

# Heart of a Tiger: How Trevor Yocum is preserving Kansas history

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - The plains of Western Kansas are known for being wide and flat. But in the small community of Liebenthal, something big breaks up the horizon. Rising from the prairie is the St. Joseph's Parish complex, a stunning display of Gothic architecture crafted from the very earth it stands upon.

For decades, these "Post Rock" limestone buildings have served as the heartbeat of Liebenthal. Now, thanks to the dedicated work of Fort Hays State University graduate student Trevor Yocum, their significance is finally being cemented into the official record of Kansas history.

Earlier this year, the Kansas Historical Society (KSHS) Board officially designated the St. Joseph's complex, including the church, school, and rectory, as a state historic site. It was a unanimous decision that didn't just stop at the state line; the board also voted to forward the application to the National Register of Historic Places. While the designation is a triumph for the community, it is a major achievement for the student who led the work.

The journey to the registry began in November 2023, when Earl Legleiter, a local advocate for the site's preservation, submitted a preliminary questionnaire to the state. When the KSHS confirmed that the property's unique architecture and its connection to the Volga German settlement made it a prime candidate for the registry, Legleiter knew he needed a researcher who could turn local stories into hard facts.

He reached out to Dr. Kim Perez, a professor of history at FHSU, who saw a perfect match in Trevor Yocum. A Graduate Teaching Assistant with a passion for public history, Trevor was looking for a project that felt real.

"Trevor's project was an ideal, authentic, place-based education opportunity," Legleiter said. "It was a joy to work with Trevor and Dr. Perez on this project and to know that we are helping to conserve a bit of Kansas history."

For Trevor, the project was a chance to really get to know the people and the history of Liebenthal. While many churches in the West were built in a simpler style, the builders of St. Joseph's, mostly local church members, had bigger plans. They quarried limestone out of the ground just outside Liebenthal and shaped the blocks by hand to create a masterpiece.

"Faith was a core part of their community. It's incredible," Trevor says. "They started having church in a field outside somebody's house, built their first tiny church, and then decided they needed to go bigger. So, they built the church."

But the research required more than just admiring the stone. Trevor spent months digging through digital records and local archives. He explored the site's importance to the Volga Germans, who brought their traditions and hard work to Rush County in the late 1800s.

Beyond the paperwork, Trevor was welcomed by the people of Liebenthal. He listened to stories of weddings, funerals, and community parties that had taken place within those limestone walls for over a hundred years.

"I found the Liebenthal community to be very close-knit," Trevor noted. "The church was used as a center for everyone around it. It was cool to read about it, but even better to hear it from the people who live there."

While student research is common at FHSU, what Trevor accomplished is far from ordinary.

"This is a big deal because these applications are usually written by professional historians," explains Dr. Kim Perez. "Students rarely get this kind of experience before they start their careers."

In her Local History course, Dr. Perez's students often study old buildings, but Trevor's work is the first time a student's research has led to a completed and accepted state nomination. Dr. Perez was a huge help, guiding Trevor through the many state rules and difficult paperwork needed for the project.

The highlight of Trevor's hard work came during Rush County's 150th birthday celebration. Standing before the community, Trevor shared what he had found, giving the buildings' history back to the people who still cherish them. The project was finished in 2025, leading to the official state honor on February 7, 2026.

For Trevor, this wasn't just an assignment; it was the start of his career. The experience helped him decide that he wants to work in public history, protecting historic sites and working in museums.

While many young professionals move to big cities, Trevor's heart is in Kansas. A native of St. Mary's, he plans to stay in the state after graduation. "Kansas is my home," he says simply.

His success shows the power of FHSU's history program. Dr. Perez notes that her students have gone on to be city planners and museum experts, but Trevor's achievement sets a new bar for what a student can do for Kansas history.

The new status for St. Joseph's Parish is more than just a title. It helps the community secure grants and funding to ensure the buildings stand for another hundred years. For the people of Liebenthal, it honors the hard work of their ancestors.

Now, the buildings are on their way to being listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This means the church is recognized as an important part of the American story. Trevor's work ensures these limestone walls will remain for a long time, helping future Kansans remember where they came from.

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