

# The Forefront of Storefronts

*Small-town girl helps preserve historical stamped-metal facades*

by Jim Winnerman  
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**H**allie Fieser was only 11 in 1997, but she already was engaged in a grass-roots effort to save a historic one-room schoolhouse on her parent's property in tiny Tilsit.

"I campaigned at home for months to try and stop my father from tearing it down," she recalls. "He felt it was structurally unstable, so I was unsuccessful, but I think he regrets it now, though."

Hallie's initial foray into historic preservation was a precursor to what appears will be her life's work. Now 23, she has become a nationally respected scholar on American storefronts built between 1880 and 1920.



Her interest in vintage architecture began while living next to the 1850-era

Tilsit School. Childhood memories include talking to former students who returned to take photos and listening to their schoolhouse stories. Hallie in turn would tell them she liked to play and roller skate on the wooden floor as a child.

Other influences include her elderly neighbors in Tilsit, most of whom lived in historically significant homes that had been in their families for generations. Hallie sensed each structure was something special to the family who called it home.

In 2005, she enrolled in Southeast Missouri State University because the school was one of the few in the U.S. to offer an undergraduate degree in historic preservation. During her junior year, Hallie began doing research on a building in Altenberg to assist in preparations for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

She was intrigued to discover the front of the building was covered with a thin metal facade that transformed the wooden structure into a substantial-looking storefront.

The intricate architectural features such as columns, pediments and brackets that appeared to be carved from stone or wood were instead sheet metal stamped into architectural motifs.

"I learned it was known as a Mesker storefront that had been manufactured in St. Louis and Evansville, Ind., by the Mesker Brothers Ironworks and George L. Mesker & Co.," she says. "They were erected in every state between 1880 and 1920 when merchants were anxious to quickly open a business in a 'real store.'"

Hallie explains that the building style became particularly popular in rural towns in the Midwest. As budgets were tight, and architectural services were limited, the metal frontages were a smart buy.

The Meskers were ordered from a catalog and shipped via the rapidly expanding rail service. They were easily installed in just a few days at a fraction of the cost of a brick or cast-iron facade.

According to Hallie, Meskers were used for shops, banks and

The town hall in Oak Ridge still displays a Mesker that Hallie helped identify.



photos by Kyle Spradley

Hallie Fieser of Tilsit stands in front of the restored Klosterman Block, a building with four storefronts in downtown Cape Girardeau. The college grad identified this Mesker storefront that was recently repainted with colors to help the metal facade resemble the stone it was originally designed to imitate.

public buildings. They often remain as architecturally significant buildings in small towns today.

Now Hallie cannot pass up a Mesker when she spots a new one. She makes it a point to stop and tell the owner of the storefront's significance. She says few people know they are even working with a Mesker and at least once, she has found patterns installed upside down that had gone unnoticed for more than 90 years.

"I believe there is only one other person in the country who may know more about Meskers than she does," says Frank Nickell, director of the Center for Regional History, where Hallie served as a research assistant at SEMO.

Of course there are more than just Mesker storefronts along the main street in any small town, and Hallie knows about those, too.

"Looking down a rural town's street, we can tell its history," she says. "By knowing what materials were used and when they were at the height of their fashion, we can date the structures and see how the community evolved."

During her senior year, Hallie led tours of vintage buildings in Cape Girardeau in conjunction with a national "This Place Matters" campaign, sponsored by the National Trust, to increase awareness of historically important buildings across rural America.

"She did a better job explaining the significance and building design than myself and two other professors who also lead tours," says Nickell.

Hallie's historic architecture studies took her to many of the rural communities in southeast Missouri, such as Burfordville, Campbell, Wilhelmina and Gordonville.

In 2009, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in historic

preservation. Now she has begun a master's in public history at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro.

"As far as a career, no matter what, I would love to work with the built environment in some way," Hallie says.

Hallie continues to be intrigued with Meskers. "My friends and classmates have all been 'Meskerized,'" she says referring to her weekend jaunts to find new Meskers. "I still get giddy when I find one."

*Winnerman is a freelance writer from St. Louis. If you discover a Mesker, Hallie would like to know the location. Contact her at halliefieser@gmail.com.*

## Want to search for a Mesker in your town?

Use these clues to help identify a historical storefront

1. Cast-iron nameplates with the Mesker name stamped in. These often are missing.
2. Morning glory and fleur-de-lis repetitive patterns.
3. Cast-iron or pressed metal architectural elements including columns, cornice-bracket ornaments and window hoods.
4. Decorative sheet-metal panels with stone or brick designs.
5. A recessed entrance that provides increased window display space.