

A full-page photograph of a man standing in a dense forest of tall, slender trees. The man is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, looking upwards towards the canopy. The forest floor is covered in green undergrowth, and the trees are closely spaced, creating a sense of being deep within the woods. The lighting is soft and filtered through the leaves.

The Forest Within

Marty and Chris McCurry, founders of Highland Craftsmen, are quietly celebrating a quarter century of innovation with poplar bark, and now much more.

by Nan K. Chase

Stillness surrounds Highland Craftsmen's Marty McCurry as he gauges the growth of tulip poplar trees deep in the woods.

I didn't realize how much I missed North Carolina's high mountains until I ventured into them again late last summer from my Asheville home. As I drove up, up toward the town of Spruce Pine—and my friends Marty and Chris McCurry—the mountains rose higher and higher, darker and darker, until the tallest peaks loomed ahead almost black within their cloak of trees.

For Marty and Chris, a husband-and-wife team who founded Highland Craftsmen in 1990 to produce poplar bark building shingles, the forest is everything: their livelihood, yes, but also a connection to nature and a way to use woodland textures to soften the hard edges of modern life.

The three of us share a bond that I treasure, and last summer's visit was a chance to see them as Highland Craftsmen turned 25. Almost a decade ago I helped Chris write a book called "Bark House Style: Sustainable Designs from Nature," and in the midst of that project my husband and I decided to build a new home in Asheville clad entirely in poplar bark shingles, like a big square tree. By living inside this snug all-bark house I "got" it—the McCurrys' passion for poplar bark not just as a superior building material but as a way to bring the forest into the city and right into the home, to meld the ancient look and feel of tree bark with the convenience of today's technology.

So it was especially good to hear that the Great Recession, which laid low so many construction-related businesses, had actually brought Marty and Chris new opportunities to innovate and expand around the world, as well as to solidify the company's standing as the largest manufacturers of bark shingles and wall coverings.

Reviving an Old Mountain Style

Highland Craftsmen began as the McCurrys' effort to revive a style of mountain architecture that dated back another 100 years. By covering the exteriors, and sometimes even the interiors, of mountain homes and lodges with slabs of tough chestnut bark, builders made handsome dwellings that could last for generations without paint or other treatments.

As Chris wrote in "Bark House Style,"



Top: Imaginative applications of bark and other forest products transformed a standard ranch house near North Carolina's Grandfather Mountain into a stunning rustic lodge.

Lower: Poplar bark shingles give the Yadkin Bank building in Boone, North Carolina a homey look.



Marty McCurry, center, watches as a lumberjack team removes a sheet of bark from a felled poplar.

Henry Bacon, later the designer of the Lincoln Memorial, created such structures in Linville, North Carolina; Eseeola Lodge is a beautiful example. The style was also popular in nearby Blowing Rock, and of course Native American people used bark for millennia as shelter.

Chestnut bark disappeared with the chestnut blight, and then building practices changed. But 25 years ago Marty and Chris discovered they could use poplar bark as a comparable building material. Symmetrical, strong and renewable, poplar bark became their medium, and the couple trained a network of woodsmen throughout the Appalachian Mountain region who cleanly strip the bark as poplar trees are harvested for timber; today Highland Craftsmen buys from some 500

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vendors who bring bark fresh to Spruce Pine for kiln drying.

Chris and Marty marketed the bark largely in rustic second-home communities, with some innovators using it in edgier urban settings. Then the economy tanked, and they had to adapt.

"When residential building bottomed out, there was no other market but com-

mercial so we knew we wanted to go there," Marty says. "We didn't realize we'd have to.

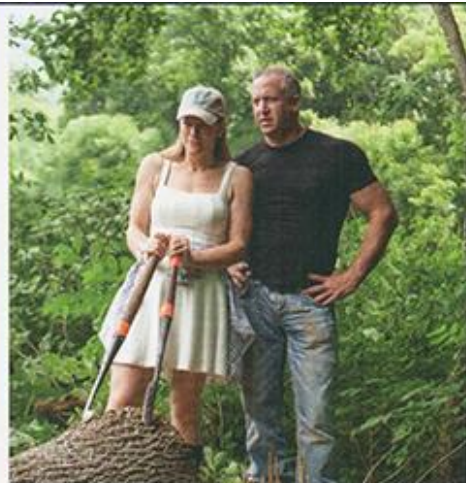
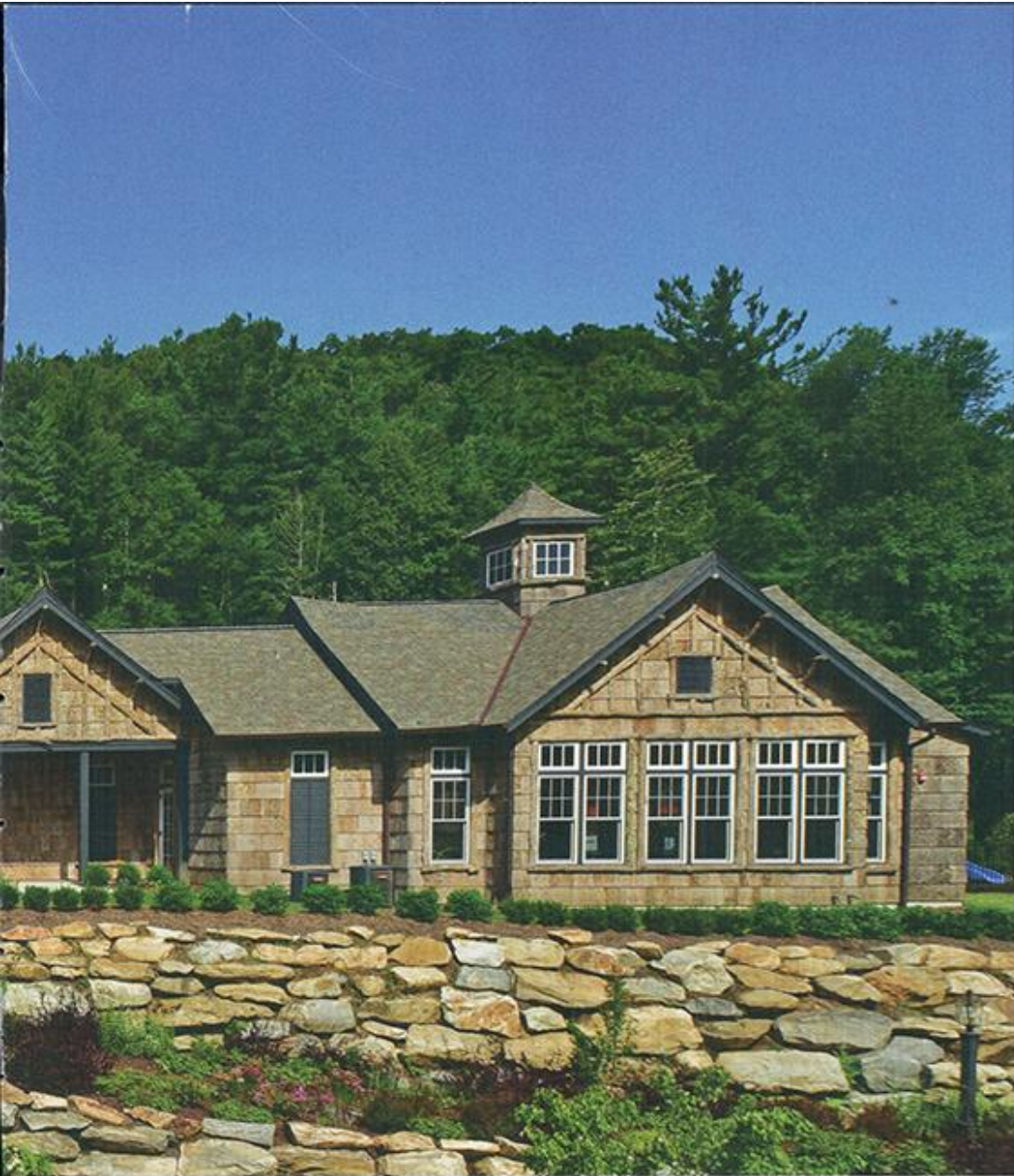
"The second home environment was taking it on the chin. We always knew this change was coming, but during the housing boom we didn't have a chance to pursue it. But we always knew bark was made for interior applications."

Kiln-dried poplar bark shingles on the buildings give a strong, unified look to the Alan Dickson Center at the storied Eseeola Lodge in Linville, North Carolina.



Marty and Chris McCurry, left and center, work with their yard manager as he grades raw bark.





The outdoors are home for Chris and Marty McCurry.

"We go to indoor gyms, we're on our iPads, we're texting back and forth. So when people say to me, 'Is this real?' I really hear what they are saying. They are saying: We're disconnected enough from the natural world that this is exciting. It's authentic. It has depth, texture."

"It's like the loudness of the world is right here in our face, and if you can get that bark or that laminate on an interior wall it's not loud...now I have a space to pause and observe an interesting texture. I have to go over and see that. I have to go over and touch it, and it touches me. It's something real. It's not plastic, it's not fake. The attributes of the material reflect the attributes of this region."

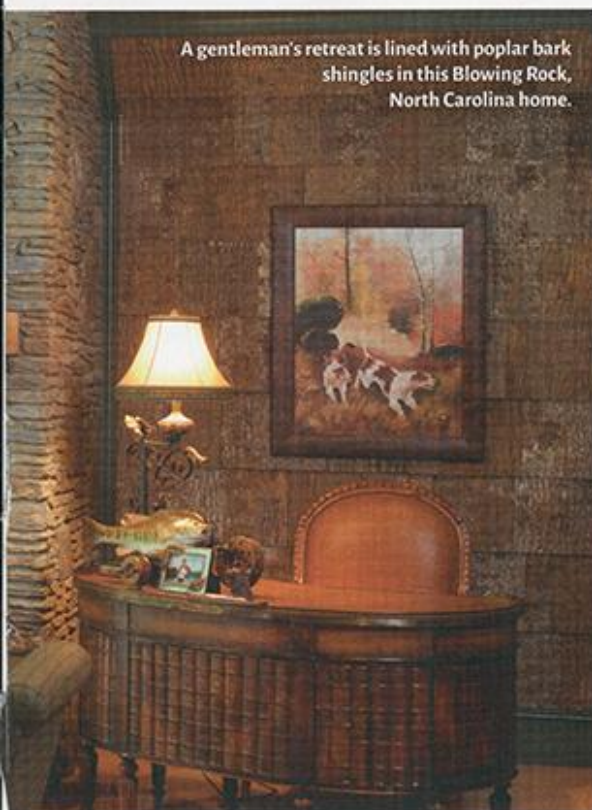
I knew what she was talking about. My own bark house invites the touch, and strangers still come to the door to ask if they may rub their hands along the grey-brown grooves and ridges.

The laminate Chris mentions is one of a range of Highland Craftsmen innovations created by using logging waste products as new materials. Marty picks up a two-foot-square panel made of reddish twigs trimmed from apple trees in his brother's orchard; then he picks up a panel of salvaged poplar end cuts at staggered lengths. He shows me a soft, glowing panel of white birch laminated onto plywood.

"There's no such thing as waste here," he says. "If a market dies we find another market. If a product that we have is no longer viable, we remanufacture it and send it out to do something again. What else can you do?"

When all else is finished, the company donates all of its waste materials for needy neighbors to burn as fuel in winter. No waste at all. ♻️

A gentleman's retreat is lined with poplar bark shingles in this Blowing Rock, North Carolina home.



Marty is a lumberjack-size man who cans about 300 jars of his garden produce a year, while Chris, tall and blonde, has the sculpted features that reflect her Cherokee heritage, along with a mystical connection to the wooded environment she loves.

Together they have branched out in creative new directions.

Green Innovation Circles the Globe

In bringing finely textured bark panels and related forest products inside commercial buildings, rather than just using bark shingles outside, Chris sees how woodland tranquility can soothe jangled nerves in some of the most crowded parts of the world, including Europe and Asia.

"We are so disconnected," she says.