

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

Choose a Historic Contractor Wisely (and Avoid the Money Pit)

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I recall once telling a contractor acquaintance of mine, “One day, I want to live in a historic home.”

He responded flatly, “Forget it. Old houses are nothin’ but money pits.”

A year later, I found myself slapping down earnest money for the Lelia B. Smith House – a ca. 1873 Second Empire Victorian in Forest Grove’s Clark Historic District.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing when I first laid eyes on the old girl. She had a French Mansard roof with nine gables. She had two front porches and a large covered veranda in back, all bordered by fancy hand-turned Victorian posts. Inside, her beautifully distressed, old-growth fir floors still remained. Intricate spindlery curved its way up her staircase. And, her dining room had a hand-painted ceiling medallion, festooned with roses that danced above a crystal chandelier. I felt like I’d found my very own Victorian dollhouse – only I could actually live there. It was truly love at first sight.

A week later, I found myself beneath the old girl’s underbelly, dodging enormous spider webs, while crawling behind the building inspector I’d hired to advise me. After effortlessly sticking his pocketknife deep within the bottom of a rotting support peer, and pointing his flashlight at evidence of past boring beetle damage in one of the mud sills, we climbed up on the roof. This time, a screwdriver came out of his tool belt, and he deftly revealed two layers of black asphalt over a layer of badly weathered cedar shingles fastened by square nails. Patches of the two asphalt layers had blown away, making the roof look disheveled, like an old black mare’s coat at the end of winter. “This’ll all have to be replaced



or you’ll soon have leaks,” my inspector warned.

After we climbed down, he wouldn’t quit pointing. “Notice that bent gutter across the front porch,” he advised. “See this loose downspout. Look at how this porch support wiggles – there’s dry rot running straight down its core from top to bottom.”

And then we went inside. “Fuse box has two open receptacles that need to be enclosed – that’s a fire hazard,” he chirped. “Check out behind the washing machine. The electrical outlet’s actually dangling loose on the floor. Amazing no one’s been electrocuted cuz there’s water down there.” He lifted boxes covering a gaping hole in the attic floor. He showed me how to listen for the “sizzle” sound, revealing that several electrical switches were shorting out. And, one by one, after much unsuccessful pulling and tugging, he showed me that all but four windows in the entire house had been painted shut, preventing quick exit in case of fire. Hours passed and his list of issues grew longer and longer, while my heart ached more and more.

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Next day, my inspector returned to present me with a loose-leaf notebook listing everything he'd found (and not found) during the inspection. Because my earnest money agreement was contingent upon inspection results, I still had time to back out of the deal. I gulped, "How much will all this cost, and who should I hire to fix it?"

My inspector explained that he couldn't make estimates or recommend contractors. Said it was a matter of "conflict of interest." So, I asked if he could at least hold up one finger if he thought I could get the most critical repairs done for \$20,000 or less.

"I expect, if you're careful," he grinned, "you might get the roof, gutters, and understructure work done for close to that. And I'd definitely start with the roof."

Then, I sheepishly asked the big question: "If you were me, would you buy this house?"

"Sure," he said without hesitation. "She's a fine one, and you'll never find another like her."

So, on November 22, 2005, I took possession of my very own Victorian dollhouse, warts and all. I was enthralled. But the honeymoon phase became interrupted every time I thought about getting the roof fixed. Everything about selecting a roofing contractor terrified me. At the time, I didn't know the difference between a fascia board and a rafter tail. I suspected I'd be better off trying to find an honest used car salesman than an ethical roofing contractor. But throughout the winter, I asked neighbors and folks I met around town for recommendations. Names of several roofing contractors kept coming up.

When spring came, someone advised me to visit City Planner, James Reitz, to see if he might recommend a good roofer. As with my inspector, James said he couldn't ethically recommend anyone. However, he said he'd be happy to show me files for all Historic Restoration Grants awarded to homeowners who had replaced roofs. I sorted through the files, and was able to identify several local roofing contractors, as well as determine which ones had been hired repeatedly. Best of all, James told me my roofing job qualified for Historic Restoration Grant funding to help offset the extra cost of restoring a historic home. He provided an application form, told me I needed to provide at least two bids from licensed and bonded contractors, and present my paperwork to the Historic Landmarks Board.



To be extra diligent, I interviewed and got bids from three roofing contractors. I explained to each that I wanted my new roof to be as historically accurate as possible, which meant cedar shingles rather than composition. Each contractor assured me his crew had experience with installing cedar shingles. And each told me I'd need my gutters replaced because they were in such poor condition.

A funny thing happened during all those interviews: I learned a lot about roofs, roofers, and roofing.

Eventually, after checking each contractor's references, I made a decision. Two of the contractors managed crews of six to ten workers. One contractor (the most expensive) said he worked with only two other roofers, and they nailed each shingle by hand rather than using nail guns. But, unfortunately, this contractor's bid came in at a whopping \$18,000. The other two bids were \$15,000 and \$12,000. Hand nailing by just three roofers sounded attractive, but I still needed new gutters and understructure work done. So, the contractor with the \$15,000 bid won, and I signed a written contract.

On a muggy September morning, heavy pallets of cedar shingles arrived. Soon, a crew of roofers parked a huge dumpster in my driveway, and began setting up scaffolding and ladders around my house. At first, the entire scene was very exciting. My Lelia B. Smith House was going to have her new cedar hat! But, after the crew tore off all the old roofing and began installing the new shingles, disturbing things started to happen.

Most of these disturbing things seemed to happen

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during afternoons when my roofing contractor left to bid on other jobs, leaving his crew unsupervised. One such afternoon, I came home from work to find one of his crew members nailing rolled roofing over rotted plywood sheathing that covered one of my flat-roofed front porches. If I hadn't looked out the upstairs bedroom window that overlooks the porch at precisely that moment, I would have never seen the disaster that was about to unfold. I ran out my front door screaming, "No! No! We had a deal! You find rot, you replace the wood!"

A few evenings later, I met a gutter contractor who stopped by to do a bid for me, because once the roof was done, I needed new gutters. The gutter contractor took one look at the metal flashing on my nearly completed roof and asked me who my roofer was. When I told him, he was mortified. He said the roofing company I hired was notorious for cutting corners. He showed me where the roofers had spliced flashing pieces together on my roof to save on materials. He explained that any responsible roofer would never splice flashing pieces together because water could leak between, causing the roof to leak. Most disturbing of all, the gutter contractor also pointed out that the roofers had installed cedar shingles too far down on my roof, leaving insufficient room for him to install K-style gutters on the now-too-short fascia boards that hung below the extended shingles.

It eventually cost me an additional \$4,000 to hire yet another contractor to retrofit my home's eaves so that half-round gutters could be installed – which were nearly twice as expensive as K-style gutters. If you've been tracking the numbers, it must be clear that I pretty much shot



holes in my \$20,000 budget by selecting this roofing contractor. In fact, by doing so, I spent nearly \$20,000 even before I was able to hire contractors to replace gutters and fix the understructure.

To his credit, my roofing contractor made good on most of the issues I brought to his attention, replacing spliced flashing, rotted boards, etc. But, when you have such an experience with a contractor, it's what you might not have seen that's most worrisome.

"How could I have made a wiser choice?" you might ask. I hired an inspector. I got recommendations from neighbors. I got several competitive bids. I tried to educate myself. I checked references. I checked city records and determined that the contractor I hired had been hired by numerous other historic home owners. I got a written contract. Seems like I did my homework, right?

Wrong! Here's the smartest thing I know about having a roof replaced when you know you also need new gutters:

Arrange for your roofing contractor and your gutter contractor to meet each other in front of your house before any work begins. And ask, "Are there any precautions the roofer needs to take to ensure the gutter installer can do his job?" Such critical coordination can be essential when you must hire more than one contractor to get almost any construction job done.

I also neglected to determine if the Oregon Construction Contractor's Board or the Better Business Bureau had received complaints about my roofing contractor. If I had, maybe I'd have never hired him.

Since my roof was installed in September, 2006, I've hired numerous contractors to work on my home. To date, all issues my inspector listed in my notebook have been resolved. A few contractors have been huge disappointments -- the worst acted surprised when I wasn't pleased to find that he'd caulked my windows (even though I hired him to paint one of my porches). A few have been absolute master craftsmen whose amazing work I continue to praise. The best have given me excellent workmanship while still providing a fair price so that I can avoid falling too deeply into "the money pit."

PRESERVATION FAIR - APRIL 27, 2013

The Historic Landmarks Board is planning to hold its 3rd annual Preservation Fair from 9:00 - 1:00 at the historic Central School, 1728 Main St. The Fair is an opportunity for historic property owners to interact with a wide variety of preservation professionals and organizations.

EXHIBITORS WANTED - if you are interested in this low-cost opportunity to interact with the public, and want more details, please contact George Cushing at greenacres2@frontier.com, or call him at 503-357-2767.

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