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## Bark for the Nation: The Success of Highland Craftsmen

by [Nan Chase](#) January 27, 2016

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



**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.

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

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