ANNUAL MOUNTAIN ISSUE

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LINVILLE GORGE

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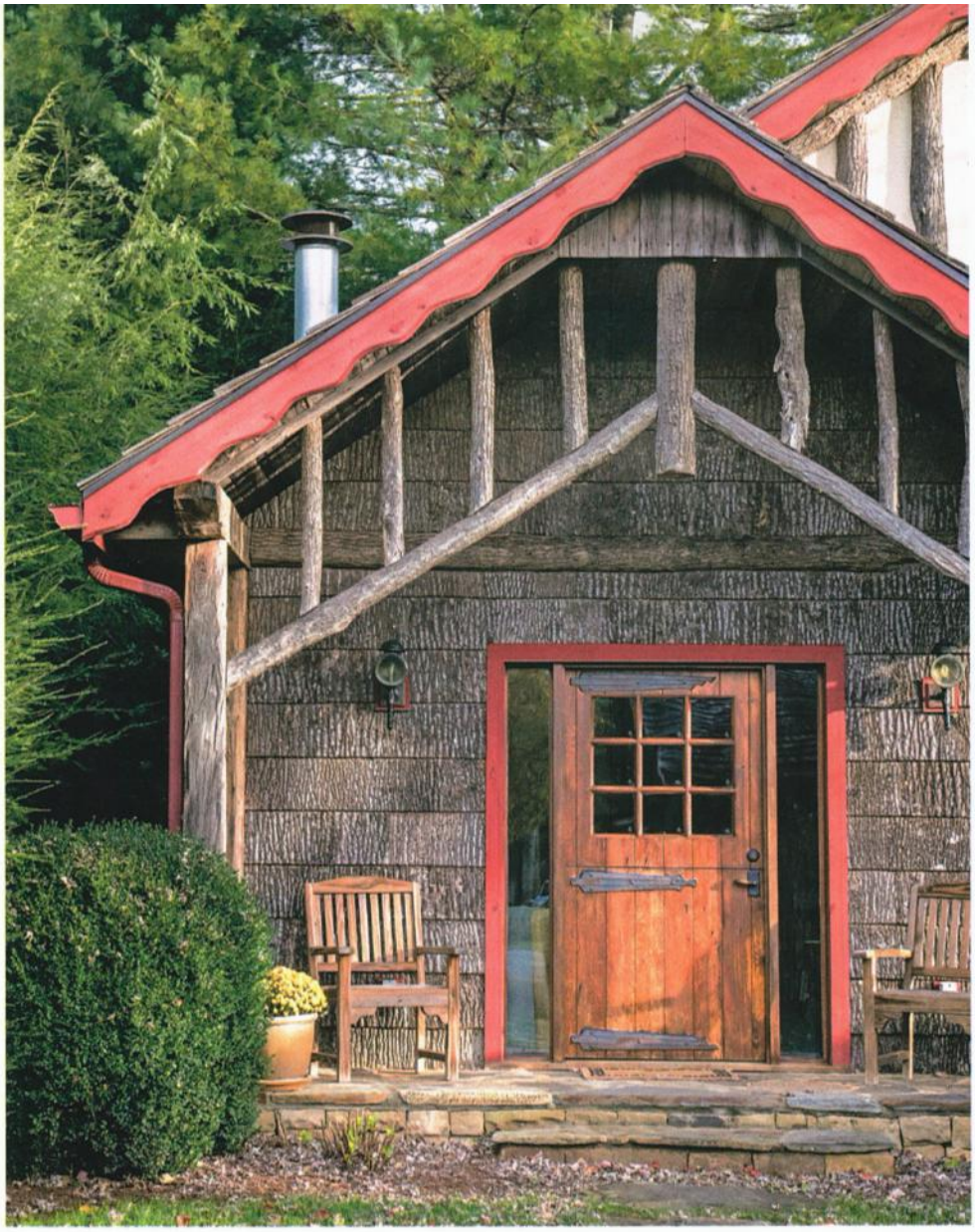
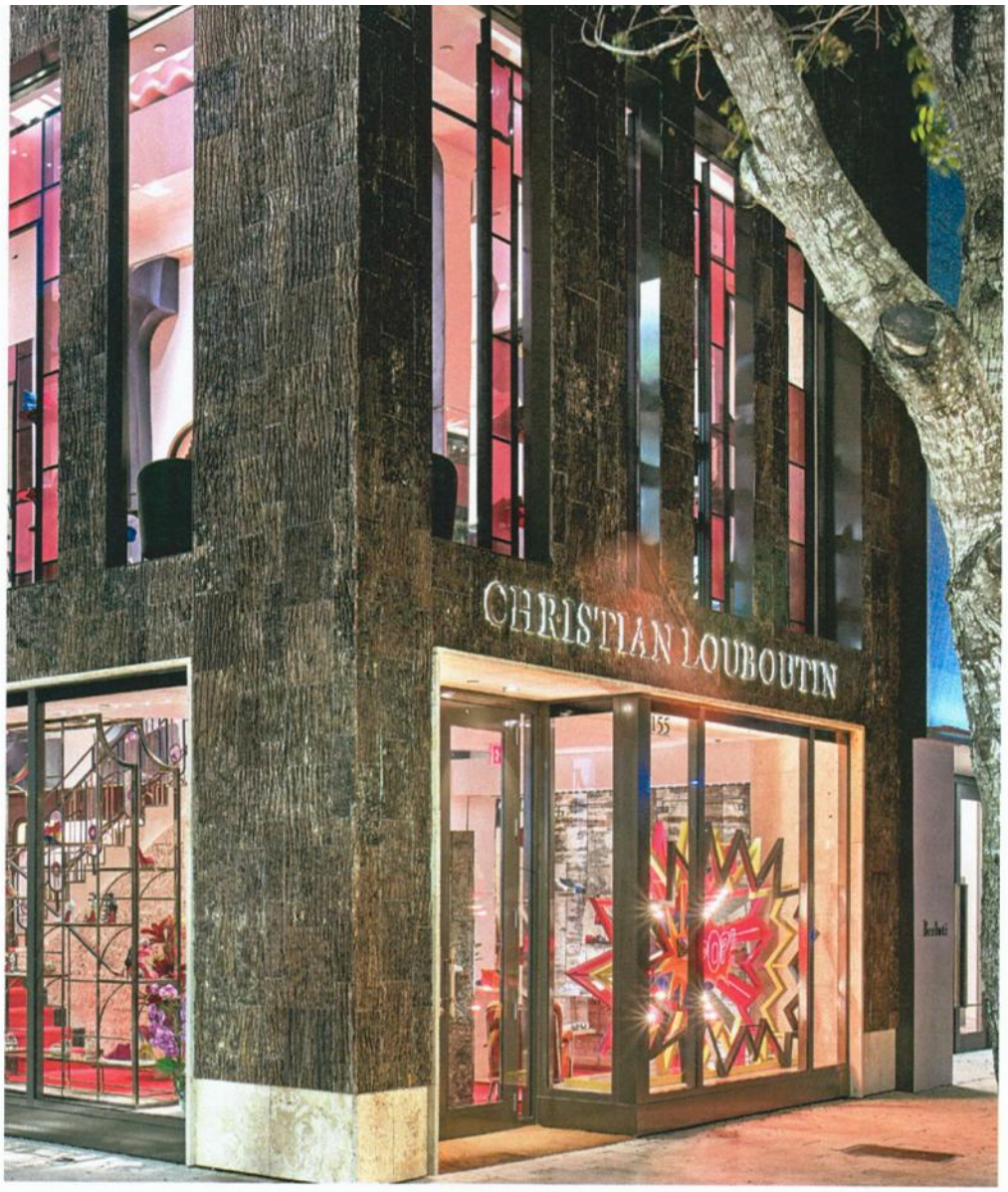


Chestnut bark shingles line the dining room walls and ceiling of "The Studio" (opposite). This Beech Street dwelling was designed by architect Henry Bacon, who also designed the Lincoln Memorial. Dot Griffith's Airbnb (this page) reflects the natural style that Bacon pioneered in Linville.

The LINVILLE LOOK

The elegantly rustic bark shingles that give this mountain town its character are as fashionable today as they were more than a century ago when a famous architect introduced them.

written by ROBYN YIĞIT SMITH / *photography by* EMILY CHAPLIN



THE MOUNTAINS of North Carolina are about 800 miles from the luxury boutiques of Miami's bustling design district, but there, on North East 40th Street, in a temple to high-end consumerism, shoppers are confronted with the soulful presence of native North Carolina trees. The entire two-story exterior of Christian Louboutin's flagship shoe store is covered in tulip poplar bark harvested from felled trees throughout Appalachia, including the Linville area: hundreds of square, gray, deep-ridged bark shingles stretching upward, like a sapling seeking an imaginary canopy. Pause to press your hand to the nubby bark, and you can almost hear the wind whispering across the nose of Grandfather Mountain.

"People always want to touch it," says Marty McCurry, whose North Carolina company, Bark House — co-owned with his wife, Chris — supplied Louboutin with the bark, acquired from privately owned and managed forests. "It's always shocking to see it up close. They can't for the life of them figure out how that material got manipulated in that way, but they know what it is."

Neither Chris nor Marty was surprised that the world-famous shoe designer (think: the crimson-soled high heels beloved by celebrities) would tap into the power of trees to inspire and stir passion in its employees and customers: The McCurrys' list of international clients includes Google and Nike. "It evokes such a personal response," Chris says. "I think the bark of a tree is the perfect metaphor for mindfulness."

The use of tree bark in architectural design is an ancient tradition because it's sturdy, long-lasting,

Mountains to sea: The Christian Louboutin store in Miami is clad in hundreds of tulip poplar shingles from the Linville area. The type of bark-and-branch design used in Linville's All Saints Episcopal Church (opposite) inspired Marty and Chris McCurry's business, Bark House.

CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN IMAGE COURTESY OF 212BOX/NICK ROCHOWSKI STUDIO

MOUNTAIN EDEN

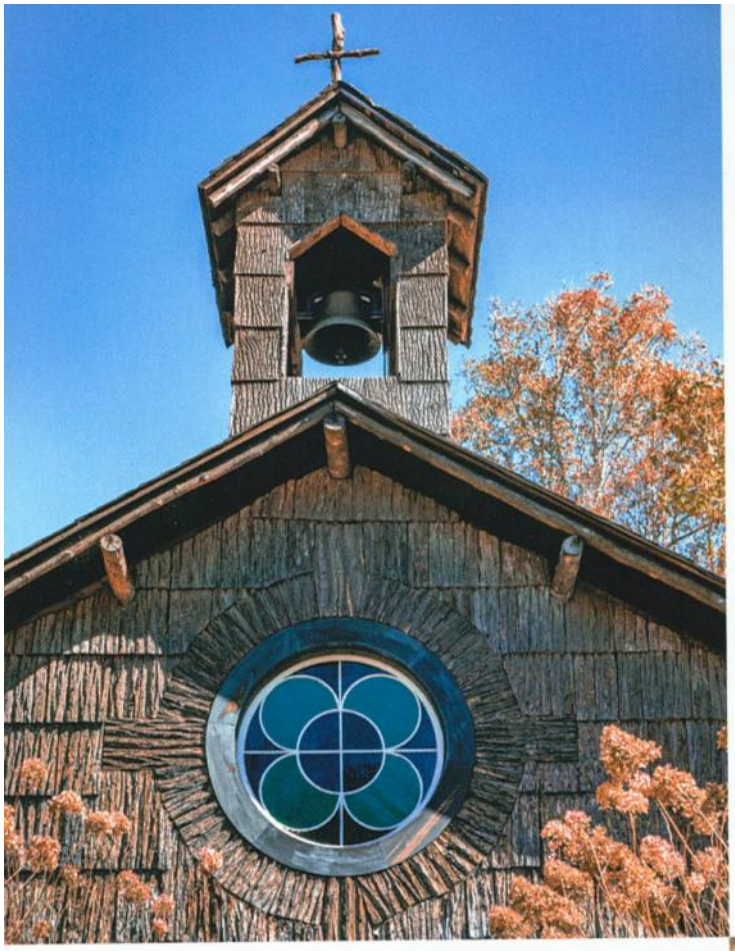
Perhaps no place reflects the history and look of Linville more than Eseeola Lodge. The original inn, built in 1891, had two and a half stories, expansive verandas, and formal dining with fine linens and china plates, making it both grand and out of place in a budding resort town that still had more tree stumps than people. Eseeola quickly became a beacon of high-end hospitality and tangible proof that Linville was as advertised — a mountain Eden. Today, the luxury resort sits on more than 3,000 acres and includes a spa, a tennis facility, and a nationally recognized golf course. It's open from May to October. ***(828) 733-4311, eseeola.com***

"It evokes such a personal response. The bark of a tree is the perfect metaphor for mindfulness."

and expressive. But the style of this particular shingle — square, deeply ridged, with a smooth edge — traces its roots to the late 1800s and the town of Linville and the surrounding mountain communities: Grandfather, Grandmother, Pixie, and Flat Rock among them. The area was so remote that it was once referred to as the state's "lost provinces." On Linville's quaint streets, many of which are named for native trees, almost every bungalow, cottage, and grand manor — and some interior walls as well — is now enveloped in a clean-edged bark shingle. The look defines the town: Bark-covered branches embellish garden archways, footbridge handrails, even birdhouses. In the center of town, guests at the historic Eseeola Lodge relax on porches and stroll under arbors that embody Linville's affinity for wrapping itself in trees.

But it wasn't always so. In 1888, a group of investors, including Donald MacRae of Wilmington, purchased the undeveloped settlement — then called Clay — with plans to turn the property into a mining and timber hub. Some say it was their wives who convinced them that Linville's most treasured asset was actually its beauty. The mountain air was clean and cool; the streams, full of trout. That it took effort to get there would only make it more appealing as a summertime mountain retreat.

At one of the early stockholder meetings, MacRae wrote the name "Henry Bacon" in the margin of his notes. Bacon, a young architect who worked for a prestigious New York firm, had grown up in Wilmington and, at one point, lived across the street from the MacRaes. Perhaps Bacon could help the young town identify its character and give the new resort a distinctive look.

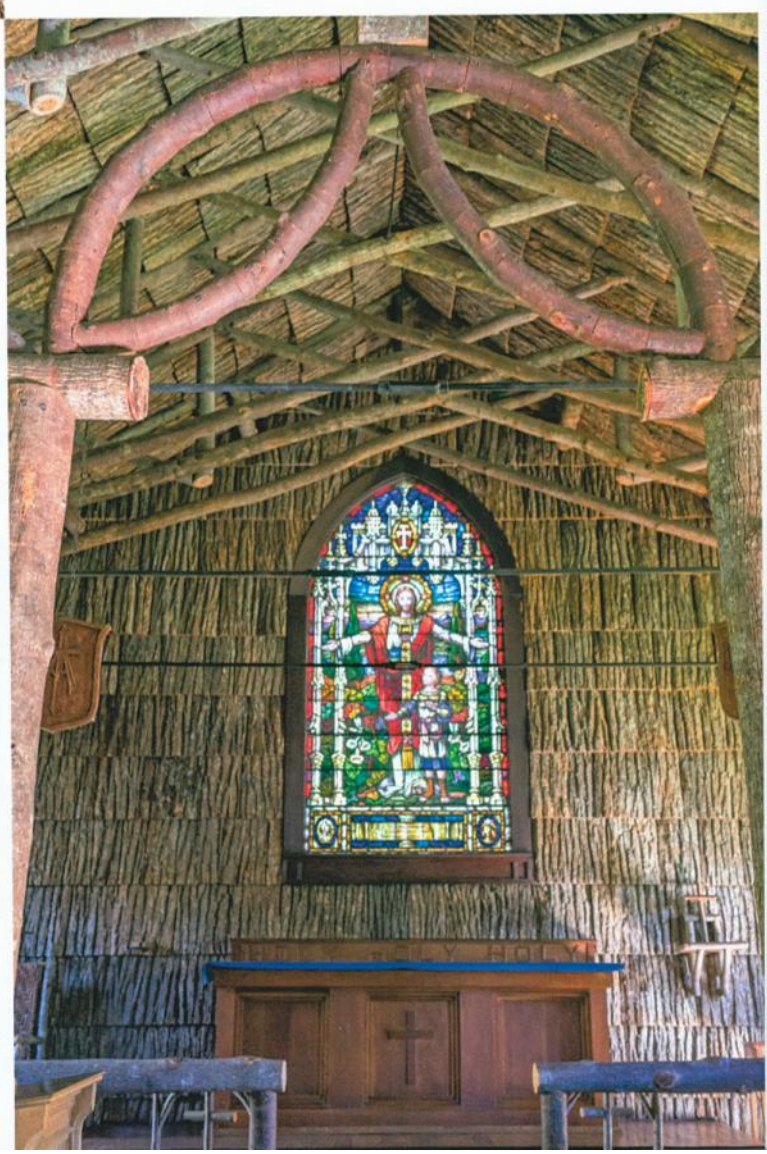


HENRY BACON

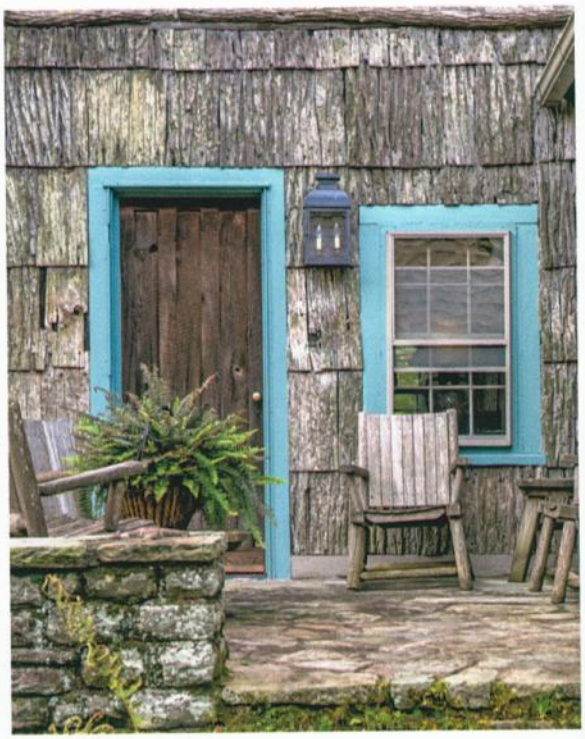
The chestnut bark and wooden beams used by Henry Bacon in his Linville designs proved to be both beautiful *and* durable: All Saints Episcopal Church is one of two Bacon structures still standing in Linville today.

HENRY BACON FIRST VISITED LINVILLE AS A CHILD, but he was in his early 30s when he stepped off the stagecoach in the mountain town again in the late 1890s. By all accounts, he was well-liked and modest, known as an "architect's architect" with a reputation for thoughtful, emotive designs. His work included monuments, which, only a few decades after the Civil War, meant working with families of both Union and Confederate soldiers. He was secretly sketching designs for a future project in Washington, D.C. — what would become the Lincoln Memorial.

But when Bacon arrived in Linville, he was not yet famous, and the town was still a fledgling resort community. Sixteen thousand acres of land had been cleared — albeit in stumpy fashion — to make way for a post office, a sawmill, and lodging. There was even a mayor. The Eseeola Inn (which would burn to the ground in 1936, reborn as Eseeola Lodge) had rooms for rent, but getting there was still an arduous task. Like most people, Bacon's journey likely would have taken him over the newly built Yonahlossee Turnpike (today's U.S. Highway 221). Wagons often got stuck in the mud on the twisty, unpaved road. Still, the breathtaking views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which were chock-full of American chestnut trees at that time, made the journey worth the effort.



PORTRAIT COURTESY OF LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY, IMAGE ARCHIVE, ELIZABETH F. MCKOY COLLECTION



Shingled houses were all the rage in Europe; Linville even had a few before Bacon arrived.

The studio that Bacon designed for Mrs. Lippitt of Savannah, Georgia, is now owned by Kenneth and Frances Lee. While Mrs. Lippitt reportedly never used the building, the Lees enjoy every inch of it — and then some: They enclosed part of the front porch for a dining room and added a kitchen wing and a carport.

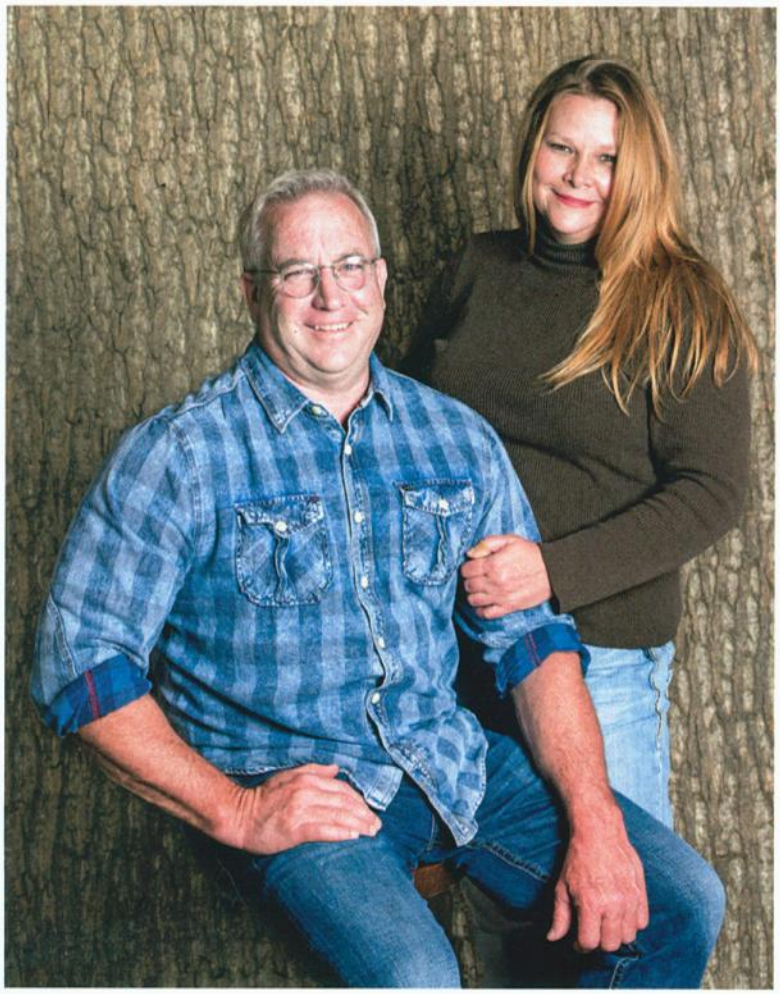
The chestnut was the most important tree in the eastern United States. These "mighty giants" were fast-growing, tall, and resistant to rot. The wood was perfectly suited for building homes, furniture, musical instruments, coffins, and telephone poles, and the bark's tannic acid even softened leather. That same bark also made magnificent shingles.

Bacon left no notes on what inspired him to further ennoble the chestnut tree by making it the centerpiece of his designs. Shingled houses were all the rage in Europe, coastal New England, and the Adirondacks; Linville even had a few before Bacon arrived. But those early shingles were rougher: jagged and unevenly shaped. Some were just slabs.

Chris, who spent years researching the history of this distinctive design method for her book, written with Nan Chase, *Bark House Style: Sustainable Designs from Nature*, surmises that Bacon's innovation might have been a serendipitous idea sparked by seeing the stacks of Linville chestnut bark that were destined for tanning factories. "It was a perfect solution: 'Let's clean up the bottom edge and make a squared shingle with a handsaw,'" Chris says. "That was the big change — now you've got a more refined look from a very rugged material." Bacon's idea was considered a new frontier in bark-style architecture. The Linville Look, as some called it, echoed the town's natural surroundings and gave residents a visual and tactile way to express how they felt about their beloved retreat.

Although Bacon initiated the town's notable look, he only designed a handful of structures himself. Soon, his time was taken up by larger, ever more ambitious projects: In 1912, Bacon's design was chosen for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., a magnum opus that would so overshadow his work in Linville that many residents today don't even realize that their beloved bark walls were essentially his creation, too.

Only two original Bacon structures are still standing: "The Studio," a cottage that was originally built for a painter, and All Saints Episcopal Church.



Marty and Chris McCurry have turned their love of bark architecture into a thriving business, Bark House, located in Spruce Pine. International clients, including Nike and Google, have used the McCurrys' bark to add natural texture to their buildings.

Peeling bark takes skill and strength. Around here, it's considered an art.

The original chestnut shingles — some two inches thick — cover the walls of the church more than 100 years later. Beams reach across the ceiling. The space is hushed and serene, like a forest monument that honors not only Bacon's contribution to the town, but also the memory of the mighty chestnut.

In 1904, a devastating fungus from Japan began its destruction of the American chestnut. Saplings continued to sprout, but the fungus lurked beneath the bark, stealthily, killing the trees just as they began to grow strong. Less than 10 years later, the blight crept into the mountains around Linville. The last chestnut shingle was hung in 1940. It would take a new generation of innovators like Chris and Marty McCurry to rethink bark-style houses and bring them into the future.

THE MCCURRYS' BARK HOUSE HEADQUARTERS IS down the road from Linville, on Main Street in Spruce Pine. It's a touchable warren of hallways and rooms covered in richly textured bark, roots, and twigs. Even the restroom feels like the cozy inside of a stump on a pine-scented ridge.

Marty studied architectural design at UNC Charlotte and chemical engineering at NC State, but his understanding of trees and how to manipulate natural raw materials came from forest walks with his grandfather, a Scotch-Irish Highlander, in Burke County. By 12 years old, Marty could make a squirt gun out of elderberry shoots.

He walks through one of several warehouses, where he's experimenting with bringing out whorls of deep red in pin cherry bark. In another, he runs his hand along a single sheet of tulip poplar the size of a wall. It's ready to be shipped. Examining the even tone and gunmetal gray hue, he can tell where the tree grew up — "most likely the west side of a ridge," a spot with good late-afternoon sun, generally hot but not direct. He knows such things. "You can tell what kind of forest you're in by the sound of the leaves," he says. "And if you can't tell from that, you can tell from the smell, because every tree smells different."

When he and Chris were dating in 1986, they used to ride around the Linville historic district, where shingles were beginning to show their age. After the 1940s, new bark-shingle construction was nonexistent. Bark — mostly tulip poplar — was only used for patching old chestnut homes. Because it wasn't harvested and manufactured in a consistent way, it curled and weathered poorly. Marty learned this firsthand in the early '90s, when he struggled to help his sister build an old-style bark house.

"When those shingles were first done," he says, "they were air-dried and put in non-insulated structures. They were just summer homes. Everyone loved that look and was right for embracing its comeback, but there were a lot of things that had to be dealt with." Building codes — for fire safety and indoor air quality — didn't exist in the early 1900s. Nor was there a recognized system for grading bark — depth of corrugation, proper texture — or preparing the wood so it would last. Marty began sketching designs for innovative drying kilns and racks and new peeling tools. In fact, all of the

standards that exist today for this kind of bark product were created by Marty.

Most days, the warehouse yard is filled with stacks of fresh bark pressed flat in pallets that allow for air circulation. Often, it's tulip poplar — still the only wood that the McCurrys use on exteriors because the trees grow fast and straight, and their bark will hold up to the rigors of processing and installation. "I had done some studies on poplar bark in architecture school. I just loved the texture of it," Marty says. The flattened bark will spend up to a week in a 150-degree kiln, a process that disinfects and cures it. Done right, bark can last about 75 years. It's pricey, but it's environmentally smart and saves money in cooling and heating. No sealants or periodic treatments needed.

In June and July, when sap is rising in trees, the driveway to the warehouse yard is lined with pickup trucks — vendors coming straight from nearby forests, their truck beds weighted with large pieces of curling bark. Peeling bark takes skill and strength. Around here, it's considered something of an art. Vendors present paperwork demonstrating that they've followed a strict protocol. Bark House has stringent environmental and social equity standards. Among its many awards is the first-ever platinum certification from Cradle to Cradle, an international organization that assesses sustainability practices.

Marty and Chris know most of their vendors by name, and their families, too: mountain people, like them, who wouldn't be surprised at all that shoppers in Miami would want to stop and touch the bark of a tree. "When you're walking through a busy city," Chris says, "you're inundated with concrete and asphalt and steel and glass. It's so *hard*. And then you come upon something that is so reflective of nature, and it's a tree." OS

Robyn Yiğit Smith is a journalist and documentary film producer. She lives in Chapel Hill.