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Save That House

Deciding to rescue a historic property is the start of what turns out to be a lifelong relationship as terrifying as it is exhilarating

BY HEATHER LOCKMAN

The threat was distant but definite, like cannon rumbling beyond the next ridge. *Mr. and Mrs. Bigelow were thinking of selling their house.* I'd lived in the Bigelows' neighborhood when I first moved to Olympia, Washington, and I knew that their gabled timber-frame house was by far the oldest in town. Built in the mid-1800s by Mr. Bigelow's grandparents—suffragists, abolitionists, and ardent temperance supporters—it was one of the few Gothic Revival homes left in the Pacific Northwest. Though battered by time and weather, and oddly remodeled in places, it was still by anyone's reckoning an immensely historic house.

No one understood this better than Mr. and Mrs. Bigelow. For nearly sixty years they had lived with the family heirlooms, mowed the last two remaining acres of the original Bigelow land claim, and given tours of the house on request. Now they both were in their eighties, and the house and its antique furnishings made up their principal assets.

Would the city perhaps be willing to buy the historic Bigelow House and preserve it for posterity? The Bigelows fervently hoped so. If not, there were plenty of builders who would gladly bulldoze the pioneer dwelling for two acres of Puget Sound view.

City officials went into a huddle and emerged with dazzling smiles. This was *such* an important landmark, such a historic *jewel*, they were sure private donors would *jump* at the chance to save the Bigelow House. The city therefore would be buying just one of the Bigelow acres—the one without the old homestead—for use as a neighborhood park. But the city would happily cheer from the sidelines for any devoted history buffs who wanted to rescue the house.

Why, I have to wonder now, did we all think it sounded so simple?

If the Bigelow House was in danger, then the handful of us who cared about it would just have to roll up our sleeves. Mr. Bigelow's grandfather had played a leading role in Washington's break with Oregon Territory and later served as a member of Washington's first Territorial Assembly. We couldn't risk losing the family home he had built in the days before statehood. Somehow we would raise enough money to buy the Bigelow House.

“We can do it,” we told ourselves. “We can save this piece of the past.”

It's the same reaction one has when seeing a lost puppy playing in traffic: Grab it and get it to safety. You never think at that moment about what happens after that. What if no one else wants the mutt, no matter how much you advertise? What if it's yours *forever*? If it grows to the size of a buffalo, will you be able to feed it? You love it, of course, and you certainly wouldn't wish it any harm. But there are times when you wonder if maybe you shouldn't have left it to play in the road.

The Bigelow House Preservation Association got off to a splendid start. Soon after, the Washington legislature (impressed perhaps that the Bigelow House had been built by a politician) granted $308,000.

Unfortunately this government funding came with conditions. The money could be used only for restoring the rundown structure after it had been purchased, not for acquiring the house. Worse yet, it was funding that we would lose if the project took more than two years. We now had just twenty-four months to buy the old place and restore it, or the state grant would disappear.

Of course, we couldn't begin raising money until we 117 nailed down a price for the house. Weeks stretched into months as lawyers, appraisers, surveyors, and grown-up Bigelow children all thought of something to say. The Bigelows had pictured a life estate arrangement, whereby they could stay in their home undisturbed for the rest of their natural lives. But we had state funds ticking like a time bomb in our pocket, and we needed to get our hands on the house.

Reluctantly they agreed to move when the time came for renovations. Reluctantly we agreed that once

renovations were finished, they could return to living on both floors. Public admission would be restricted to rooms on the ground floor and to four afternoons each week. “Like a stately home in England,” Mrs. Bigelow suggested, “where tourists are permitted to visit the duke and duchess’s house.”

To buy the house and its furnishings, and to run our historic house museum during its crucial first year, we would need to raise, we figured, $170,000. It was harder than we expected. The public, though mildly interested, was not entirely tuned in to historic preservation. “For what the state is giving you,” dozens of prospects told us, “you could tear the whole thing down and build two houses from scratch.” As for those who had moved here from somewhere back East, well, a home from the 1850s hardly struck them as truly historic. “You know,” such people were fond of saying, “I was raised in a house in New Hampshire a century older than that.” If the Bigelow House was still around in another hundred years, we were welcome to try them again.

Luckily the staff fundraiser for a well-known regional history museum was willing to give us advice. “You’ll never get anywhere,” he clucked, “if you don’t offer naming opportunities.” This, it turned out, was a genteel term for auctioning bits of the Bigelow House off to major supporters. In exchange for a large contribution, a donor would be “recognized” in the old home’s formal front parlor or its wainscoted dining room. A much lesser sum would secure the back porch or an unseen utility closet. By the time the fundraiser was finished poring over the floor plan, every alcove and corner had received a suggested price.

“This will be easy,” he promised. “You’ll have most of it pledged by July.” The fundraiser encouraged pledging., Folks would give more money, he said, if they didn’t have to give it right now. But “pledged” is not the same as “paid,” and by July we were still far short of the cash we needed. With less than a year remaining to pull off the restoration, our struggling band of volunteers could think of just one thing to do.

We closed our eyes, took a deep breath, borrowed sixty thousand dollars, and bought the Bigelow House.

From the beginning we had clung to the notion that if we could manage to get there, restoring the house would be fun. We would choose lush period wallpapers and pretty Victorian carpets, and visitors would swoon when they saw the authentic job we had done. “Hold on,” our architect warned us. “With the budget you’ve got, and what this house needs, there may not be any money left for wallpaper and rugs.” First we would have to replace all the plumbing, heating, and wiring that had been added, somewhat haphazardly, to the house in the past hundred years. We would have to install a staff room, where tour guides could hang their coats. A security system. A fare alarm. Protective film on the windows to block ultraviolet light.

“Not to mention,” continued the architect, “your handicapped parking, your barrier-free entrance, and your wheelchair-accessible restroom.” Suddenly the grant from the state sounded like small change. Fitting a new public restroom into a pre-Civil War-era house was not an easy assignment. The only practical option was to convert the laundry room, a shed-roofed extension behind the house with its own exterior door. We would have to demolish the existing room, rebuild it nine inches wider, pour a concrete entrance ramp, then move the Bigelows’ washer and dryer into an upstairs closet. This would cost, the architect estimated, twenty thousand dollars—just about what we’d hoped to spend on wallpaper, carpets, and draperies.

On a dismal January day, as drizzle turned to ice in the streets, a dozen stalwart vol-unteers moved the historic furnishings out of the Bigelow House. Mr. and Mrs. Bigelow had packed up their things and departed; we were storing, as agreed, the Bigelow family artifacts that we hoped to purchase one day. Out went the Empire-style sofa, and Grandfather Bigelow’s desk, and watercolor paintings in seashell-encrusted frames. Tables made from trees that early Bigelows had felled on their acreage. Chairs that Grandmother Bigelow had brought west on the Oregon Trail.

Seeing the house without furniture, stripped down to its architectural bones, was exhilarating and dreadful. Acoustical tile ceilings, installed in the 1950s, glowered in all three parlors. Ancient plaster crumbled in most of the upstairs bedrooms, and extension cords slithered like dangerous snakes throughout the entire house. It was thrilling to know we had moved at last from thinking and planning to *doing*. But it was hard not to wonder silently if the house was in fact worth the fuss.

It helped that the construction crew was smitten right from the start. They loved the chance to work on a house with wooden pegs at the corners and a foundation of fat, whole logs. Their dashing gypsy king of a foreman studied old photographs of the place until every lost historic detail was burned into his brain. “You want what’s shown in the architect’s plans?” he’d ask when he didn’t like the drawings. “Or do you want what really was here?”

An interior designer, working for us pro bono, scraped off layers of wallpaper and soaked them apart to discover rich Victorian designs. When he showed us new wallpapers he had chosen to approximate the old patterns, we fell head over heels in love. Visitors would be spellbound. By postponing —maybe forever—restoration of the kitchen, we squeezed enough out of our budget to do the parlors up right.

Work on the Bigelow House foundation took three times longer (and cost three times more) than expected. But as the 1950s ceilings came down and the Gothic Revival porches came back, the Bigelow House began to look like the fabulous landmark it was.

On a blistering weekend in July we moved the family heirlooms back to the Bigelow House. In went the hand-painted fireplace screen, the exquisite rosewood sewing box, the Eastlake dining room table. Our exacting designer spent most of a week straightening portraits, adjusting lace curtains, and arranging the Bigelow furniture in nineteenth-century style. “Oh,” he said, beaming, gazing around when he’d finished. “It looks like 1871!” The year that the Bigelows’ square grand piano was shipped from New York ‘round the Horn. The year that Susan B. Anthony, stumping for suffrage along the West Coast, visited Olympia and dined at the Bigelow House. Eighteen years before Washington Territory earned a star on Old Glory. We had done what we had set out to do.

Mr. and Mrs. Bigelow moved back into the house in August. They had six weeks to get themselves settled before the public opening of the Bigelow House Museum. “I’ll try to have things ready by then,” Mrs. Bigelow told us. And then she spent every waking moment rearranging the house. Paintings were moved to places that she found more familiar. Dozens of personal knickknacks exploded out of packing crates and scattered themselves about. We begged. We reasoned. We argued. But ultimately we were bested. She had ruled this estate for sixty years, and she wasn’t going to stop now. “We can’t live in the 1870s,” Mrs. Bigelow said firmly. After spending six months in exile, the duchess was back.

To her credit, she left the large pieces of furniture more or less where we had put them. And there was a certain Victorian spirit in her clutter of trinkets and gewgaws, even if the items themselves were wildly out of line. A lot of our docents-in-training, earnestly learning how to give tours, thought the house now looked “more homey.” Since strict historical accuracy seemed to be out of the question, we would have to settle for that.

The Bigelow House made its public debut on a Sunday in mid-September. For half an hour after we had cut the ceremonial ribbon, not a single customer showed up. But slowly visitors began to trickle in: young families, grandparents, students, a group of traveling Bulgarians, fifty or sixty people in all before the end of the day. They gawked at the soaring ceilings and hand-cut wallpaper borders. They peered at the spidery penmanship in Grandfather Bigelow’s diary and listened to tales of how Grandmother Bigelow had taught school on the Northwest frontier. Almost all of them seemed to think the new museum was terrific. And almost all of them believed the city was running the place. “It’s great,” we heard over and over. “The City Council should really be proud.”

Four months after the museum had opened (and nearly three years after we had started), we finally succeeded in reaching our initial fundraising goal. By that time, of course, it was clear we had greatly underestimated the cost of staying in business. As our treasurer cheerfully puts it, the Bigelow House loses money each time it opens its doors.

Our relationship with the Bigelows, after a prickly start, has gradually found its balance. They’ve learned to live with a gift shop stuffed into their dining room sideboard. We’ve learned to look past the toy Mickey Mouse perched on the library stairs. Heaven knows what visitors make of the plastic beadwork basket displayed on the grand piano. I’m not about to ask. Yet if the Bigelow House Museum isn’t everything that we dreamed of, it is still some kind of miracle. “You saved the house,” my husband says. “Try not to lose sight of that.”

If we hadn’t been such idealists, if we’d had any clue at all about what we were getting into, a rare piece of regional history might have been lost forever. We grabbed it and dragged it to safety and so far are keeping it fed. With luck the Bigelow House will still be standing long after we’re buried, telling its nineteenth-century stories to children born after we’re gone.

Was it worth all the work, the anxiety, the sleepless nights? Absolutely. Would I do it again? Not a chance.

Heather Lockman is a freelance writer who continues to volunteer at the Bigelow House Museum and frequently teaches workshops on historic home preservation.

The Bigelow House is open on weekends from 1:00 to 3:00 P.M. For more information, call 360-753-1215.