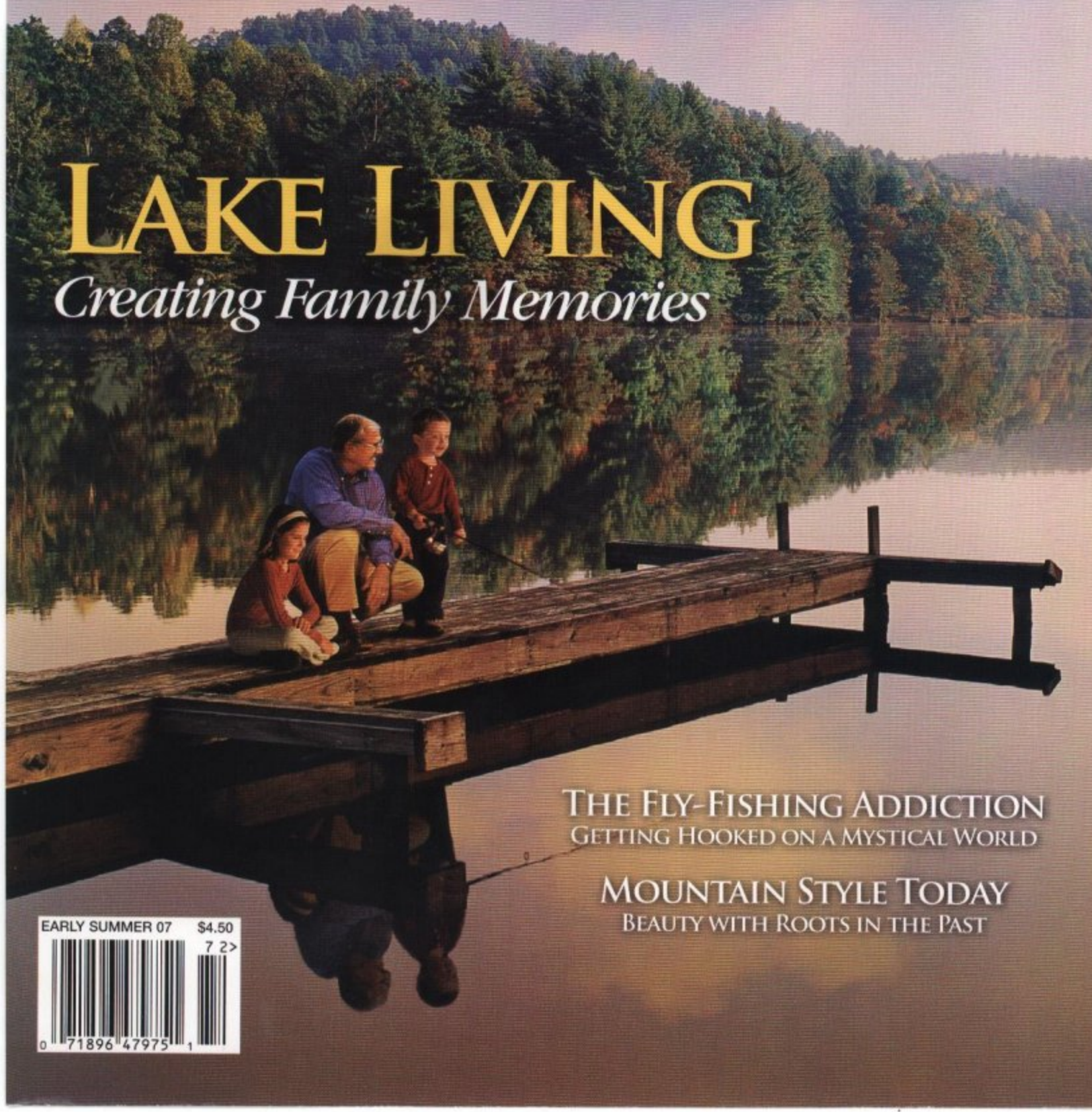


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BARK SIDING

A mountain classic comes back to life

BY COURTNEY THOMAS



Poplar bark siding was used in the past by landowners who wanted to sell chestnut trees on their land instead of use them; now with chestnut trees destroyed by blight, poplar bark adds the rustic touch to today's mountain homes.



Resources for poplar bark include large companies and individual landowners who want timber, but not the bark of the poplar.

One of today's latest building trends is one of the Southern mountains' oldest techniques, revived and updated. Fortunately, it's also good for the environment.

Poplar bark siding is enjoying a new surge of popularity in the mountains, a trend that's spreading to other areas. It's not hard to see why.

This is a "green" product – one that is environmentally friendly. If not used for siding, the bark would become little

more than waste or low-grade mulch. In addition, it is treated without chemicals so there is no risk of contaminating soil or water during processing.

"How could I put chemicals on something and know my kid is going to be playing around it at my own house?" points out Chris McCurry, vice president and co-founder of Highland Craftsmen Inc. of Spruce Pine, N.C. "And think about the possibility that it's going to be hurtful."



Homeowners can often greatly increase the value of their homes with bark siding because it requires no maintenance when installed correctly and has been proven to last 75 years.

An Oldie But Goodie

Chris and her husband Marty McCurry, president and co-founder of the company, revisited the art of bark siding when they started their company. Second only to their dedication to protecting the environment for future generations is their love of the mountains.

"I was born in the mountains and noticed that the architectural style of the mountains was looking like any other suburban community," says Chris. "We saw that a lot of trees were being cut and there was not a great appreciation for the indigenous planting here.

"I love the mountains. It's just so central to who I am that it was hurtful to see these processes occurring. We wanted to be a part of something that was historically appropriate to the area and that looked like it belonged here."

That something: bark siding.

The material blends structures with their natural surroundings and has historic roots in western North Carolina. From the turn of the century into the 1920s, American chestnut bark was abundant in the area, was considered valuable and was frequently used as siding for houses.

"At that time, chestnut trees were more than 60 percent of the forest in some places and the bark had a high concentration of tannic acid that was used by tanneries," Marty notes. "People would boil the bark to get tannic acid to make leather,"

A few local families used bark from the poplar, the same tree used for bark siding today, because it allowed them to save chestnut trees on their land to sell.

A fungus, known as the chestnut blight, began to spread and eliminate the trees around 1900. This along with a change in building styles rendered bark siding a lost art, remembered only in a few old homes, until the McCurrys resurrected it.

Learning From The Past

Remaining poplar bark homes, some more than 75-years-old, have provided Highland Craftsmen Inc. with proof that, along with its other advantages, the tree will stand the test of time.

"They're very abundant east of the Mississippi," Marty says. "They generally grow very fast, very tall, very straight; the bark easily peels off in sheets that are generally very large and, relatively speaking, smooth. And we know of its longevity."

Another bonus to the siding: It requires no maintenance when installed correctly. This is a prime selling point for a product priced similarly to premium cedar siding products, such as cedar shakes.

"What you find when you're using other wood products is that every three to five years you're due some type of topical coating application," Marty says. "You either have to paint or stain or seal or put preservative up, and that gets expensive. Compare that to the long-term cost of putting bark up once and never touching it again."

That long-lasting, no-maintenance exterior is also said to add to the resale value of mountain homes.

"Aesthetically, bark siding is so much more attractive and makes the market value so much better if I were to sell the house," says Kathy Quinn, a home owner in Blowing Rock,

The first step: obtaining the bark in a very narrow three-month window from late spring to early summer.

"The material has to be harvested when the tree hits the ground because the natural processes of logging degrades the bark too heavily," Marty explains. "If we wait until the tree is brought out of the forest it's either scratched or beat up or covered and caked in mud."

For their production, bark is obtained from large companies, from small crews or individual landowners who use only the timber and would otherwise dispose of the bark. Handmade tools or antiques that have been recast are used to harvest.

Once harvested, the bark must reach the dry kiln within 48 hours or it becomes so dry, it will crack when flattened.

The kiln drying process puts the material through a sterilization process and leaves the bark within a specific range of moisture content. Finally, it is cleaned and evaluated.

A Growing Demand

Since beginning their own home and then founding Highland Craftsmen Inc. in 1993, the McCurrys have seen their business expand to serve more than 30 states and overseas clients.

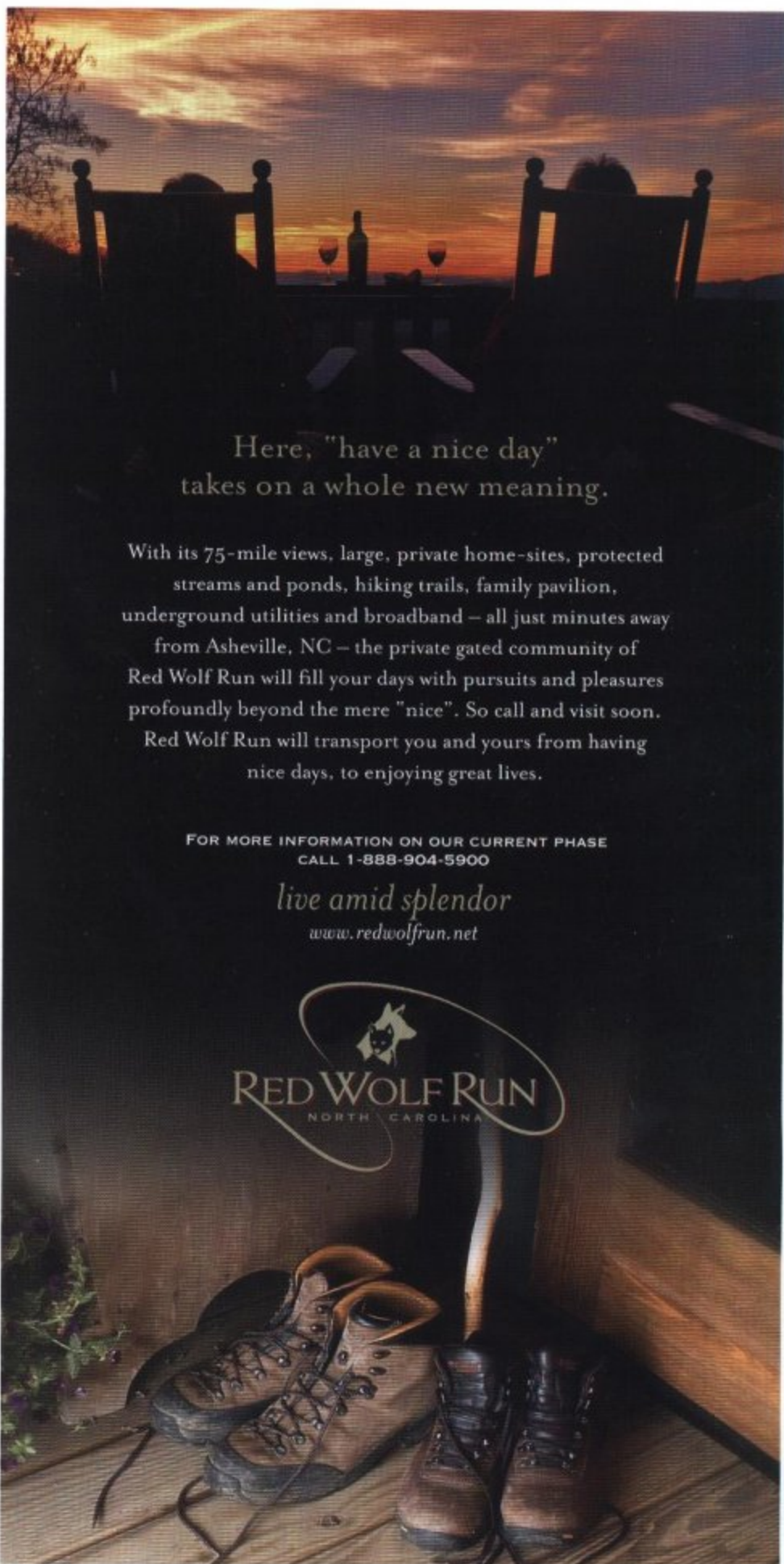
Marty attributes the growth to Chris' marketing efforts plus media attention and word of mouth by second-home clients.

"These people are very transient," he points out. "They're all over the country."

Convincing builders and architects to take the product seriously was a three-year process and now the McCurrys are fighting to protect the reputation of bark siding as new companies enter the market.

"The important thing we stress is that first, the bark has to be manufactured correctly, and second, it has to be installed correctly," says Chris. "If those two steps are followed, nothing can compare to the product."

For more information, call 828-765-9010 or e-mail: matt@highlandcraftsmen.com. ■



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