

# Stairway to heaven

By JOE HANNEKEN

We all know that staircases have destinations. There was the staircase in "Gone With the Wind."

Remember, Rhett Butler forcibly picking up Scarlett and carrying her up the stairs. We all knew that the destination was Scarlett's bedroom. And then, of course, there is the "Stairway to Heaven," a great destination for a staircase.

A destination we all want to achieve. Well, almost all of us, anyway.

Williamson County found itself in possession of a staircase without a destination. "No, that can not be," you may be thinking. But it is true and it is also true that as citizens and taxpayers in this county, we — you and I — own the staircase.

As far as we can determine, our staircase was constructed, on site, in 1910 as part of the Farmers State Bank Building, located at 716 South Austin Avenue in Georgetown. Our staircase is made of longleaf pine and is 11 feet in length, 9 feet 4 inches in height, and 2 feet 9 inches in width. It also has a landing that is approximately 54 inches square.

The bank and the fully functional staircase dutifully fulfilled their purposes for the next 50 years. Then the building and the staircase passed through several owners and were finally bought by Williamson County.

"The county partitioned [the building] off into several offices," said Ed Lansford, who is secretary on the board of directors of the Williamson County Historical Museum Corporation.

"About 10 years ago the county determined that they didn't need it any more. They granted the use of the building, and the staircase, to the Williamson County Historical Commission as a museum. We have a license to use it for 50 years as a muse-



**WITH THE ONLY BID**, Jim Builta is the new owner of the staircase currently housed in the Historical Museum.

um," he said.

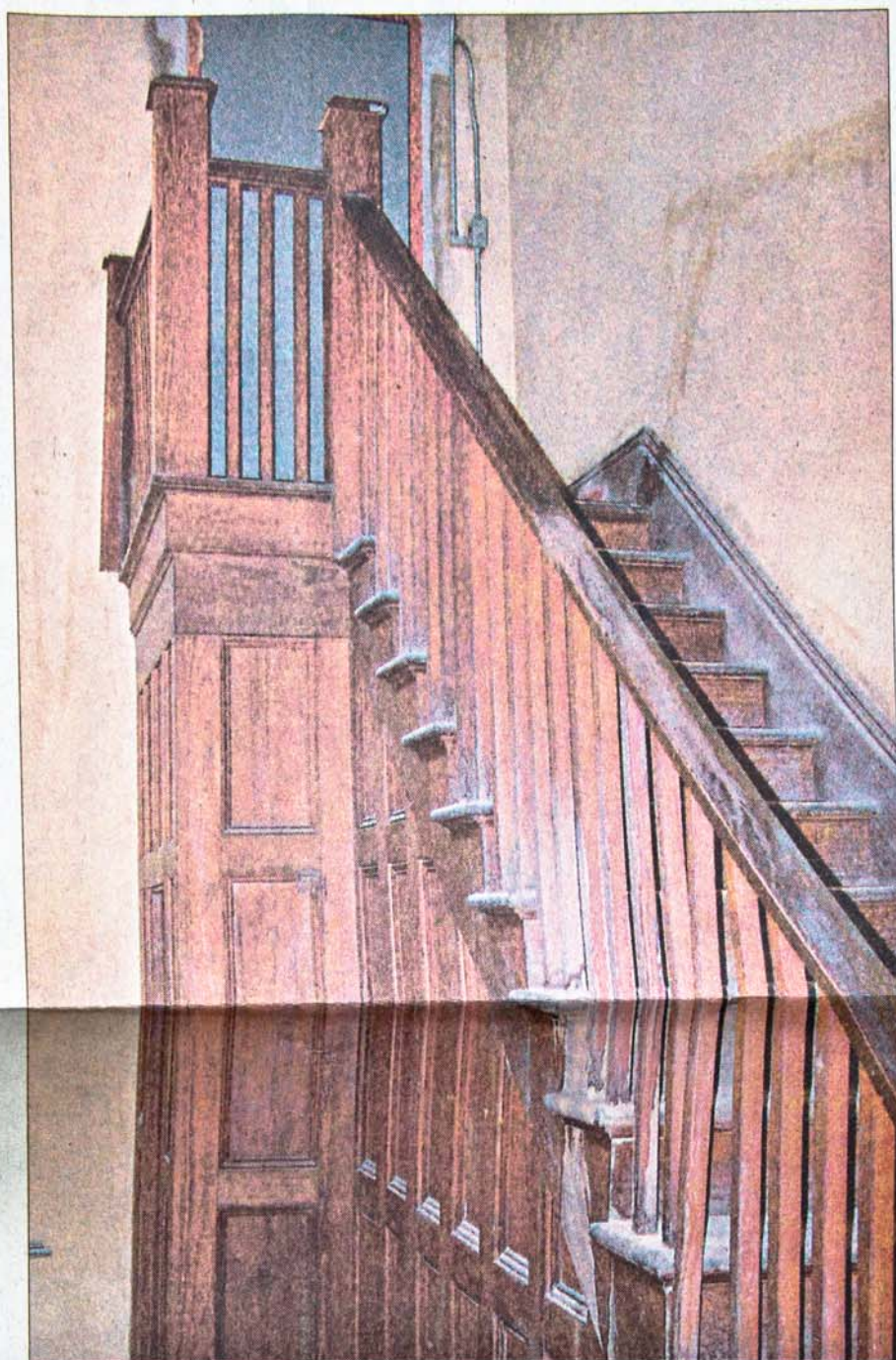
One would think that our staircase is safe now and expect, at least, another 50 years of faithful service, happily having as its destination, the mezzanine floor.

Not so fast, the twin villains, "refitted" and "remodeled," are about to make an entrance.

"For about four years now, the Williamson County Historical Museum Board has been working on getting the building refitted and remodeled for proper use as a museum," said Mr. Lansford.

You guessed it. The twin villains put our staircase in serious jeopardy. However, the Historical Museum Board tried to come to the rescue, only to be thwarted by the most dreaded of all villains — building code.

"At first, we thought we could build it [our staircase] into the renovation and



SUN photos / Joe Hanneken

**HISTORIC STAIRCASE SELLS FOR \$610.** This staircase, built in 1910, will be moved to Theon, where it will become part of the Builta's new home.

use it as the main access to the second floor. Then the architect realized that it was not fireproof —duh — and the building code requires that we have a fire proof staircase,” said Mr. Lansford.

Our poor staircase, after all those years of providing a valuable function and having a worthy destination, now being rejected as obsolete and old fashioned and, most horribly, it will no longer have a destination, a purpose.

It may look like all is hopeless for our staircase, but not to worry. The scene is being set for our “Super Hero” to arrive.

Perhaps feeling some guilt and pity for our hapless staircase, the Historical Museum Board took the moral high ground by trying to find a new home

and new destination for our staircase. It is also possible that they saw a way to lay their hands on some cash to help offset the potential cost overruns that often accompany those three previously mentioned villains: refitted, remodeled and building code.

Whatever their motivation, the Williamson County Historical Museum Board, decided to accept sealed bids and a sell our staircase to the highest bidder.

Enter our “Super Hero,” Jim Builta, who gallops into town on a white stallion with his hero's white hat firmly planted on his head. Well, maybe he didn't ride in on a white stallion and

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# STAIRCASE

## *A super hero saves the staircase.*

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maybe he really wasn't wearing a white hat. Maybe he was in a pick-up truck. I'm really not sure, but you get the picture.

"I saw the legal notice in the paper about this staircase for sale and the bids were due the next day," said Mr. Builta.

"I immediately called and made arrangements to see the staircase that same day. I brought my digital camera along to take some pictures. I thought that I would bring the pictures home and see what my wife thought about it, but I liked the staircase so much that I immediately walked across the street to put a bid in on it. You have to see it to understand it. It is gorgeous. At least it is to me.

"I brought the camera home and printed up the pictures for my wife and she absolutely fell in love with the staircase," he said.

Things are now starting to look up for our staircase; but what about a destination, what would be the function of our staircase.

"I, basically, own the town of

Theon, all of the old stores and houses and buildings and the cotton gin. We are going to build a house on a hill up there. I hope to start this house within a year. I have been talking about it for five years, but we are going to get started pretty quick," said Mr. Builta.

As it turns out, our Super Hero, Jim Builta, was the only bidder on our staircase. His bid of \$610 may not seem like much but Mr. Builta will have substantial additional expenses.

"It will take two men a full day just to disassemble the staircase and get it out of the building, and a lot more time, effort and expense to re-assemble, re-install and refinish the staircase on the other end," he said.

So it seems that our staircase will find a new destination. It will once again bring value to its owners because it performs a function. But it gets better than that, much better.

"This is an architectural piece. This is the kind of piece that will make a dramatic impact on a room," Mr. Builta said.

"As a matter of fact, we may not



Sun / Joe Hanneken

**HISTORIC STAIRS**, are going to Theon. These stairs will be re-assembled and used in a new house being built by the Builtas.

even have a second floor. We are going to use it either way. If we don't build a second floor we will find a use for it. Maybe have some shelves built into the side or use it in conjunction with bookcases. We love it and want it in our house."

Oh my. It is unconditional love. Our staircase will be loved regardless of its function. It doesn't need a destination. It will be loved for what it is, not for what it does.