

# Putting new life into an old mansion

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AUBURN — Barn swallows have built a nest in one of the upstairs bedrooms of the 84-year-old Neely Mansion. Spider webs, some so thick you can't see through them, creep the corners of the windows.

The banister on the stairs is loose. One of the two fireplaces doesn't work. The wallpaper is peeling, the plaster is cracking and some of the floors list perilously.

That's what the old house looks like today. Sandy Jackson suggests a return trip in three years.

By then, she hopes, the Victorian farmhouse east of here will be fully restored, serving the community as a museum and no longer the domain of the birds, bugs and graffiti artists.

THAT DREAM got a boost recently when the restoration project was awarded a \$30,000 grant from the state for the initial planning, cleanup and structural improvements. The Auburn Arts

## Auburn

Council, of which Ms. Jackson is vice president, and the White River Historical Society are sponsors.

Ms. Jackson stumbled across the Neely Mansion shortly after moving to the Auburn area from California four years ago. Like many before her, she was impressed.

"I would have given my right arm to have it," she remembers.

The mansion has weathered years of abuse and disuse, including one tenant of not so long ago who raised chickens upstairs. What remains under the grime today is an architectural gem.

The ornate woodwork, the 12-foot ceilings, the delicate strips of original wallpaper and especially the gingerbread on the exterior all speak of another time, another way of living.

THE MANSION even has a built-in mystery to be solved: Why is there a horseshoe embedded in the plaster of the ceiling above the entry hall?

Aaron Neely built the house in

1894. Ms. Jackson and others have begun negotiations with his heirs to buy the property.

Ms. Jackson admits restoration will be a big job.

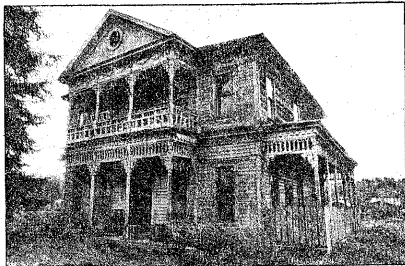
"I fully expect to spend many hours out here myself with a broom," she said.

The \$33,000 state grant must be matched by the community, either in cash or volunteer time. Local Kiwanians already have pledged to put in 1,500 hours, and Ms. Jackson said she's been getting calls from entire families volunteering for duty.

Some of the matching funds could come from King County block-grant money, but that won't be allocated until summer.

After the planning and structural repairs are finished — sometime next year, it's hoped — the Arts Council and Historical Society will apply for more grants for interior restoration, mechanical and electrical improvements and landscaping.

"We hope we can spark people's interest," Ms. Jackson said. "It's a great old place, a real landmark."



The Neely Mansion in Auburn

— Staff photo by Richard S. Heyza.