



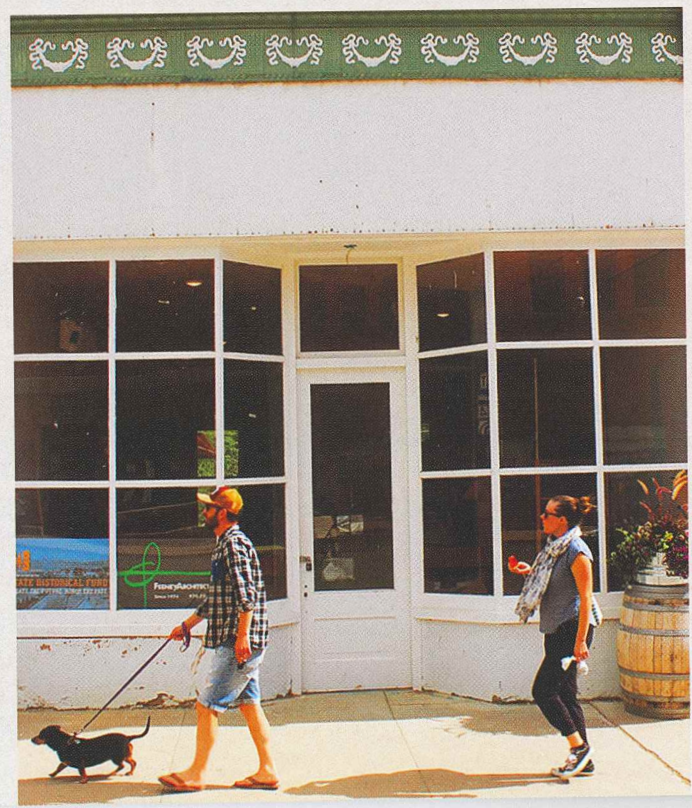
Start the Presses

Historical newspaper building revived as Mancos Common Press

Frank Matero was walking in downtown Mancos in January of 2013, past the old *Mancos Times-Tribune* building on Grand Avenue. It was usually empty, so he was surprised to see an editor typing away inside. He asked if he could take a look behind the false wall of the building, which had always intrigued him. He was astonished by what he saw.

There was no power or lighting, but even by flashlight he sensed the enormity of the discovery. Behind the wall, Matero, chair of the graduate program in historic preservation at University of Pennsylvania and an architect, found a completely untouched and intact newspaper office from the last century. There was a giant Cranston press, which he later learned was a very rare item, and there was shelving, furniture, blocks of type, and a typesetters bench. The sealed-off room still had an ornamental metal ceiling and light fixtures. It was as if he'd opened a door into the past. "It was walled up almost like a tomb," said Matero.

Matero, who splits his time between the Four Corners area and Pennsylvania, met with the community nonprofit Mancos Valley Chamber of Commerce to make a pitch about what he'd found. At the very least, he hoped to convince them to document the discovery. They went further than that, embarking on an ambitious project to preserve and restore the building and its precious contents.



Back to the Future

Members of the community formed the nonprofit Mancos Common Press under the fiscal umbrella of Mancos Valley Resources, and the building's owner, Ballantine Publishing, graciously agreed to donate the structure and its treasures to their efforts. A cadre of volunteers came forth and spent hundreds of hours cleaning out and repairing the building. Betsy Harrison sits on the Mancos Valley Resources board and was the administrator of a 2016 grant from the Colorado State Historical Fund. "Without the state historical funding, the restoration of the building would not have been possible," said Harrison.

Matero enlisted the help of his UPenn colleague, Matt Neff, an artist and director of the undergraduate fine arts program at the university, to assess the behemoth Cranston Press. The Cranston is a single-revolution drum cylinder press used for printing newspapers that was made in 1890. This particular relic was delivered by train from the East Coast and likely pulled by a cart and placed in the unfinished building in 1910 or 1911, before the back of the building was put on. It was used until 1969 to print the local paper. Neff had never seen that model before—it was only after several years that was he able to find one or two others still operating—but he and the team of volunteers set about trying to restore it. He was amazed at its pristine condition and how well the arid climate here had preserved it. "I was fortunate to meet the last operator before they shut it down. He was in the middle of doing a job and left wet ink in the tray when the paper was bought by a larger newspaper and he left. The ink in the tray was still wet... I was able to scoop it right out."

Restoring the Cranston mostly involved cleaning, stripping, and putting it back together, but they did have to re-cover the rubber rollers that distribute the ink onto the type itself. The volunteers also found a local blacksmith to build the "chases," the metal boxes that the type is set in.

Matero's students supported the local team by researching the history of the newspaper and doing a scientific analysis of the plaster walls, paint, and ceiling that informed the restoration work. There was even a surviving photo from 1911 of the building's interior that enabled them to identify every piece of furniture in the shop.

The *Mancos Times-Tribune* space was home to more than just the Cranston press. In addition to the actual letterforms, pieces of type that were more than a century old, the building also contained a hundred-year archive of newspapers and photogravure blocks etched into copper and zinc. The Mancos coalition even procured a second, smaller letterpress printer to enhance the renewed space.

The Mancos Common Press, which pays homage to Benjamin Franklin's 18th century printer, the Common Press, opened its doors to programming including lectures, courses with the local school district, and letterpress classes. Neff said that letterpress printing is making a comeback in the arts world. There's a certain elegance to the medium, he says; the way it slows people down and lets them revive the antique implements of journalism to communicate ideas in a new way.

Letterpress has had the same revitalizing effect on downtown Mancos. The classes are always full and the space has breathed life into the arts community in the town. "I never even gave letterpress a thought, and now it's all I think about," laughs Harrison. "The building was boarded up for so long. Now it's coming to life again, and the community is really excited about it. We've had a lot of fun."

