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Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

Lucas Koch, Stone Mason

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Strata Terra 1
Laura Berman

LUCAS KOCH, STONE MASON

*I have found what I love to do, and I have
found a way to make a living doing it.*

Lucas Koch

The Flint Hills is home to a number of stone masons, but Lucas Koch, owner of Koch Construction Specialties, is one of the most passionate about the craft. In addition to creating beautiful stone structures, Koch has worked hard to keep stone masonry alive. He helped organize the 2017 Flint Hills Stonework Symposium and Workshops, is now certified by the Dry Stone Conservancy to teach dry stone walling classes, and works side by side with his employees to teach them his craft.

How and why did you become a stone mason?

I have always felt that my earliest interest in stonework started when I served as a park ranger at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. I was surrounded by the historic stone buildings and walls. I was fortunate to be able to watch National Park Service masons do restoration work on the Lower Fox Creek School. During this time I felt a strong urge to buy an abandoned stone house south of Cottonwood Falls. After working months alongside masons from Emporia on our home, I learned many of the basic principles of restoration and stone construction. Shortly after completion of our home, local folks began to ask if I would work on their stone structures. Hence in 2000, my business began.

How did you learn the craft of stone masonry?

I learned much of my craft by trial and error. However, I researched books and learned from other masons that worked for me. The most valuable experiences came from participation in workshops and symposiums led by master masons around the country. I have attended twelve stone masonry workshops out of state. I communicated with a network of stone masons around the country and Europe. Several of these masons have traveled to Kansas and helped with a few of my projects.

What drew you to the stone masonry business?

I have always loved the old crafts. I did woodworking and blacksmithing at one time as well. The Flint Hills offer a great opportunity for stone masons. I like the fact that the techniques for building with stone are not going to change much; it's one of the oldest trades in the world. I shape and work stone with chisels and hammers much like the Romans. The connection to history and preserving these techniques, I feel, is what appeals to me the most.

What is your staff size?

I currently have a crew of seven, including me. The number changes seasonally, with more employees in the summer than

winter. High school and college students are employed in the summer months when the workload is heaviest. At times I have hired masons temporarily to help with bigger projects. The crew is mostly Chase and Wabaunsee county residents; however, the foreman lives in Topeka and commutes to the Flint Hills. My family also helps with the business. My wife, Susan, is business manager; my oldest son, Tanner, works with the crew in the summer; my daughter, Laura, helps with painting letters on signs; and Bryson, my youngest at twelve, is too young to work with the crew but has been carving stone since he was nine.

What does a typical day look like?

Most days begin at 7 a.m. If mortar is needed, it is mixed as soon as possible. The crew can use ten to twenty batches of mortar in a day. Masons organize the worksite by getting the proper tools and stocking stone. Building and stone shaping consume most of the day. After lunch the masons begin to strike the mortar joints from the morning's work. A wire brush is used to smooth and refine the joints for a final finish. This can only be done after the mortar is set. At the end of the day, materials are stocked for the next day. In the summer we work four ten-hour days; this allows for a make-up day if needed due to weather. In winter we work five eight-hour days.

What is a typical project?

Throughout the year we usually do several restorations on 1880s-era buildings. This may involve tuck pointing, rebuilding failed walls, or replicating broken lintels. There is usually some new construction such as veneer on houses, fireplaces, or stone patios. We also do a lot of dry stone projects, which involves stonework without the use of mortar. These typically are retaining walls or stone fences. Lastly, we also carve letters into signs.

What projects are you most proud of?

I am really happy I got to build a dry stone arched bridge. It is located just north of Matfield Green along Bill McBride's sculpture path. I am not aware of other dry stone bridges in Kansas. We built two root and wine cellars; they are subterranean with an arched ceiling. I enjoy the process of building arches.

Are you especially careful about keeping your work historically correct?

I am very concerned with keeping our work historically correct. In restoration projects I will match the historic mortar's color, sand, and texture to make seamless repairs. In dry stone construction, I follow a very specific design to ensure the walls will stand for a century.

What is your most visible project in the Flint Hills?

In 2017, I organized the Flint Hills Stonework Symposium and Workshops in Cottonwood Falls. Masons and carvers from fifteen states and seven countries converged to build an artistic courtyard for Citizens State Bank in downtown Cottonwood Falls. It has become a meeting place as well as a backdrop for countless photo shoots. Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve is the site of one of our most visible projects. Koch Construction Specialties was hired to work with Dry Stone Conservancy of Kentucky. We built a stone fence that flanks the entrance to the visitor center. The stone fence is 835 feet long.

How is your headquarters in the Flint Hills important to your business?

Living near Cottonwood Falls has put me geographically in the center of the Flint Hills. This puts me within one to two hours of most projects. I also have a house in Alma that allows me to be within minutes of the bulk of my work in Wabaunsee county. Most of the stone used in our projects is quarried in Chase or Wabaunsee counties. Occasionally we have special projects outside of the Flint Hills, such as the restoration of the Wilson Czech Opera House in Wilson. I have also done several great projects in Kansas City.

Where does the stone come from for your business?

I am fortunate to have a great selection of limestone throughout the Flint Hills. Many quarries supply cut stone and blocks. I also salvage stone from fences and dilapidated structures. Many projects in rural areas have the stone that is needed on the property; this can produce a perfect match.

What would surprise people about your business?

I often plan projects several years in advance. Typically, the crew has a solid year of work lined up. Fortunately, weather and construction schedules offer the flexibility to work on smaller projects.

How important is passing on your knowledge?

I realize that my trade will die if it isn't shared or passed on. The era of son learning from father who learned from his father is nearing its end. I train my crew by working side by side with them. My seasoned crew does a good job of helping to train the new recruits. I recently became certified to teach dry stone walling classes from the Dry Stone Conservancy, and I hope to organize a workshop for the Kansas region soon. For the Flint Hills Stonework Symposium and Workshops in 2017, four international instructors taught carving, sculpture, dry stone masonry, and architectural fabrication in stonework. I

have presented at four international Stone Symposiums, at Symphony in the Flint Hills Signature Event, and for local civic groups and schools.

What special recognition has meant the most to you?

I competed in the National Dry Stone Walling Competition several times. I placed first in the Professional Division in 2017 and third in the Master's Division in 2019. I was excited to receive a 2019 Historic Preservation Building Award by the Manhattan and Riley County Preservation Alliance for our work on St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Manhattan. I am honored to have worked with Kansas State University's fifth year architecture students and their Design+Make studio course at Camp Wood YMCA. Our project was the Preston Outdoor Education Station, a unique stone feature constructed and designed by my crew and students. The students received honors from *Architect's Newspaper*, *Azure Magazine*, and the ACSA Design Build Award.

What would you like your legacy to be?

God has each of us here for a specific purpose. I have felt that I was guided through life by events and people along the way that brought me to this career. I have found what I love to do, and I have found a way to make a living doing it. I would like to be remembered as honest



Dry Stone Bridge on Bill McBride's PrairieArt Path
Matthew Regier

and good to those I work with. I want my work to be thought of as beautiful, solid, and timeless. I also hope that the craft I practice honors the masters that perfected stonework through time.

Why are you passionate about keeping the stone heritage alive?

I feel the Flint Hills offer many things to people. Elements that are appealing to us are prairie, wildlife, Native American history, the ranching tradition, and architecture. The complete story of the Flint Hills does not exist without the stone in the hills and the topography created by the stone outcrops and layers. The stone and flint prevented the conversion to farmland, allowing ranching to dominate.

The limestone has created nutrients for the grasses and water that are superior for grazing. Native American tribes hunted here for centuries; now ranchers reap the benefits of fattening cattle on the same hills. Lastly, the building material of choice was stone for early settlers. The stone architecture is one of the most recognizable cultural landscape features in the Flint Hills. The craft is appreciated here. People stand in awe of the work that was involved to build the houses, barns, churches, courthouses, and even the miles of stone walls. I often wonder if I didn't work on these structures, who would? Ultimately, I wouldn't be able to do this work without the great customers that hire us and keep us busy.