

Victorian Dreams

COUPLE POURS HEARTS INTO RESTORATION OF LIVONIA HOME

Original: Henry Skowronek holds some of the original hardware for the windows in this turn-of-the-century Victorian house.



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For a decade Valerie Skowronek had her heart set on an old Victorian house she saw in a Livonia neighborhood. It was love at first sight after she spotted the turn-of-the-century home while shopping at a garage sale across the street.

"I said, 'if there was ever a house I could have... that would be my dream house,'" remembers Skowronek. Ten years later, Valerie and her husband, Henry, find themselves standing in the parlor of the late 1800s house they purchased in March 2000, and Valerie couldn't be happier.

"It's the house I always wanted and I'm so excited we were able to buy it after seeing it all those years," said Valerie. The couple estimates they looked at 100 houses while they were in the market but always went back to the house on St. Martin Street near Inkster and Seven Mile roads. Ironically, they only lived a few blocks away in Redford. They walked by regularly to keep an eye on the property.

In order to make their intentions known to the homeowners, they stopped at the home, introduced themselves and left their name and number — hoping that one day if the property was ever sold they'd be the first to hear about it.

The Skowroneks were eventually contacted by the seller, but the road to home ownership was a bumpy one.

"We had so many obstacles and heartaches when it came to purchasing this house," said Valerie. "We went back and forth with the seller on whether or not he really wanted to sell it, what the selling price was, whether he was going to sell the lots on each side of it. We thought we were going to lose it before we got it."

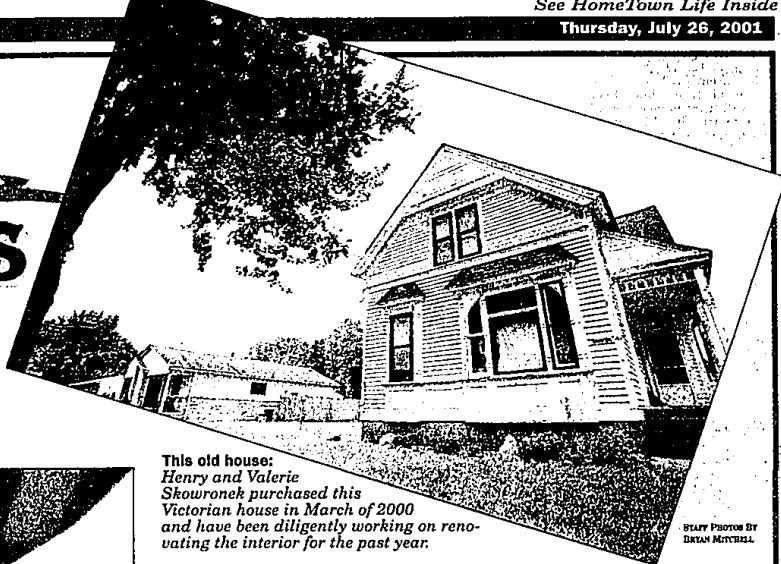
Patience is a virtue

Finally in March 2000 the final purchase agreement was signed and the Skowroneks had their dream house. They paid approximately \$160,000 for the 2,000-square-foot house with a detached garage that also included two additional vacant lots, one on each side of the home.

By no means though was the house ready for inhabitants, other than the infestation of ladybugs and other four-legged creatures that took over the inside. The couple also didn't start working on the house for another four months after they closed, because they had exhausted all of their extra income on the down payment with hopes of making their monthly payments smaller.

"We worked so many hours to get the money for the down payment, and then even more, to have the money for the monthly payments, that we didn't have any extra cash to start the renovations," said Henry.

The pair owned two rental properties in Detroit, one of which was built in 1919, that required refurbishment. Once they sold one of those two homes, they were free to start working on the



This old house: Henry and Valerie Skowronek purchased this Victorian house in March of 2000 and have been diligently working on renovating the interior for the past year.

STAFF PHOTOS BY DEAN MATHIAS

house they describe as something out of the television show "This Old House." "We started cleaning the place inside and out first," said Henry.

Between the bugs, 15 broken windows, a dead tree in the front yard, bird nests in the attic and countless old cars and bents that were scattered about the property — the pair had a lot of work ahead of them.

One of their first tasks was to tear off the old roof with the help of a brother-in-law. They found four layers of cedar shakes, but they completely updated the roof after they found shingles that complemented the Victorian-style home.

Fit for a queen

The five-bedroom, two bathroom home also features a parlor, formal dining room, kitchen pantry, and a back porch the Skowroneks had to gut and rebuild because it deteriorated and separated from the house, just like the chimney.

The second level of the home also has a porch-like room that overlooks the back of the property. They installed a ceiling fan in that A-frame room and plan to use it for a sitting area and storage.



Unique: Valerie got creative painting the base of the claw foot tub she and Henry will install in the next few weeks.

"Some of the things they did to this house makes you wonder," said Valerie, who discovered that some of the broken windows were replaced with Plexiglas that someone screwed onto the window frames, then caulked around the seams. She said she spent countless hours replacing and reglazing windows and stripping away layers of paint around the window frames that masked beautiful wood trim and molding.

"I used a heat gun first, then a chemical stripper," said Valerie. "Luckily we have all the original hardware that went with the windows."

Over the past year they have spent much of their evenings and weekends at the home. Together Valerie and Henry have power-sprayed the exterior, plastered, drywalled, stripped wallpaper, installed a new floor in the bathroom, updated electrical and plumbing, installed a new 12 tub upstairs, breathed new life into the original claw-foot tub they found in the downstairs bathroom and removed the hot water tank someone installed in the kitchen.

"It's a labor of love," said Valerie. "Every time we start a project we try and focus on what it will look like when it's all done."

The couple renovated both bathrooms and hope to reinstall the claw-foot tub soon. They enjoy antiquing and look forward to furnishing the home with period furniture and accessories.

For the outside of the house they envision a white picket fence around the front of the property and a Victorian rose garden with fruit trees on one of the two vacant lots.

After 12 months of labor they plan to move in by the fall and begin siding the exterior clapboard that is aging and faded.

It's hard to find people you can trust who are experienced enough to do this kind of work and who will maintain the historic integrity of the house," said Valerie.

Although the couple hasn't been able to find county records verifying the date the house was

constructed, many of the architectural aspects of the home point to the 1870-90s. They said they visited the City County Building (now the Coleman A. Young Building) in Detroit and Livonia's planning department, but to no avail. "The city of Livonia doesn't have records before the 1960s," said Henry.

They did learn from a neighbor that the home was moved from its original location a few lots away in 1922. Valerie also started the process of having the house listed with the state of Michigan historical registry.

Ups and downs

Despite the obstacles and challenges of renovating a home more than 100 years old, the Skowroneks say they have never wanted to give up.

"We do have to take a break from time to time and stop working on it," said Henry, who bears the scars of his work. "I was in a hurry and nearly cut my finger off with the saw a few weeks ago."

Henry and his brother-in-law have also fallen off a ladder while working on the house. "I bruised a few ribs doing that."

All in all, the project has been a learning experience for the couple. "I'm afraid once we're all done, she's going to want to sell it and start all over again with another house," said Henry. "It can be a vicious cycle."



Restoring: Valerie Skowronek paints the trim around the doorway of a bathroom just outside the kitchen. In the foreground you can see the detailed wood trim and original wainscoting.



Details: Valerie Skowronek holds up a roll of wallpaper she ordered from England that will be hung in the formal dining room.

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