturday. (Photos by Cyrus McCrimmon, *The Denver Post*)

When the dedicated staff at the History Colorado Center sat down to plan out a new museum, it had to face a cold, hard fact about the old one: It wasn't a very popular place.

Oh sure, school kids came by the busload, but they didn't really have a choice. And tourists visited; the museum offered out-of-towners some excellent lessons on our Rocky Mountain past.

But Coloradans weren't all that excited about going there, and they have been honest with their opinions of the museum when surveyed — "heartbreakingly honest, at times," said exhibits director Bill Convery.



A display for Steamboat's Lighted Man, who would wear holiday lights on a run down the ski resort's mountain, is part of the "Colorado Stories" exhibit area. (Photos by Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

A [brand- new museum](#), built from the ground up, offered a chance to start over. How could the center attract families? Lure in locals with a free afternoon and plenty of choices on how to kill it?

For the museum, the answers were simple: Loosen up, let the stories keep their drama, make things kid-friendly and fully interactive. Allow a sense of humor into the building.

The [new \\$110 million, high-tech, energy-efficient center](#) will house scores (and scores) of artifacts, and it will have its share of dioramas, and it will still work hard to present an accurate and inclusive picture of Colorado's past.

But it will also have a time machine you can push around the lobby floor and program to tell quick and lively tales about the state, a mock ski jump where visitors can soar down [Howelsen Hill](#), a mine-shaft elevator that rattles and shakes.

There's a barn, but it does tricks. The chickens lay eggs on cue, a cow drops milk into a lighted bucket, kids can climb to the hayloft and return down via a corkscrew slide.

How loose is loose? You can learn a few things about Molly Brown, but also [Eric Cartman](#), the kid in "South Park." And there's an outhouse, and it gives off the kind of sounds that make little children giggle.

When the museum opens Saturday, only a third of its 40,000 square feet of exhibition space will be filled. But that already feels enormous, and the good news for families is that there's a lot to actually do in there.

"The point to all this is that we want to put you in the center of the story," said chief operating officer Kathryn Hill. "With all the pathos and humor and even the ridiculousness."

The strategy for getting people into the center has several fronts. There will be the exhibits and special events, and school trips, of course. But the building is also loaded with event space, which can be rented out for parties and meetings. The main room, with the balcony overlooking downtown, is already booked for 2012. There's hope that all those wedding guests will develop a kinship to the museum that makes it a part of the community.



The 40-foot-by-60-foot "Great Map of Colorado" is the centerpiece in the lobby of the center.

The building also houses the state's history operations. The the state archaeologist office is at the center, and there is ample archival storage, holding fodder for future exhibits.

The goal is to stay flexible. History has a way of changing, and a center needs to follow suit. "We're not using the word 'permanent' " to describe exhibitions, said Hill.

That means the museum's main timeline of Colorado history is now digital, unlike the old static one that ended a little early due to the fact that the museum ran out of wall space. This version is projected on a wall in the lobby and unfolds in a 27-minute loop covering 10,000 years. The same microtile wall screen projects a six-minute movie recapping Colorado's highlights.

And that overlooks the curious time machine, a giant, circular brass contraption, built steampunk-style, that rolls across the lobby floor. The museum used its art set-aside, the money all new projects must devote to art as they build, to commission artist [Steven Weitzman](#) to make a massive terrazzo map of Colorado. Embedded in the floor are 11 markers designating key historic spots.

Visitors choose their destination and push the machine over to it. They tap a time period, and a short film plays on the monitor. The stories cover broad terrain: the preservation of Mesa Verde, the Leadville Ice Palace, Shep the Tollbooth Sheepdog, the Ludlow Massacre. The presentations are lively with video, text, animation.

A journey east

For most visitors, the next stop will be a 5,000-square-foot attraction called Destination Colorado, which focuses on the rise, fall and reincarnation of Keota, a town on the Eastern Plains. The museum received a large donation of artifacts from the once-prosperous railroad town and used them to re-create a home, classroom and general store.

Again, the emphasis is on interactivity. Text abounds on the walls, and visitors can spend some time consuming details. Or they can take an amusement-park approach. Sitting in the actual Model T car as it bumps along a rocky road. Using a monitor to snap their picture and insert it into the Keota class photo. Actual smells come out of a period kitchen stove.

Real artifacts are mixed with reproduced ones so that people can actually pick up items from the store's shelves and get a feel for what it was like to order goods from the Montgomery Ward catalog in 1920.

The mix of experiences has its value. When historians piece together a picture of the past, they do their best to be accurate, but "it's constructed and it's messy," said director of education JJ Rutherford. Allowing visitors to read the record, see the objects and follow the timeline offers an idea of how stories are re-created.

The final exhibit developed for the opening is "Colorado Stories," eight "holistic environments" strung together over 9,500 square feet. The display attempts to connect the major places and events that "hook Coloradans together," according to Convery, and map out a collective identity for people who live here.

There's an 1833 stop at [Bent's Fort](#) trading post and an 1880 descent into the Silverton Silver Mine (where kids can play with a wall of dynamite). There's a brief history of the Ute Indian tribes and a trip through contemporary Steamboat Springs that tells the story of the ski industry.

The exhibit takes its darker turns, too, with a stop at the Amache-Granada relocation center, where Japanese-Americans were interned during World War II, and a history of the Sand Creek Massacre, where the tale of Indian slaughter is told from the points of view of soldiers, American Indians and early settlers.

Here, the museum is able to put perspective on today's difficult topics. The Borderlands section, for example, provides context for the current immigration debate by showing how Colorado's borders have changed over time. Whose state is it? The exhibit offers clues (with some humor) that concerned citizens can digest as they will.

It's a complicated experience, but visitors are invited to feel whatever they want at the various stops: the "pride or joy or anger or sorrow" of Colorado history, as Convery puts it.

The History Colorado Center is a work in progress. Still to come is an exhibit focusing on the city of Denver and LEGOrado, a take on our past constructed from LEGO bricks. In June, the museum will unveil the original state constitution.

The goal, said Hill, is to keep the place surprising in the hope that people will come, and then come back again.

"We want to turn what you expect from a history museum on its head," said Hill.

Ray Mark Rinaldi: 303-954-1540; rrinaldi@denverpost.com; twitter.com/rayrinaldi

...