ABSTRACT

TITLE:	Dilemma or Delight?: The Role of Dioramas in Colorado History Interpretation 1930 - Present
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ABSTRACT: In 1933 the Great Depression was raging in the United States. Unemployment in Colorado had soared to a staggering 50 percent, and businesses across the state were failing. Fortunately, relief for the desperate situation had come into view with the recent presidential election, in which Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated the incumbent Herbert Hoover. Roosevelt had promised to the American people that his administration would take decisive action to end the economic crisis. After taking office, programs that Roosevelt created to assist the unemployed, including the Civilian Conservation Corps and later the Works Progress Administration, were implemented across the nation. In Colorado the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) funded and conducted enhancements at Mesa Verde National Park, among other locations, and at the State Museum of Colorado the Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded similar improvements beginning in 1935. What both locations had in common was the construction by WPA and CCC employees of more than 50 total dioramas, miniature models that depict scenes and moments in Colorado History. Dioramas were used at the Chapin Mesa Archeological Museum of Mesa Verde National Park and the various iterations of the Colorado State Historical Society's flagship museum for more than 75 years. Yet presently, both institutions have adopted significantly different approaches to their use and handling of the dioramas. There is debate as to whether or not the historic dioramas should be treated and handled as artifacts, or whether they are able to continue to effectively serve as tools of education and interpretation. I examine the use of dioramas based on the history of the models, the methods of their use adopted by museum professionals, and their continued popularity among museum visitors. I argue that a public history dilemma arises when institutions that house historic dioramas chose to handle them as artifacts and lock them away from the public view. Without the use of the historic dioramas at Mesa Verde National Park, and the present day History Colorado Center, it is impossible to tell the complete history of those institutions, and indeed the very history of the State of Colorado.