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Building With Bark



PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM KAPRIS

left: Marty (left) and Chris McCurry of Highland Craftsmen look over plans for a bark-shingled shopping center in Linville. **below:** Because they are bug and moisture resistant, square bark shingles can last almost 100 years.



Marty and Chris McCurry revive a North Carolina architectural tradition through Highland Craftsmen.

People who live in bark houses usually love stones—as well as trees, flowers, and other natural things. At least, that's what Marty and Chris McCurry have discovered.

As founders of Highland Craftsmen, the Blowing Rock couple is bringing back the bark house. Once quite popular throughout the mountains of North Carolina, this unique architectural style, defined by buildings covered with unfinished tree-bark, is making a resurgence.

"The houses blend with nature," Chris says. "They look like they belong, like they grew up out of the ground. I think they help tie people to the land."

Shingle-Minded Architecture

Morganton natives, Chris and Marty grew up in the mountains but ended up in the suburbs. "We were living in Charlotte," Chris says. "I was employed as a nurse, and Marty was working as a contractor and studying architecture. We were stuck right in the middle of suburbia and sick of it."

Then, one day, Marty's sister asked him to help her build a bark house. While Chris continued her nursing, Marty worked on the house and realized an opportunity.

Although American Indians and early settlers used bark shingles for hundreds of years, by the turn of the 20th century, the building technique



His collection of antique tools helps Marty strip and shape bark the old-fashioned way.

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"The [bark-shingled] houses
 blend with nature. They
 look like they belong, like
 they grew up out
 of the ground...."

Chris McGarry

had been largely forgotten. "Then, around 1900 the Linville Land Improvement Company came to the mountains to build a resort," Chris explains. "They asked Henry Bacon if he would head up the project."

A world-famous architect primarily known for creating large public works such as the Lincoln Memorial, Bacon took the job of designing the Eseeola Lodge in Linville. Inspired by the area's natural beauty, he used chestnut bark shingles on the lodge, chapel, and several nearby houses.

"We found examples of his shingle houses," Marty says. "Some are nearly 100 years old and are in great condition. That's when we decided bark houses were what we wanted to do."

Poplar Products

Once they made their decision, Marty and Chris got down to business. They spent days searching through stacks of old timber in lumberyards and started collecting antique hand tools. Because blight had decimated the area's chestnut trees in the 1940s, they decided to use poplar. "We had to figure out how to strip the bark, dry it in a kiln, and put it on a house correctly," Chris remembers. "It was definitely a learning experience."

Unfortunately, many of their fellow builders thought the couple was barking up the wrong tree. "It took about three years of bugging people before anyone would give us a chance," Marty says. "Finally a local contractor let us do one house, and others

In addition to shingles, the company also produces bark furniture, cabinets, and interior accents.





The bark has to be properly stripped from the wood and dried in a kiln before it can be used as a shingle.

started to accept this material. Now we've worked on hundreds of projects in several states."

Bark Houses and Beyond

The company ships shingles to construction sites throughout the Southeast, with Marty often accompanying his

product. "You basically put it up like installing cedar shingles on a roof," he says. "But you have to know how to nail it just right because bark tends to want to curl back into its natural shape."

In addition to the wood shingles, Highland Craftsmen also offers bark-embellished furniture, fencing, railings, cabinets, and interior accents.

Whether they're sawing shingles at the company headquarters or relaxing with their 3-year-old son, John Caleb, in their own bark house, Marty and

Chris are never far from their natural products—or the people who use them.

"It's not just the material itself," Chris says. "It's also where it comes from and what it says about the house and the people who live in it. People who live in bark houses are just nice people to know."

JAMES T. BLACK

Highland Craftsmen, Inc.: P.O. Box 2011, Blowing Rock NC, 28605; (828) 295-0796 or www.highlandcraftsmen.com.

Working Vacations

When they aren't busy with bark, Marty and Chris travel the world studying other natural building techniques. "On one trip we saw these beautiful bed frames for sale in front of a little house in Uganda," Marty says. "I asked the man who lived there if I could watch him make one." The American builder gazed in amazement as the African craftsman chopped down a tree, cut boards from it with an axe, shaped the wood on a foot-powered lathe, constructed the bed, and painted the finished product with a stain made from berries.

Hi Jen!

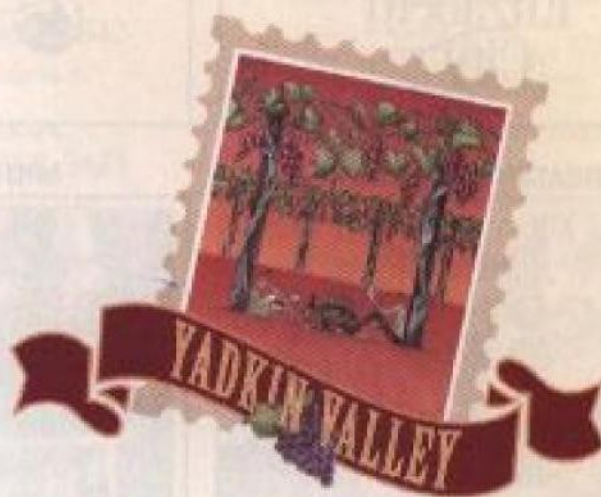
Just left my sisters in North Carolina. What a weekend! Her new boyfriend is great. He took us to Yadkin Valley on Saturday. Imagine a place just minutes from Winston-Salem with awesome wines and the Blue Ridge Mountains in the back ground. No Kidding and not just any wines... French varietals. We didn't make it to all the wineries... there are over 19! She really lucked out with this new boyfriend. The last one could only find the couch.

See ya Thursday

Wig



This project received support from the GoldenLEAF Foundation.



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