

Builder/Architect

A Salute to the Asheville Home Builders Association and the Parade of Homes Winners

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José installing poplar bark siding

businesses in *Western North Carolina* and in seven other states. Examples include the *Blowing Rock Methodist Church* and the *Ragged Garden Inn* in Blowing Rock, the *Esceola Lodge* and the *Linville Resort* in Linville and dozens of private residences. The McCurrys have expanded their business to include rustic handrails and posts, mantelpieces, custom furniture and bark panels and sheets for interior applications — all perfect complements to the exterior siding.

Prices for bark shingles are comparable to other high-grade wood siding, but since the bark never needs maintenance and lasts nearly 100 years, an investment in bark siding soon becomes a bargain for the home or business owner.

“We have always been interested in doing things that make us feel connected to nature and the mountains we love,” said Chris, “and supplying builders with environmentally sound and beautiful materials is the ideal business for us.”

For more information on *Highland Craftsmen* and poplar bark siding, visit their Web site at www.barksiding.com, or contact them at (828) 295-0796 or highlandcraftsmen@charter.net. ■

Poplar Bark Shingles

A "New" Old Product for Siding

By Eden Foster

Chris and Marty McCurry didn't need a crystal ball to know that the wave of the future was to use green building techniques that are kind to the environment from production to installation.

Fifteen years ago, this Blowing Rock couple fell in love with chestnut-sided houses and inns that seemed to spring from the very mountains where they were built. Many of these structures were 80 to 100 years old, yet the bark siding had never been painted and remained as viable, maintenance-free and beautiful as the day it was installed. But the chestnut blight of the 1940s wiped out entire industries that depended on this dominant hardwood, and the practice of using bark to clad buildings died.

The McCurrys were curious: Could chestnut bark siding be replicated using materials available today?

After stumbling upon a rare example of a beautiful 75-year-old house that still boasted its original poplar bark as siding, Chris and Marty decided upon the perfect solution to their dilemma. All across the Southeast, fast-growing poplar stands are continuously being harvested to supply the furniture and plywood manufacturing industries. Yet the lovely bark of the trees had become a pesky nuisance to the loggers and sawmill operators, and was often discarded as waste, or ground as low-grade mulch.

Serendipitously, poplar bark has many of the same qualities as the vanished chestnut. It is *plentiful, pliable, durable, resistant to the elements, chemical-free* and over time, it turns to a lovely shade of gray that melds perfectly with the mountain setting. Yet poplar bark is

even more enduring than its predecessor, as it will not de-laminate or peel over time.

If done within days of the timber harvest, poplar bark can be peeled readily from the logs, using the same antique tools that woodsmen used to remove chestnut bark for siding and tanneries a century ago. When the bark "cylinder" is removed whole from the tree, it is immediately cut by hand into vertical strips, and damaged or discolored portions are discarded.

The strips are cut into standard shingle lengths, then stacked and placed under pressure to prevent them from curling. The stacks are carefully kiln dried, which destroys any fungal spores or insect larvae, and establishes the proper moisture content. The shingles are squared, packaged and stored in a climate-controlled warehouse until they are ready for use on the job site.

After affirmatively answering the question: "Can it be done?" Chris and Marty were faced with selling their idea to builders and architects. They established *Highland Craftsmen* in the early 1990s, and began selling their unique product within just a few years.

"We decided to use poplar bark to side our mid-1950s bungalow," said Chris. "Marty worked hard for months on the project, and often stopped to talk to people who were curious about what he was doing. But the result is really worth it. Our home now fits in perfectly with the neighborhood, and is a great advertisement for our business."

Word of mouth soon spread, and *Highland Craftsmen* was hired to produce siding for a number of homes and

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