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We Bought This!

Kyle Johnson

It all began with one of those articles in the paper about someone else's unusual life. My fiancé, Steve Broadfoot, had read a story about a family of four who were renovating an old house while living in one room at a time. "That sounds like fun," he said.

I remember laughing and saying that that did not sound like fun to me, and that I was not an old house "fixer-upper." Famous last words! And, that if that was what he wanted in a wife, he best look elsewhere.

Well, we got married anyway. The article faded into a dim memory for me. Not so for Steve. After three years of marriage, and renting, we began house hunting in earnest. Somehow, we ended up at 313 White Street. We had put earnest money down,

or come “this close” to buying other old houses. But, no, this truly-falling-apart dump looked good to us. We could both see the glorious possibilities underneath the funky colors, maze-like layout, and dilapidated condition. He said we’d be done in three years. I said ten. Wrong on both counts, but we had a mission!



The first time I saw the “13” in the address I wondered if this boded poorly for us—and the fact that we ended up moving in on Halloween should have been the clinching piece of information that I needed to send me screaming in the opposite direction. Oh, I failed to mention that somewhere during the move Steve was bitten by a brown recluse. So, he spent the first night, and the following week of life in our “new home,” sick as a dog.

Bad went to worse. We spent two months without heat because of a lying contractor. And, that’s not fun with 11 foot ceilings and 13’ X 14’ rooms. Of course, the little space heaters we bought overloaded our inadequate fuse boxes. It was cold.

However, we learned valuable lessons. Lesson #1—Always call the city inspector FIRST to find out what the “code” actually is. Do not rely on even the best-referenced contractor to tell you the truth. Especially if you live downtown. Somehow, when repair trucks roll down the street, the price jumps with each house they pass.

On top of the fact that we had spent every last cent, and then some, to buy the house (we even considered selling the silver), we were faced with immediate problems. The roof was hardly a roof. It had no flashing, and barely kept the rain out. Minor problem. The cat became deathly ill with a brain abscess, caused by an ear infection, compounded by having to be spayed. The sewer backed up almost as soon as we began living in the house. All we needed was money.

To repair the sewer, Steven decided that he and a friend could rent the equipment and clean the line more cheaply than calling a pro. We learned fast. The only hitch in this case was that Steve and his friend were neophytes, and “lost” 40 feet of snake in the sewer line. So, we had to call the pros after all. They retrieved the snake, unblocked the line, were nice, to boot, for less than Steve had spent renting the equipment. Lesson #2—Always leave sewer lines to professionals.

We decided to tackle the roof, and had great difficulty finding a roofer willing to scale our hip roof. But, we finally found one. Get ready for Lesson #3—It always costs more and takes much longer than any contractor will admit. “Oh, yes ma’m,” he could, “roof the house without having to put down decking. Those pieces of irregularly-laid pine strips were plenty to nail shingles to.” And, he could have this job done in a week, week-and-a-half, MAX.

As the first shingles came off, the rains began. And lasted. Of course, the day I got home from work, and they were finally on the roof working, I should have sensed doom. Steve met me at the car, opened the door for me, and helped me out (bad sign), as though I were nine months pregnant. “Honey,” he said, “remember that decking?” Yes, we had to buy lots of plywood, along with the shingles, tar paper and nails. To top that, the police came to take two of the roofers from our roof in handcuffs one day. Couldn’t they have at least waited until 5 o’clock?

And, of course, several months later, and several times after that, our new roof leaked. Lesson #4—Everything on, and in, an old house needs to be done at least three times before you can assume it is “fixed.”

I learned to appreciate the history of this old house. Our neighbor across the street, Mr. Fred Monroe, would bring us watercress in a brown paper bag during the summer. Plus, he and his wife, Irene, would have us over for a drink sometimes in the late afternoon. They would give us huge glasses filled with crushed ice and bourbon. Mr. Monroe never took the first sip until the clock chimed 5 o’clock. He and Mrs. Monroe would regale us with tales of old times in Huntsville. Foolishly, I never wrote it all down. They were wonderful, and I miss them.

Mrs. Louise Marsh told us of living down on the corner from us in “old Sam Butler’s” house, and having a best friend who lived in our house. She told us the name of the woman, but again, it never made it to paper. Mrs. Marsh said that the woman had become an author of some renown, and we should contact her. We were too busy trying to survive. I am sorry that I missed that opportunity, too.

The house sits on parts of Lot No. 8 and Lot No. 9 in the Poplar Hill addition, March 1, 1888. This was developed by C. H. Halsey, W. L. Halsey, and J. R. Yeatman. They sold Lot No. 9 to Charles Bassett on April 21, 1888, for \$1,000. Mr. Bassett sold Lot No. 9 to James B. and Daniel R. Harrison on April 20, 1893, for \$400. He was the first owner to take a loss.

Lots No. 7 and No. 8 were sold to Miss Sarah Leech on March 19, 1888, for \$850. She sold both these lots to Laura McCracken for \$10 on April 23, 1901. Then on April 30, 1906, James B. Harrison bought Lot No. 8 and 30 feet of Lot No. 7 from Ms. McCracken for \$450.

We assume that James B. Harrison built our house sometime after 1906, probably around 1910. We also assume that the house was built for family members, or as rental property. There were no more transactions until 1953, when Sarah M. Harrison left Lots. Nos. 7, 8, and 9 to Sarah Caldwell Huff in her will. Mrs. Huff and her husband sold the parts of Lots Nos. 8 and 9 to Katherine Womack in 1954.

In looking at old city directories, we found our house listed as rental property from the 1920's through the 1980's.

Sometime around 1957, Ms. Womack turned the house into a duplex. She closed off the main hall, added a second door on the front porch, and added a second kitchen and bath. When we moved in, we had two of everything—two kitchens, two bathrooms, two front doors, two back doors, and a maze of passageways worthy of any psychology experiment. We dubbed one side of the house “The Good Side” (HA!) and the other side “The Bad Side.” The good side was “livable” and the bad side was falling in on itself, literally. We found out from our neighbors that the house had been vacant for so long that squatters had moved in on the bad

side. The neighbors thought they were the new tenants until they realized there were never any lights on at night. The squatters were removed by the police.

The windows fit so poorly that when the wind blew so did the curtains and blinds. Talk about old houses being drafty! It was more like a gale. When we had the storm windows put on, it reduced our heating bill by half. Plus, it didn't sound like every car, or person, passing was in the house with us. A miracle!

We knew that the floor in the bad kitchen (the one with the hand-painted, "hazard-sign yellow" and white tiles plus lovely fluorescent orange trim), sagged very badly. Only several years later did we learn that the reason it sagged was much worse than we had suspected. Some "helpful" plumber at an earlier time had removed most of the foundation to get to the pipes. He had failed to replace the foundation. So, 16-foot spans of floor joists were hanging in mid air. No wonder the floor bounced a lot. We found out that the siding on the house was the only thing holding the walls up.



It was amazing that once the foundation and sill were replaced—viola!—not only did the floor no longer sag, but that nasty ridge in the roof subsided.

In the process of returning the house to its present condition, Steve moved windows and doors, added doors and windows, moved walls (even load-bearing walls), removed fireplaces, rebuilt fireplaces, torn down four chimneys and rebuilt one. He tore off the existing concrete and wrought iron front porch, and replaced it with a wooden one designed by Ralph Allen. He painstakingly patched and replastered the dining room. We ended up sheetrocking over the new cracks and crevices that appeared in that room later. Lesson #5—Plaster is hell.



Steve gutted the entire back half of the bad side, and shoveled out dirt to give the new floor joists some clearance. He added the back porch to the house and stairs up to the unused attic space. He scraped three sides of the house to the bare wood and primed and painted them. The list goes on and on.

Steve learned so much from this house that he went on to get an actual degree in restoring old houses, and went into contracting for himself. I, on the other hand, know just enough to be dangerous.

Anyway, to make a long story short, after 13 years of living here I have come to love this house. Half-finished, money-absorbing place that it is, I can't imagine living anywhere else. Except, of course, when things like the ceiling in a room falls in because of a still-leaking roof. Then, I not only have to get the room fixed, I have to have the entire back half of the house re-roofed. These are the times I fantasize about brand new houses with plumb walls, level floors, real bathrooms, and lots of closets.

With the exception of the attic, the only two rooms that remain basically unaltered after all this time are my bedroom and bath. Um, except for the two plastic bags taped to my ceiling where Kevin Miller put his foot through not once, but twice, while sistering 2-by-12 rafters in the attic. But, that is another story...

We took a ramshackle duplex that had been rental property since the 1920's and attempted to make it "a little more Presbyterian looking," as my grandfather would say. The house has withstood vagaries of wind and weather, but our marriage did not withstand our Gypsy existence in living from room to room.

The only thing that has saved me and kept me going during all these years of “learning” has been having terrific neighbors, family, and friends. And, also some wonderful contractors. Here is a partial list of those who have helped to rebuild and maintain “This Old House.”

Linda and Ralph Allen; Barbara and Jerry Barclay; Bud Beinvenu; Alvin Blackwell; Suzanne and Scott Bradley; Bob Broadfoot, Sr.; Bob Broadfoot, Jr.; Blevins Plumbing; Tom Carney and Elvis; Keith Clines; Kyleen and Toney Daly; Penn Dilworth and everyone at Dilworth Lumber; Kathleen and Phil Dotts; Pat Earles; Mary Ann and Gene Ezell; Nancy and Jim Gaines; Janice Hammonds; Jack Hengel; Melissa Hiley; HHF; Jesse and Gene at All Weather; my father, Warren Lee Johnson, my dear mother, Mildred Johnson, and brothers Lee and William; Hubert Jones; William Jones; Larry, Mike, Steve, Scottie and everyone at Old South Plumbing, Heating and Air Conditioning; Tom Lewallen; Bill Lewis; Lewter’s Hardware; Wayne Lumpkin; Mad River Woodworks; Nancy and Randy Martin; Robin and Tony Mason, and Tony’s father; Callie McNiel Vincent; Kevin Merrill; Bill Miller; Kevin Mill; Fred and Irene Monroe; Jonathan Moore; John Mullen; Nancy and Bill Munson; William Neely; Kay Parrish; Mary Lee and Lee Prout; Roto-Rooter; Lee Sanderson; Jane Scott and family; Mancil Self; Kate and Rob Sexton; Jamey Starkey; Linda Stone; Lee Ward; and Burt Webster.

I’m sure there are many others whom I’ve either left out inadvertently, or forgotten. I apologize. But, all these people deserve most of the credit for helping this house make it this far. I plan to go further; if I can only win the lottery!

FROM JUNK TO JEWEL



Good kitchen, 1982 (above), is transformed into the guest bedroom, 1995 (below).





The study as it appeared in 1983 (above); the study as it appears today (1995).





"Bad" bath, 1982 (above); guest bath, 1995 (below).





Dining room (above), and taking out the second front door (below left), 1983. Bad kitchen with new floor joists (below right), 1986.





*A "new" room with a view,
(above) and "new" kitchen
(right), 1995.*





ABOVE: Back of the house, October 1995.

BELOW: Front porch and author, February 1994.

