

January/February 2016

March 2011

A Poplar Idea

Written By: Nan Chase
Photographs by: Christopher Shane

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



Chris and Marty McCurry outside their business Highland Craftsmen in Spruce Pine



- [About](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Where To Buy](#)
- [Connect](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Business Directory](#)
- [Careers](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Search This Site](#)



SEARCH THIS SITE

SEARCH






Have you had your **grit** today?


ashevillegrit
 Bold. Smart. Local. Now.
 (new local blogs updated daily)




TWITTER


Tweets Follow

 **WNC magazine** @WNCmagazine 53m
 RT @WileyCash: So excited to watch @UNCABasketball tonight on @ESPNU at 9:00! @UncAvl @newsUNCA

 **WNC magazine** @WNCmagazine 1h
 RT @NCparks: Sounds like there's snow for most of the state tomorrow. Let's enjoy how pretty it makes NC State Parks! pic.twitter.com/j6Llh21ia



Expand

 **WNC magazine** @WNCmagazine 23h
 RT @VisitCherokee: Winter Guide for the Best #Fishing Spots in Cherokee, NC + win \$20K opening day, bit.ly/20nqw89 #flyfishing

Tweet to @WNCmagazine

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 The naturally beautiful shingles, which were originally made of chestnut, wrapped private mountain retreats and inns so that they blended into the forests.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. **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 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 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 brownfield (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." **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.

0 Comments

WNC MAGAZINE

Login

Recommend

Share

Sort by Newest



Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON WNC MAGAZINE

WHAT'S THIS?

Sugar & Spice

1 comment • a year ago



Ed — GREAT pic !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The Long Road to Victory

1 comment • 2 years ago



T E Terry Holmes — Not all the "Overmountain Men" were Scots-Irish! My 6th great-grandfather, Detrich "Teter" ...

Beneath the Surface

1 comment • 10 months ago



roegruler — I love her art!

Ambrozia Bar & Bistro

2 comment • 2 years ago



magazinegirl — I love brunch at Ambrozia! Great dining review. Sign me up for that Gorgonzola flan, please.

Subscribe

Add Disqus to your site Add Disqus Add

Privacy



© Gulfstream Communications 2015

Advertise | Reader Services | Contact | Careers | Subscribe | Terms of Use

