

# MOUNTAINS

## Renovator breathes life into Cataloochee structures



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

Back in the late winter of 2016, avid cyclist Sean Perry was feeling burned out on biking. With spring just around the corner, he took a break from his Trek Superfly hardtail and began a new regimen of long runs after work into Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

“I would go in the Smokies, primarily Cataloochee, and do these cruises or these bushwhacks,” he recalled. “One night I was on this solo trip, and it was in March before the time change. It had gotten dark, and I had gotten lost. I had to pull out my map and compass to figure out if I was going the right way, and it hit me: ‘I may not make it home tonight.’”

Thankfully, a short time later, Perry arrived at the Woody House, a historic structure he knew was about a mile down Rough Fork Trail. No longer feeling lost, he started looking around.

“I realized this beautiful historic house was rotting, and I just felt inspired to do something.”

Not long after, he connected with the Friends of the Smokies and floated an idea to involve his Asheville-based business, The Hands of Sean Perry, in a series of projects to renovate Cataloochee structures. But this would not be a volunteer project; he would pay his employees to do the needed high-quality restoration work, thereby making a substantial donation to the park.

A year later, in May 2017, work began – not on the Woody House (which ended up getting some renovation from the National Park Service) but on the Cook Cabin in Little Cataloochee.

“This was a real thrill because we got to rebuild the three-sided porch around Cook Cabin, hand hewing the logs to make them look like they would have been done back in the 1850s,” he said, “That site was extremely remote, which made the work a little more difficult, but also cool because we were so far off the beaten track. For instance, it was really hard to get out to make a phone call or send a text.”

Perry’s connection to the Smokies goes back almost 50 years. Born in Chattanooga, he hiked sections of the Appalachian Trail in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia on weekends with his mother and a small group of friends. He also went with his Rogersville-based



Crew member Rob Moody and company president Sean Perry work on the exterior of Palmer Barn during the 2018 restoration project of the iconic barn in Cataloochee, Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

CAMILLA CALNAN PHOTOGRAPHY/PROVIDED BY THE HANDS OF SEAN PERRY CO.

grandparents to Cades Cove and Cosby on the Tennessee side of the park. But now he almost always visits the North Carolina side and loves Cataloochee because it has fewer of the 14 million visitors the most-visited national park now sees annually.

A licensed building contractor and carpenter by trade, Perry credits his military high school in Gainesville, Georgia – at the base of the Blue Ridge and close to the beginning of the AT – with his tenacious, stick-to-it-iveness.

“What I learned there was perseverance and attention to detail, and that has led to who I am today,” he said. “As long as I have freedom, I can stick with something and get it done.”

Perry worked at a fine furniture restoration business in college, helped his brother do remodeling, and soon started his own renovation business. He moved to Asheville at age 22 and began doing high-quality restoration projects in Montford.

“It started out with just myself and a few guys doing simple designs and hands-on building and stonework,” he



The Hands of Sean Perry Co. onsite during the 2017 project to shore up the floor joists and porch of Cook Cabin in Little Cataloochee, Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

HANNAH FURGIUELE, PROVIDED BY THE HANDS OF SEAN PERRY CO.

said. “But I soon saw that, as a small-framed guy moving thousands of pounds of rock in a day, this is not going to be sustainable, not going to work long-term.”

There came a point, Perry said, when he had to decide he was going to focus on doing business from a place of craftsmanship.

“That’s an all-encompassing word to me. Back in about 2005, I started to focus this way, and I began to work with a remodeling-specific peer group,” he said. “This group taught me the fundamentals of the remodeling business specifically. It was a real game changer to learn the appropriate ways to do craftsmanship well, taught by the leaders in the construction and remodeling industry.”

Over the years working in Montford, Perry’s own dream house was one that was built by famous English architect Richard Sharp Smith, with whom he has always felt a connection.

Sharp was the man on the ground making sure the vision of the architect of Biltmore was being realized. After that project, Sharp stayed in Asheville and designed several hundred buildings, including Perry’s favorite, in which he now actually lives! Now Perry and his “hands” have inherited the legacy and are doing the needed renovations on the structures designed by these early Asheville craftsmen.

“We go into a lot of homes that

haven’t been touched, but that time is about to end,” he said. “So now we get to do our historic renovation and restoration work, and that’s so rewarding. I take that same spirit into the work in the Smokies, honoring the people who did the work and who lived their lives on that land.”

In 2018, Perry and his hands embarked on their second Cataloochee project: The Palmer Barn. The primary scope was rebuilding the access ramp to the second floor, but the team also performed rot repair on the back side of the structure, replaced some sill logs, posts and siding, and restored a door that was damaged from being pried open.

The Hands of Sean Perry has now been in business for 25 years and employs 15 high-quality restoration builders and support staff.

“It’s a hard business, but we are focused on building an extremely positive company culture to attract top talent,” he said. “We are being intentional and taking a conscious, meditative approach to doing business. It’s definitely not the typical model.”

Frances Figart is the editor of the bi-annual journal “Smokies Life” and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational non-profit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org and learn more at smokiesinformation.org.

**USA TODAY NETWORK**

**Dining Deals USA**

2DXMC92

BONUS CODE

- 1) Register and enter codes at: [www.diningdealsusa.com](http://www.diningdealsusa.com)
- 2) Enter today’s code before Monday, May 30 at 11:59 p.m.
- 3) Redeem today’s bonus code for coupon redemptions that interest you. Coupons cover restaurants, travel, family fun, automotive, shopping and more!

\* Discounts vary by merchant, location and offer; subject to availability. Offers may change without notice. Total savings vary based on the number of discounts and coupons redeemed and value of offers.

TODAY’S BONUS CODE

## Citizen Times

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

### Customer service

To view important information online related to your subscription, visit [aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com](http://aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com). You can also manage your subscription at [account.citizen-times.com](http://account.citizen-times.com). Contact the Citizen Times for questions or to report issues via email at [cizitentimes@gannett.com](mailto:cizitentimes@gannett.com) or 1-800-672-2472.

### Operating hours are:

- Monday-Friday: 8:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m.
- Saturday: 7:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m. for technical support only
- Sunday & holidays: 7:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

### Full access subscriptions

Subscribe and save today by visiting [citizen-times.com/subscribe](http://citizen-times.com/subscribe). Subscriptions below are billed per month and include access to [citizen-times.com](http://citizen-times.com), tablet and smartphone apps, and the e-Edition, a digital replica of the print edition.

- Delivery of the Sunday through Friday print editions up to \$68.00\*
- Delivery of the Sunday and Wednesday print editions up to \$32.00\*

\*Plus applicable taxes

### Corrections and clarifications

Our goal is to promptly correct errors. Email us at [accuracy@asheville.gannett.com](mailto:accuracy@asheville.gannett.com) to report a mistake or call 828-232-5829. Describe the error, where you saw it, the date, page number, or the URL.

### Contact us

**Customer Service** ..... 1-800-672-2472  
**News Director** ..... Jewell Walston | 828-232-5829  
**Advertising** ..... 828-252-5611  
**Obituaries** ..... 828-232-5966

### Postal information

The Citizen Times, USPS# 236-000, ISSN# 0336-0000, is published 6 days per week excluding Saturday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve by Gannett Media Corp, 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC and additional mailing offices. **Postmaster:** Please send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 5830, Augusta, GA 30916.