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The Veins that Lighten Dearth: Documenting Hidden Collections in Rural California

Jillian M. Ewalt

ABSTRACT

This case study discusses an archival consulting project to document and preserve hidden collections in rural Northern California. The paper provides an overview of the collecting institution (the Mother Lode Land Trust), the collections and their historical context, and the consulting process. The author highlights processing strategies to improve preservation and description while developing a post-custodial approach to managing collections in a rural, community-based archives setting. .

Introduction

The Mother Lode Land Trust (MLLT), a land conservation organization based in rural northern California, became the custodian of important archival collections when the Chichizola Family Store Complex was donated to the organization in 2011. The Chichizola Complex includes a historic ranch and general store founded by Italian immigrant brothers in 1850 and operated by the family for over 125 years. It is also a prominent local landmark listed on the National Register of Historic Places (No. 1788).¹ The ranch and store complex contained over 60 linear feet of archival collections documenting the Chichizola family, gold mining, labor, business, and rural life in California from 1873 through 1977. The collections were both physically and intellectually hidden in that they were undocumented and stored in compromised conditions including lumber and livestock barns. As an organization focused on land conservation and natural resources, MLLT did not have staff to support their cultural heritage collections. In 2017, the author was hired as a short-term archival consultant to survey the collections and provide recommendations. The author returned to the project in 2021 on a pro-bono basis, this time with the goal of

1. National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places NPS Form 10-900 filing for Chichizola Family Store Complex, 1992, accessed June 2021, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/4ac6fd74-fad2-4716-980c-b4b9cfc06af7>.

gaining baseline physical and intellectual control while working with the organization to develop a plan for long-term stewardship.

This article provides a case study of the project to process and develop a post-custodial plan for the collections located at the Chichizola Family Store Complex (referred to throughout the article as the Chichizola collections). First, the article reviews relevant literature, places the collections in historical context, and provides an overview of the Mother Lode Land Trust and the collections. Next, the author discusses the consulting process including processing the collections and developing a plan for stewardship. This article provides examples of the unique challenges faced by collections in rural communities and strategies to improve documentation, preservation, and access.

Literature Review

This case study focuses on a multi-faceted project that was informed by processing, community archiving, and post-custodial theory and practice. This literature review points to examples from recent scholarship while situating this article in an important growing body of literature.

Several recent articles advocate for efficient processing strategies in instances where a baseline level of physical and intellectual control is warranted, such as short-term consulting projects and hidden collections. Majia Anderson summarizes the nature of consulting for hidden collections stating that, “In these projects, archivists work quickly and efficiently to deal with large backlogs of unprocessed collections. Collections are processed according to baseline preservation and access requirements, not to an ideal level of artisanship or scholarship. The goal,” she adds, “is to give the client a consistent foundation for the next phase of the project.”² In her article on applying MPLP (More Product, Less Process) as intentional, not necessarily minimal, processing at Humboldt State University, Adrienne R.S. Harling says, “we set out to do only as much processing as would ensure good-enough preservation and access to the collection in light of our specific resources and circumstances.”³ Most of the literature on MPLP and adjacent approaches such as extensible and efficient processing are based on large, formal archival repositories with dedicated staff and

2. Adina Langer, “Ask a Consulting Archivist: Majia Anderson,” National Council on Public History, 2014, <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/ask-a-consulting-archivist-majia-anderson/>.
3. Adrienne R. S. Harling, “MPLP as Intentional, not Necessarily Minimal, Processing: The Rudolf W. Becking Collection at Humboldt State University,” *The American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (2014): 493. See also: Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208-263.

resources.⁴ The literature generally lacks examples of how intentional processing has been applied in non-traditional settings such as community archives or archival consulting projects.

Alex H. Poole's systematic literature review on community archives provides a foundation for understanding the current state of such interactive information work.⁵ He and other scholars note the complications inherent in attempting to define community archives.⁶ As such, the current study in many ways resembles a community archiving project, but also has features that distinguish it from many of the important programs in the community archiving literature. For example, the Chichizola collections are inactive historic collections that primarily document the history of the Italian American community in a specific geographic location and are in the custody of a nonprofit conservation organization that serves that community. Examples from community archiving literature often focus on active collections and projects, for example, collections that are currently being collected, created, digitized, or developed by a community.

It's common for community archives to employ a post-custodial stewardship model, which is defined by the Society of American Archivists as "relating to situations where records creators continue to maintain archival records with archivists providing management oversight even as they may also hold custody of other records."⁷ Andrew Flinn noted that, "A post-custodial model is appropriate for community archives for a number of reasons—most importantly it addresses the ambivalence that many communities feel towards depositing their archives in formal heritage institutions."⁸ Several articles discuss post-custodial models as they have been applied to the archives of specific communities. For example, the A.M.E. History Project, a partnership between the Antioch A.M.E. Church and the University of West Georgia, built a digital community archive based on a post-custodial model; and the

4. See, for example: Kate Dundon, Laurel McPhee, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jolene Beiser, Courtney Dean, Audra Eagle Yun, et al. "Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries (Version 4)," UC Office of the President: University of California Systemwide Libraries, published 2020, accessed June 2021, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4b81g01z>; and Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2015).
5. Alex H. Poole, "The Information Work of Community Archives: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Documentation* 76, no. 3 (March 2020): 1-52.
6. Poole, "The Information Work of Community Archives," 4. See also Andrew Flinn, "Community Archives," in *Encyclopedia of Archival Science*, ed. Luciana Duranti and Patricia C. Franks (Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
7. Society of American Archivists, "Dictionary of Archives Terminology," accessed June 2021, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/postcustodial.html>.
8. Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 151-176.

Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin provided consultation, digitization equipment, and training to partner institutions to archive vulnerable human rights documentation.⁹ Additional examples such as the present case study are helpful because they document approaches as they may be applied in and with different communities and collections.

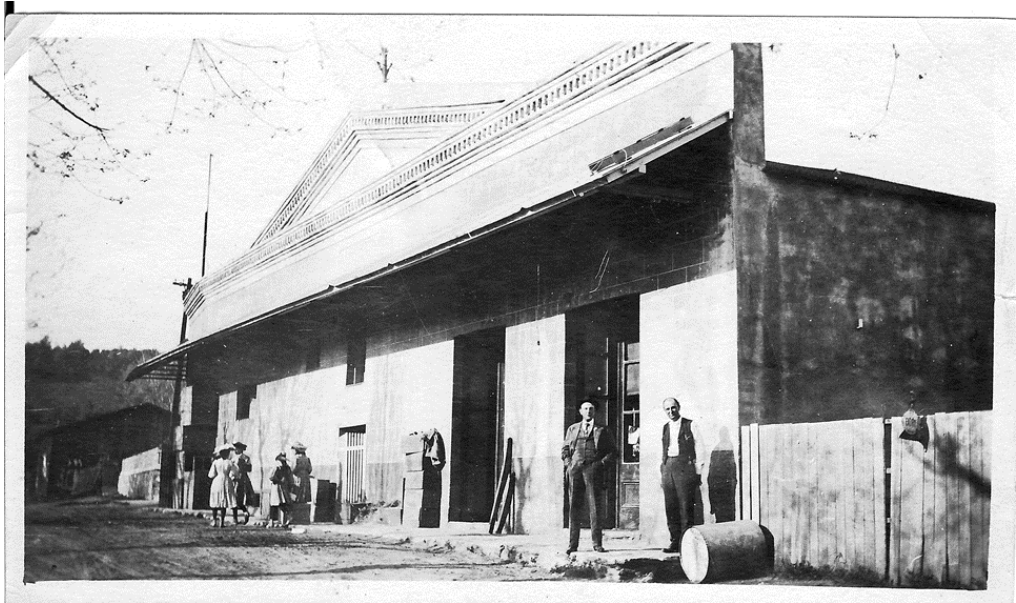


Figure 1. Photograph of the Chichizola Store, circa 1920. The individuals pictured are unidentified, however the man on the left is likely Julius Chichizola. Photograph courtesy of Amador County Archives and the Mother Lode Land Trust.

The Chichizolas, Gold-Quartz Mining, and a History of Early Amador County

The search for gold is what initially brought the Chichizola brothers to Amador County, a narrow strip of land in the foothills of northern California. Agostino, who was born in Genoa, Italy in 1831, along with his two brothers Antonio and Louis, immigrated to Boston in 1848. While Louis went to New Orleans, Agostino and

9. Julia Brock, Shaneé Yvette Murrain, and Tigner Rand, “The Post-Custodial Theological Library: Developing a Community Archives Program with the Local Church,” in *Summary of Proceedings of the 71st Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association*, ed. Miranda Bennett (Atlanta: ATLA, 2017); Theresa E. Polk, “Archiving Human Rights Documentation: The Promise of the Post-Custodial Approach in Latin America,” *PORTAL*, published August 5, 2016, <https://lilasbensonmagazine.org/2016/08/05/archiving-human-rights-documentation-the-promise-of-the-post-custodial-approach-in-latin-america/>.

Antonio made the long journey to California via the Isthmus of Panama. After an unsuccessful prospecting stint in Lancha Plana in 1849, the brothers anticipated the need for food and supplies in the burgeoning mining region. In late 1849 they went into the mercantile business, taking orders from local miners and delivering goods by wagon.¹⁰ The first structure of their stone-and-mortar location was built in 1850, two miles north of Jackson.

Placer mines were quickly depleted after the gold rush and succeeded by the underground gold-quartz mining industry, which positioned Amador County as one of the largest gold producers in the state. Consequently, the Chichizola Store flourished as it continued to provide essential supplies to miners and the growing community, many of which who were also Italian Americans. Although early gold production is unrecorded, several sources attest to the quantity of the ore extracted from this region, which was valued up to about \$4 million a year.¹¹

It's important to point out that the mining industry exploited Indigenous people, laborers, and natural resources. For example, one 1897 newspaper attests to the amount of forest land decimated in order to build mining infrastructure.¹² The gold rush displaced the local Miwok community who were compelled into labor in exchange for only food or clothing and, as historian Daniel Cornford pointed out, "suffered extreme violence at the hands of the Argonauts [early gold miners]."¹³ Gold-quartz mining was grueling and under-compensated labor which included being underground for up to 12 hours per day. The Chichizola collections provide harrowing primary sources about miners, many of them only in their early 20s, who were killed on the job.¹⁴

Immigrants from northern Italy, Austria, Cornwall, and the former Yugoslavia made up the majority of laborers in Amador's gold-quartz mines.¹⁵ Northern Italians, such as the Chichizolas, were among the most prominent groups to settle in Amador

10. Email correspondence with Hazel Powell, descendent of Agostino Chichizola, February 7, 2020.

11. See, for example: Albert Herbert Koschmann and M.H. Bergendahl, "Principal Gold-Producing Districts of the United States," *Geological Survey Professional Paper 610* (1968), <https://doi.org/10.3133/pp610>; and William B Clark, "Mother Lode Gold Mines; Jackson-Plymouth District," *California Geology* 40, no. 3 (1987): 51-58.

12. G. A. Carpenter, ed., *Special Mining Edition of the Amador Record*, April 1897, 37.

13. Daniel Cornford, "We All Live More like Brutes than Humands: Labor and Capital in the Gold Rush," *California History* 77, no. 4(1998/1999), 86; Henry Woodhead, *The Indians of California* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1994), 139.

14. See, for example, *Accident Reports, Oneida Gold Mining and Milling Records, 1873-1907*, Mother Lode Land Trust, Jackson, California.

15. Robert Wendell Richards, *The Tall Frames: Quartz Mining after the Gold Rush: A History of Amador County Mining* (Sutter Creek, California: Hilda's House Publications, 1999), xi.

County. While some worked in the gold-quartz mines, many families became merchants, proprietors, or went into agriculture, including the Chichizolas, whose familial success was directly tied to the thriving mining industry.

The Chichizola's business began dwindling at the time of the government-mandated closure of the mines during the US entry into World War II, and again in the 1970s when chain stores began to enter Amador County. The Chichizola Store could not compete with the prices and eventually closed its doors in 1977, after having been in continuous operation by the family for over 125 years. In 1992, the Chichizola Family Store Complex was entered into the National Register of Historic Places (No. 1788). In 2011, the store and surrounding ranch were donated to the Mother Lode Land Trust.

The Mother Lode Land Trust and the Chichizola Collections

The Mother Lode Land Trust (MLLT) is a nonprofit land conservation organization based in Jackson, California. Their mission is "Working with landowners to ensure the continuation of the rural character of the Mother Lode through the preservation of agricultural and forest lands, natural and scenic sites, historical places, and other unique properties in California's gold country."¹⁶

MLLT is guided by a six-member Board of Directors with backgrounds in business management, nonprofit management, ranching, forestry, and water rights, as well as a four-member Advisory Board with expertise in forestry, agriculture, wildlife biology, and public policy. One full-time staff member with a background in rangeland resource science serves as the Executive Director. MLLT took custody of the Chichizola Family Store Complex and ranch after the passing of Marion Frances Chichizola-Cuneo, the last remaining heir. At this time, they identified archival collections located on the property. As a rural land conservation organization, MLLT did not have the staff or resources to begin managing their archival collections. However, board member Bob Dean is passionate about cultural heritage and was influential in initiating the project.

The collections held by the Mother Lode Land Trust include the South Eureka Mining Company records (1892-1915), the Oneida Gold Mining and Milling Company records (1873-1907), the papers and ephemera of Marion and Virginia Chichizola (1928-1940), the Amador County Rodeo Association records (1938-1939), and the records of the Chichizola Store and other businesses owned and operated by the family (circa 1908-1977). These collections provide critical primary documentation and are relevant to national, state, and local history. It was common for the records of gold-quartz mines to be destroyed, so the Oneida and South Eureka records fill important gaps in mining and labor history. They document labor issues, such as the mining strike of 1903, and include accident reports that detail the horrific and often deadly conditions

16. Mother Lode Land Trust, accessed June 2021, <http://www.motherlodelandtrust.org/>.

of mine labor. The Marion Frances Chichizola-Cuneo papers, which include correspondence received by Marion from her friends and family, provides documentation about rural life during the 1930s for a young woman from an Italian American family. The records of the Chichizola Store document the operations of one of the earliest and most prominent mercantile businesses in the California gold country.

Consulting for Preservation, Description, and a Postcustodial Approach

Archival consulting is a broad term typically encompassing, as one author puts it, “intervention of outside expertise to address the operating processes of an organization, with the expectation of effecting change.”¹⁷ Like other forms of archival labor, archival consulting should be guided by values and ethics set forth by the Society of American Archivists.¹⁸ Although every consulting relationship and project is different, collaborative engagement should be at the forefront, particularly when working with a nonprofit or community organization such as MLLT.

This project began as a contracted consultation but continued on a pro-bono basis. The author communicates the major stages of the project by discussing it in phases. In practice, however, phases intersected and were linked by ongoing communication and modified based on available resources and the needs of the organization.

Phase 1: Salvage and Documentation

In 2017, the former Executive Director of MLLT, Adam Stratton, hired the author as a consultant to survey the paper-based collections located at the Chichizola Family Store Complex and develop a report with prioritized recommendations. The project began with several conversations about expectations and resources, and a tour of the property. The collections were dispersed in outbuildings and historic structures including a lumber barn, livestock barn, and several locations within the historic multi-building store complex. Environmental conditions posed a major threat to long-term viability of the collections; many materials sustained damage from rodents, pests, moisture, fluctuating temperatures, and particulates consistent with their storage in a rural setting. In one instance, for example, a fox made its den adjacent to archival materials stored in a lumber barn. These mine records also had the most extensive rodent damage; some had been nibbled beyond salvage. The Marion and Virginia Chichizola papers, which were stored in the livestock barn, were covered in owl pellets and located in boxes that had been used by rodents for acorn storage.

17. Virginia Stewart, “Transactions in Archival Consulting,” *The Midwestern Archivist* 10, no. 2 (1985): 1, https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/45450/MA10_2_5.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y.

18. Society of American Archivists, “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics,” accessed June 2021, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

In his case study on archives in Holden, Washington, Mattias Olshausen points out that the challenges faced by small nonprofits—such as lack of staffing and preservation-quality storage facilities—can be amplified by being a remote location, which was certainly the case for the Chichizola collections.¹⁹ In addition to unsatisfactory storage conditions, environmental threats exacerbated by climate change, such as wildfires, are also a major concern for collections in many parts of California, especially those in rural settings.

Removing collections from outbuildings and transferring them to more secure storage conditions was a priority. Materials were documented, removed from their locations, rehoused into non-archival banker boxes, and consolidated to a central location in the main Chichizola Store building. Concurrently, the author created a box level inventory, noting general contents, dates, and preservation issues. Phase One took approximately five months to complete and was documented in a report that outlined the status of collections and recommendations. At the end of the consulting period, the project was communicated to directors via board meetings and to stakeholders through an article in the MLLT newsletter.



Figure 2. The photograph on the left depicts the conditions in the lumber barn. Three wooden boxes containing the records of the South Eureka Mine Company and the Oneida Gold Mining and Milling Company can be seen in this photograph. The photograph on the right depicts a receipt book with substantial rodent damage from the South Eureka Mining Company records. Photographs courtesy of the author.

19. Mattias Olshausen, “The Archival Challenges and Choices of a Small Non-profit Organization Attempting to Preserve Its Unique Past,” *Journal of Western Archives* 10, no. 2 (2019): 2.

Phase 2: Baseline Processing

In 2021, the author resumed work with the MLLT and Chichizola collections, this time as a pro-bono consultant on research leave from her permanent position (similar to a sabbatical). With the organization's goals and resources in mind, Phase Two primarily focused on baseline processing, including arrangement, preservation, and description. The processing plan took into account the author's time on site (approximately three months), the organization's budget (under \$1,000), and the condition, content, and size of the collections.

The goal was not to provide an ideal or artisanal level of preservation, arrangement, or description. Rather, the processing goal for the Chichizola collections was to provide just enough description and preservation to create a foundation for, and most importantly empower, the organization to move forward after the consulting period ended.

Preservation was the most challenging part of processing, but also one of the most critical given the organization's goals. Materials were heavily soiled due to their storage in barns and outbuildings. Owl pellets, rodent feces, and particulates all contributed to the compromised state of the collections. Adding to the importance of preservation was that midway through the project, MLLT identified the goal of physically depositing the collections in a nearby repository (discussed in the next section), which required them to be significantly cleaner than their current state. One preservation metric was "are these materials clean enough to deposit in an archival facility without risk of contaminating other materials?" With that in mind, preservation activities included setting up an outdoor cleaning space (in addition to an indoor processing space) to ensure proper ventilation. The consultant used a paintbrush and dry cloth to remove debris from materials. A medical mask and gloves were worn during cleaning and when handling some of the more soiled parts of the collection. At the end of each workday, the consultant cleaned the indoor processing space, including vacuuming the floor and wiping down tables to reduce the spread of particulates. Preservation activities also included rehousing all materials into archival document storage containers and refolding select items such as loose documents. Preservation, arrangement, and description were completed concurrently due to efficiency, accuracy, and time constraints.

The level of description took into account priority of the materials (for example, the mining records were a higher priority than the rodeo ephemera due in part to their age and research value), the types of materials (for example, ledgers or loose papers), and the consultant's time on-site. All of the collections received DACS-based collection-level descriptions while the detail of the inventories varied. The South Eureka Mine and Mill records, for example, received item-level inventories because it included only bound items such as ledgers and journals while the other collections received mostly box-level inventories. At the end of the second phase, the consultant completed baseline preservation and finding aids for approximately 50 linear feet of materials, including the South Eureka Mine Company records, the Oneida Gold

Mining and Milling Company records, the Mary Virginia Chichizola Schroeter collection, the Marion Frances Chichizola-Cuneo papers, and the Amador County Rodeo Association records. The largest and most complex collection was the records of the Chichizola Store; a partial finding aid was created for that collection. The finding aids are currently for internal use only, however, in the future they may be encoded in EAD (Encoded Archival Description) or published on the Online Archive of California to enhance public access.

Phase 3: Developing a Postcustodial Model for Rural Community Archives

Most of the records about the California Gold Rush and its adjacent histories—such as labor and immigration—are not held in or by the communities that created them; rather, they are typically housed in major collecting institutions, often located in large urban areas such as Sacramento, the San Francisco Bay Area, or Los Angeles.²⁰ Given the lack of infrastructure and resources at MLLT, the consultant initially recommended that the collections be donated to an urban repository with a focus on California history that had infrastructure to provide traditional preservation, description, and access. The consultant's initial recommendation was based largely on the assumption that the most important destination for this collection would be in the hands of researchers. However, after further discussion it became clear that one of MLLT's primary goals was for the records to remain in their custody and in the community.

Natalia Fernández and Christine Paschild point out, "Returning control to communities, or at the least enlisting and valuing their direct engagement" is an important theme in community archives.²¹ This project prioritized the needs of the organization (and the rural community which they serve and are situated) and valued direct engagement and creative solutions over prescriptive standards. Therefore, the consultant adapted her process and strategies to fit the needs of the organization, even when those needs meant taking a different approach than the consultant's professional recommendations. For example, the consultant had initially recommended transfer to a formal repository, however, one of MLLT's goals was internal use of the collections for the purpose of promoting their organization and its services to the community. In order to facilitate that goal, it was critical that the collection remain physically accessible to MLLT.

After exploring several options, MLLT felt most confident about a post-custodial model in which they physically deposited the collections at a small, local archival facility (a fire-proof, climate controlled building housing the records of a local gold-

20. See, for example, the results of a search for "California gold rush" in the Online Archive of California, <https://oac.cdlib.org/>.

21. Natalia M. Fernández and Cristine N. Paschild, "Beyond a Box of Documents: The Collaborative Partnership Behind the Oregon Chinese Disinterment Documents Collection," *Journal of Western Archives* 4, no. 1 (2013): 7.

quartz mine) but retained legal ownership.²² This partnership came about organically because both the consultant and MLLT had worked with the local archival facility in different capacities in the past so they were familiar with the organization's facilities and program, and acquainted with personnel. In addition to providing a secure space, the archival facility has volunteers that can provide access to the materials. Along with the deposit, the consultant also recommended that institutional policies and procedures be agreed upon and documented by both organizations to support ongoing collaboration and stewardship. At the time of writing, a formal agreement was still in progress. Including the finding aids in the Online Archive of California was also discussed as a possibility to support public access and may be part of future post-custodial activities. Similarly, the post-custodial plan includes remote support from the consultant on an as-needed basis.

This strategy met a priority of the organization: to ensure that the records could physically stay in the community, while also taking steps to improve long-term preservation by storing them in a climate-controlled facility. The baseline processing described above allowed the records to be in a condition that was *clean enough* to deposit in an archival facility and *described enough* to allow both parties (and future researchers) to know what the records are. Keeping records in the community was symbolic in that it challenged historical narratives of extractive practices while allowing for the possibility that the records can one day be used to serve the community.

With the right collaborators and appropriate funding, the Chichizola collections could have a strong impact within the rural community. For example, the collections could be used as a teaching tool in a local high school class studying California history. Collaborative programming with the public library is another potential use. The Italian Benevolent Society is a local charitable organization founded in 1881 to aid the families of miners and many members of the Society are descendants of those who were associated with underground gold-quartz mines which these collections document. The Society hosts a popular annual picnic and parade, and the archives could be used to support historical engagement during that event.

Conclusion

Archival collections in rural communities face unique preservation and access challenges that historically have been addressed by moving archival collections to large, urban repositories. This case study discussed several strategies used to help a nonprofit land conservation organization in northern California document and care for their hidden collections. The project prioritized baseline physical and intellectual control which was achieved through intentional and efficient processing strategies. The consultant and organization developed a post-custodial approach which allowed

22. At the time of writing, the deposit agreement was not yet finalized; therefore, the name of the partner repository has been redacted.

materials to be housed in an archival facility while remaining the property of the organization and, most importantly, in the community. Institutions that employ archivists can support such community archiving efforts by offering paid research or academic leave for archivists, such as was taken to engage in this project.

Appendix

The title of this paper was taken from a poem about underground mine labor. It offers a personal narrative related to labor documents found in the South Eureka Mining Company records and the Oneida Gold Mining and Milling Company records.

The Miners Lot

I dive into the deepest pit;
You'd tremble where I stay;
And through the rock and glittering ore
My arm must break its way.

I cannot breathe the summer air,
Nor see the roses blow;
No scent of flowers can meet me there,
No freshness where we go.

Though every element declare
That death's at every turn,
I fear no dark abyss if but
My little lamp should burn,

Nor do I fear the threatening cliff,
Precipitous o'er my head;
Nor yet the wild and gushing stream
That tears its rocky bed.

Nor yet the blue and ghastly flame,
From which comes poisoned breath,
Blown out to bring us suddenly
Into the jaws of death.

I boldly bore into the hill,
And split the hardest rock;
God grant the grace—I light the match,
And wait the dreadful shock.

I boldly dig from mountain depths,
The veins that lighten dearth,
And bring from out of rocky gulfs
The marrow of the earth.

How beaut'ful at first! but soon
We see an idol rising;
They worship it, forgetting us,
And God himself despising.

I open many a golden lode,
And many a silver vein,
And when the rich take up the prize,
What, you think, is my gain?

Stiff rheumatism in my limbs,
And oft a beggar's stave;
Dry bread, with but a little salt,
And oft an early grave.

True, many a miner passing by
Weeps when he sees my end;
And having blest my ashes says:
"Rest well, rest well my friend!"

So glimmer on, my little friend,
For certain soon or late,
With many a brave and noble man,
The grave will be my fate.

Sutter Creek, 1880
By WM Jones
(Also attributed to Ch. F. Weiss)