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MOUNTAIN LIVING IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

# Happy Home

## NATURAL BEAUTY

*A couple builds  
on the history  
of bark homes  
with a green  
approach*

## TREASURE HUNT

*17 top spots  
to uncover the  
antique gems  
you seek*

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*Winning paint  
combos for your  
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# a POPLAR idea

*With the demise of chestnut trees, so went the reign of bark architecture in the mountains. Today, Chris and Marty McCurry are leading a revival of the historic style. Using poplar bark and sustainable practices, they're ensuring a lasting connect between home and nature.*

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRISTOPHER SHANE**

PHOTOGRAPH BY TODD BUSH





**MOUNTAIN WELCOME**

Bark-clad posts and beams create  
a grand rustic entrance to the  
clubhouse at Diamond Creek Resort.



**Y**ou have to have a love affair with something to nurture it," says Chris McCurry.

She's a woman in love with tree bark—specifically that of *Liriodendron tulipifera*, the yellow or tulip poplar.

Chris grew up exploring the dense woods of Mitchell County, and gained an appreciation for the grandeur and intricacy of trees—their subtle shades of grey and brown that act as a backdrop for each season's colors and their deep textures, which highlight the uniqueness of every square inch.

Years later, Chris's romance became the basis for Highland Craftsmen, a building products company that she and her husband, Marty, founded and operate in her hometown of Spruce Pine. The company's primary product is the tough poplar bark shingle, roughly two feet long and a foot wide, used as siding for houses and other buildings.

Bark shingles have been used to clad homes for more than a century in Western North Carolina, particularly in the Linville area, where architect Henry Bacon popularized the material. The naturally beautiful shingles, which were originally made of chestnut, wrapped private mountain retreats and inns so that they blended into the forests. And before then, Native Americans used bark on wigwams, in part because of its insulating quality. But during the early 20th century, a blight wiped out chestnut trees and stopped bark architecture in its tracks.

Today, the McCurrys are leading a revival of bark shingles, which embody admirable 21st-century environmental qualities—sound dampening, heat insulation, and chemical-free purity. Their efforts are helping to place bark at the forefront of green architecture.





## henry bacon father of bark house style

**H**enry Bacon was a luminary of early 20th century American architecture, and is best known for his design of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

A native of Illinois, he lived as a youngster in Wilmington. There he became friends with Hugh McRae, of the influential family who founded Linville. That tie led him to the mountain town as a young professional, where he designed several houses and other buildings in a style he devised from locally available materials. Sometimes both the interior and exterior was covered with thick chestnut bark that was squared into chunky, uniform shingles.

Whether designing grand public buildings or summer homes for the wealthy, Bacon drew on the simple, well-proportioned lines of classic Greek architecture. Because of this, his bark buildings in Linville have a distinctive, spare look that is at once "rustic and refined," says Chris McCurry.



**BUILT TO LAST** Highland Craftsmen's showroom in downtown Spruce Pine is the go-to source for builders, architects, designers, and homeowners who want bark shingles and architectural elements. The material offers a rustic texture and can last for 80 or more years. Opposite, Chris and Marty McCurry outside their bark-clad showroom



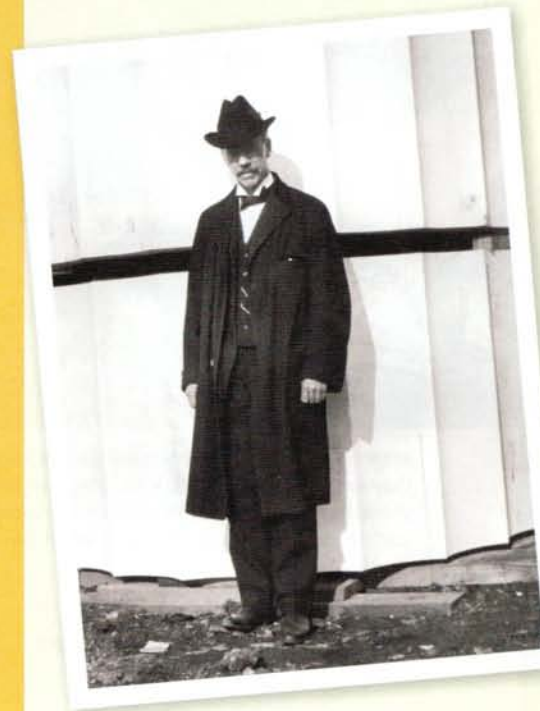
### BACK TO NATURE

The couple met in the mid '80s at a Lowe's in Marty's hometown of Morganton. He was working as a contractor, and Chris was employed at the home improvement store, with plans to earn a nursing degree. The couple wed soon after and moved to Charlotte, where Marty went into an architecture program and Chris worked as a psychiatric nurse. Both were uncomfortable with suburban life and felt disconnected from nature. Then opportunity knocked.

One of Marty's sisters and her husband were building a bark house in Highlands—another locale where the rustic material has a storied past—and asked for Marty and Chris' help. Before her foray into the health field, Chris had earned a degree in interior design. And though Marty had been working in construction for many years, it was his studies in pulp, paper, and chemical engineering at North Carolina State University that provided the know-how to take on the project. "He understood wood on a molecular level," Chris says.

The two set about learning how to re-engineer a nearly defunct building technique, and turn lumberyard waste into a standardized building material.

As Chris saw it, the major challenges in creating commercial bark siding involved kiln drying the bark and stabilizing it for storage, shipment, and the application process.







Originally, chestnut bark had been used green, when it was still damp, and nailed on in double thicknesses. This application had worked when homes lacked insulation. But with today's airtight structures, the couple found that wet bark leads to mold and rot.

To perfect their techniques, they climbed piles of poplar logs; Marty used a chain saw to rip a vertical seam down each one, and he and Chris used antique tools to turn the logs and pry off the bark in heavy sheets. Only then could they cut it into pieces, trim it, dry it, and transport it. "It was dangerous as hell," Marty admits. It took five years of research and development to take Highland Craftsmen, the construction business they opened in 1995 in Blowing Rock, to the next level.

Word of their work spread among builders in the High Country, who began recommending bark to clients. As the business grew during the mid-1990s, the company leased facilities in Spruce Pine, and then in 2000, bought the first of several buildings it would inhabit in downtown.

"People have been peeling bark around here for 40 years, stacking it, and using it to patch their old bark buildings," Marty explains. "But we are absolutely the first—period—to manufacture it to standards."

### HOLISTIC APPROACH

At the core of those standards is sustainability. In commercial timber operations, tree bark often ends up shredded for mulch, burned as industrial fuel, or left to rot. But when salvaged quickly in the field, while still moist, it can be cut into manageable pieces, flattened and kiln dried, and then, without any additives, paints, or sealants, used on homes as siding, with a lifespan measured in generations.

By constantly evaluating and improving their practices, from saving water and energy



**MAN & MACHINE** Woodsmen still use traditional hand tools to harvest premium bark, which they sell to Highland Craftsmen. They also bring in a mix of salvaged forest material including stumps and twigs. In the fabrication workshop, Chris and Marty designed and built the wood-cutting machinery (top and right), which has allowed them to standardize their products.





## the past & future of bark design



**T**he mountain hamlet of Linville may have more historic bark structures than any town in the country, thanks to the one-time abundance of chestnut trees and architect Henry Bacon's contributions.

All Saints Episcopal Church, which Bacon designed and built between 1910 and 1913, is covered inside and out with slabs of two-inch-thick chestnut bark. The church, which is the only public structure Bacon built in the area, is still open to visitors during the summer.

Perhaps the most well-known example of the style, though not credited to Bacon, is The Eseeola Lodge. Today a luxury resort, it showcases old chestnut bark siding and substantial sections that have been re-barked with modern poplar shingles. It also features natural posts and railings.

Today, bark panels aren't just used in a rustic form. Smoothed and stained pieces are showing up in contemporary interior design settings, including Parsons The New School For Design in New York. "It can be sleek and sexy," says Chris.

during production to tracing their sources, the business has garnered awards, grants, and green-building honors. The accolades and certifications include a 2010 Advantage Innovation Award from the 23-county AdvantageWest economic development organization, Chain of Custody certification from the Forestry Stewardship Council, and Cradle to Cradle certification at the Gold Level, which measures a company's commitment to environmental health.

In turn, recognition for Highland Craftsmen shines a favorable light on Spruce Pine. And by following a calling to nurture not just their company, but the town, its workers, and the land, the McCurrys have brought new energy to this remote community.

Their bark is being used across the United States, in Europe, Asia, and Saudi Arabia. But the sources of poplar bark are localized to Southern Appalachia and the material is perishable, meaning the jobs can never be exported overseas, giving the local labor force stability and the potential to grow.

While the housing bubble was inflating during the last decade, Highland Craftsmen had a network of some 700 independent woodsmen who brought not only bark, but twisted

branches, burls, windfall trees, and other forest salvage of architectural value to the facility. That network has shrunk, but the bark business remains a source of jobs, where work has otherwise been scarce.

"The McCurrys have played a major role in the resurgence of Spruce Pine's downtown," says Bryan Freeborn, executive director of Spruce Pine Main Street. "Chris has been a

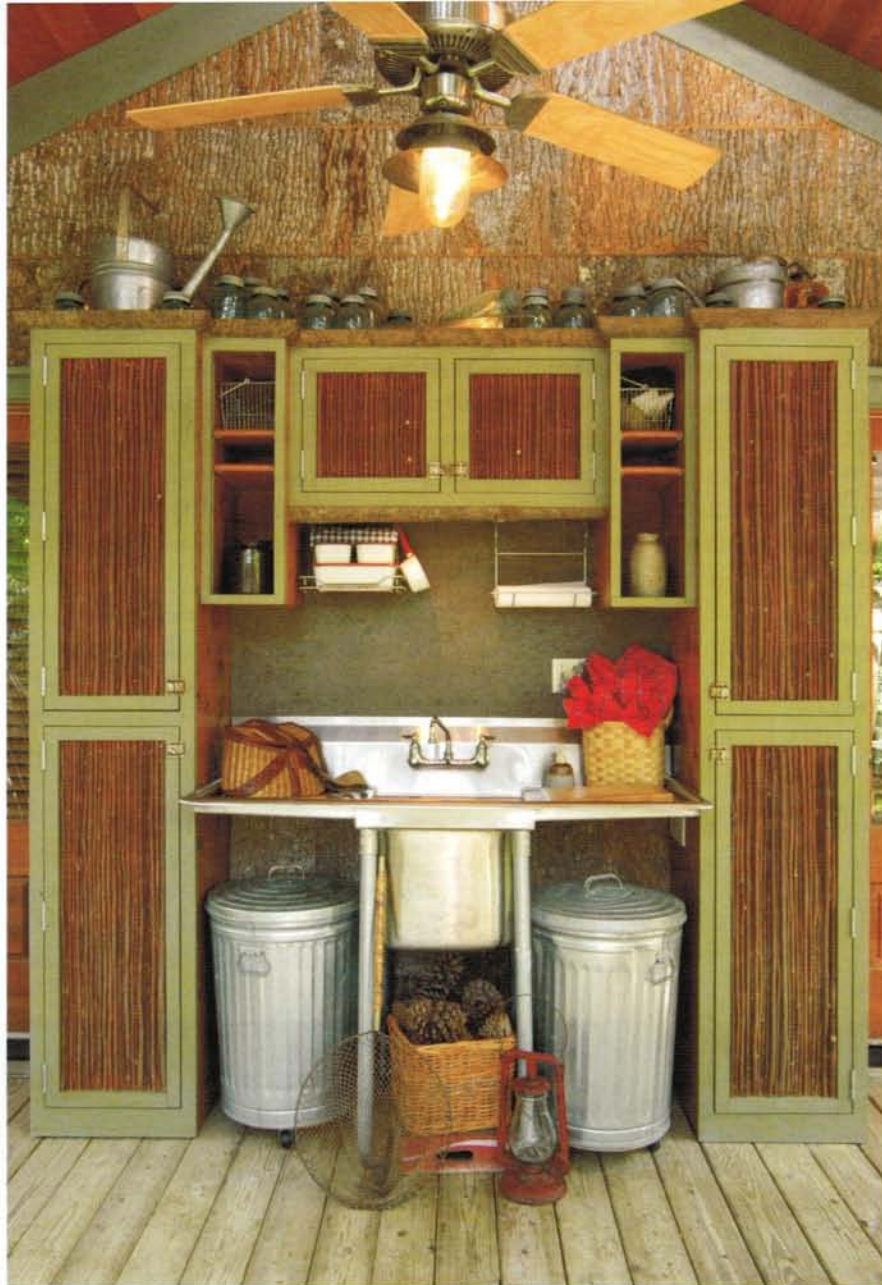
**"Chris has been a leader in setting a tone of economic revitalization that focuses on green manufacturing."**

—BRYAN FREEBORN, SPRUCE PINE MAIN STREET PROGRAM



**NEXT GENERATION** Today's tools for removing bark are fashioned after the antique models. Left, Travis Oglesby finishes a red oak burl bowl with a mineral oil rub.





**CUSTOM ORDER** A fish-cleaning station on a porch in Blowing Rock showcases twig details. Right, large slabs are used to make one-of-a-kind tables and benches.

leader in setting a tone in economic revitalization that focuses on green manufacturing.”

Strengthening downtown was a goal Chris had in mind all along, and the plan included making use of buildings that were sitting empty. The company refurbished an industrial structure in downtown, turning it into a showroom for bark products, as well as a fabrication workshop and shipping point. They cleared a tract nearby for a kiln and lumberyard, and added a warehouse for slabs. More recently, in a collaborative effort with the town, they bought and remediated an old service station classified as a brown-field (a site that once contained environmental toxins) to house their next endeavor, the Bark House Supply Company.

That division of Highland Craftsmen, still in a developmental stage, will provide a one-stop shop for architects, designers, and homeowners who want to mix-and-match reclaimed forest materials to craft decorative accessories, furniture, and cabinetry. “A designer can walk in with color, texture, and applications in mind,” says Chris, “we start there and can match their desire.”

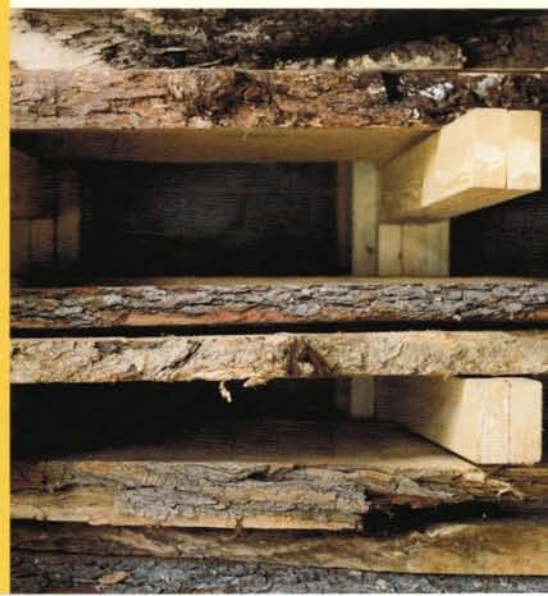
## new products from the forest

**H**ighland Craftsmen continues to find new uses for natural materials. While several architectural components have been standardized, including door and window moldings, split rail fencing, structural poles and logs, others evolve from salvaged forest products, such as branches, twigs, and stumps.

The company also offers massive slabs of wood (shown below) reclaimed from windfall trees. Designers transform these into large tables, benches, and desks. Inventory includes locust logs stripped of bark to reveal pale, knobby burls.

Highland Craftsmen is experimenting with new ways to finish poplar bark panels for interior use, like sanding the bark's ridges and then using paint, stain, or even metallic finishes to bring out the grain. The company is also using other types of bark scrap—birch, cherry, and white pine—to produce distinctive laminates for cabinetry and furniture.

Visit [www.barkhouse.com](http://www.barkhouse.com) to learn more about innovative uses for salvaged tree materials.







**TREE HOUSES** A renovated historic residence in Linville shows how well old chestnut bark and poplar bark blend together. Right, interlocking timbers, stone, and bark shingles create rustic appeal at Diamond Creek Resort.


## BRANCHING OUT

While researching the history of bark architecture, Chris recognized the style's greater impact. The richness of bark-house style, as she calls it, is its ability to create a simple way of life based on relationships with nature and family, rather than gadgets and expensive decorations. It's reflective of the way she was brought up.

"I think about my grandmother's home in the mountains," she says. "There were no extra things about. Everything was functional; the bedroom held only a bed, a nightstand, and a light. There was an elegance to the spaces, and a lack of ornamentation. The structure itself became a work of art."

The recession, a return to simplicity for many, reminded the McCurrys that Highland Craftsmen wasn't just about selling a lot of product; the company had a mission to explore new ways to use poplar and other barks, as well as all those slabs and burls, to create organic elements inside a home. "We were so overwhelmed with the housing boom," says Marty. "When it quieted down, it allowed us to rediscover all these new textures."

The texture of bark, its ability to be worked and crafted as an interior wall covering, in addition to an exterior cladding, has become a source of creativity. Craftsmen are sanding bark, coloring it, and laminating it onto hardwood ply. Highland Craftsmen bark is showing up in sophisticated settings like spas, cruise ships, hotels, restaurants, and banks.

"Bark is the art in the room," Chris says. "You don't have to buy more things to dress up your house. You go live your life"—a life that is made more beautiful with a natural backdrop. 

*Nan Chase is co-author, with Chris McCurry, of Bark House Style: Sustainable Designs from Nature.*

