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North Twin Builders
Custom Home Builder of Wisconsin's North Woods



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By David Omastiak

In the north woods of Wisconsin, the air is brushed clean by tall pines and incredible beauty captives your attention. The stresses of everyday life depart and you are calmly transformed by the tranquility of nature. Seclusion is welcomed. Friendly smiles are common. Troubles removed. This is the place where generations have flocked to escape city life. This is the place for family vacations, fishing stories, campfire chats.

For someone born and raised in the north woods, the quiet lifestyle can sometimes be taken for granted. For visitors, this dream vacation spot can lead to wonderful lifetime memories or

a quest to find some land and build a home. The up north experience is often a wake-up call to live life better.

Building your dream home in northern Wisconsin is not necessarily an easy task. Especially if you live further south in metropolitan Milwaukee, Chicago or other distance places. Choosing the right builder can be challenging. Trust, confidence, reputation are just a few of the concerns that must be addressed. Energy efficiency and construction quality are especially critical (we're talking north woods here).

The first time I met John Volkmann of North Twin Builders was at the Building Science & Design Conference

sponsored by the Metropolitan Builder's Association (MBA). I was curious to find out why a northern Wisconsin builder was attending a Milwaukee area trade show. John was quick to point out... "I attend these types of shows to keep tabs on new building practices and technologies—it's part of the continuing education philosophy that I foster at my company."

North Twin Builders is located in Phelps Wisconsin—about as far north as you can get in Wisconsin. The company was started by John's father in 1971 and remains one of the few high-end custom homebuilders servicing Eagle River, Land O' Lakes, Minocqua and surrounding areas.

John Volkmann cut his teeth in the home building business at a very early age. He fondly recalls...“ I have pictures of when I was 8 years old on a roof helping my dad shingle—I was probably more of an inconvenience than a helper”. He worked for the company each summer during high school. After graduation he lived in Montana for a short time before returning to Phelps to rejoin the family business. In 2003, John took over the reins of the business after his dad retired—by that time John had already been managing the day to day affairs for almost 5 years.

Quality Homes For Quality Customers

On a recent visit to Phelps, I had the privilege of walking through several North Twin homes. I witnessed first hand various levels of quality construction covering the full gamut of home styles. From a simple ranch to a cozy lake cottage to an expansive lakeside estate. During my visit, it became evident to me that if North Twin Builders was compared to other area builders—they would clearly stand out “taller than the pines”.

As we toured one home, John Volkmann stated in a casual matter-of-a-fact manner “Mike Levin and Carol McErlean live here—I probably have dinner with them four to five times a year.” It’s not unusual for John to dine regularly



with customers. He might even go fishing for walleye with another. On many occasions, Rae Ann (John’s wife) and their two children get together with client families to watch a movie or spend an afternoon. The Volkmann’s like to maintain friendships with their clients even years after a project is completed. According to John...“It’s just the way we are”.

Mike and Carol are successful attorneys from Chicago with a storied family history tied to the Phelps area. When Carol wanted to build a house that re-

flected her childhood memories of life at the lake—she chose North Twin Builders.

Architecturally, the McErlean’s lake house is a 1920’s replica lake cottage filled with authentic details as well as modern day conveniences. As you walk through the home, you are transformed to a by-gone era of classic lake living. Old family photos hanging on the walls depict fun times shared by family and friends over multiple decades. Several intricate details define the character of this home—namely the wrap-around

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screen porch with bead-board ceiling; a bunk-style kids bedroom complete with hideaway play loft; the huge family room fieldstone fireplace; a built-in game table; 1920's replica kitchen appliances and bathroom fixtures; distressed wood floors...the list goes on. After the home was completed, Carol commented favorably to John "you know, we got exactly what we wanted."

Up the shore from McErlean home lies a comfortable ranch house owned by Bill & Karen Moore. Bill's brother Fred lives right next door and is a year

round resident on South Twin Lake. During construction of the McErlean house, Fred kept a careful eye on progress and visited the site often. He was so impressed that he told his brother Bill to think about using North Twin Builders if he was ever interested in remodeling his home.

John fondly recalls the day when Bill Moore walked into his office while the McErlean house was under construction and said..."I realize that you're the Bentley Builder of the Northwoods and I know you can produce a high

end home. We don't have a big budget...can you build us a house that is economical, but yet built right?"

It did not take long for Bill Moore and John Volkmann to forge a solid relationship. "We sat down and started going through the specs," said John. "I advised him on costs, we talked about insulation, sub-floor construction, various options and we developed a target budget. I told Bill if you stick to these specs we can stick to the budget. In the end, we delivered. In fact, we had \$4,000 leftover that we will use for some landscaping this summer."

Bill Moore proudly proclaims that North Twin Builders built his retirement ranch home for the money he could afford. "John's crew was exceptional, very polite and professional," recalls Bill. "They tore down our old family cottage which had been added onto several times since 1918 and built us a very economical comfortable home. We could not be more pleased with the way things turned-out."

Larry Kreiter, is a successful businessman from Menomonee Falls who has vacationed with his family in the Eagle River area for over 25 years. When he and his wife Sandy decided to build their dream home on Kathan Lake, he deliberated long and hard before choosing North Twin Builders.

"Milwaukee to Eagle River is about a 4-1/2 hour drive—a significant distance





when you're building a new home," states Larry. "We needed a builder we could trust, someone that required little direction and handholding, someone with a solid reputation. When you're hours away, you can't frequently swing by the site to check on things. So, you need to trust that your builder is there and the job is being done right. John really kept us informed. He would even send pictures on a regular basis to show construction progress."

The Kreiter home is situated on 5 acres overlooking Kathan Lake. Flanked by towering pines and beautiful birch trees, the home is a majestic lake estate encompassing over 9000 sq. ft. Architecturally, it blends northwoods comfort with traditional French country design. Sweeping lake views, exquisite wood ceilings, handcrafted built-ins,

and superior craftsmanship is evident throughout this amazing residence. The home offers the ideal entertainment retreat complete with a state-of-the-art theater room. One of Larry's favorite relaxation spots however is in the year-round, cedar paneled screened porch. "I like to lounge on the couch and absorb the peaceful lakeview...you might even catch me napping from time to time".

Skilled, Cross-Trained Craftsmen

John Volkmann understands the benefit of ongoing education and employee training. The company is staffed with skilled employees that wear more than one hat. Over the years, he has found that when employees are given the opportunity to work in different areas of construction they perform better, avoid burnout and are more motivated.

"I think people get bored if they are not challenged," says John. "Our masons are also trained to do framing. Our framers are trained to do finished carpentry or flooring or dry walling. We retain good, talented employees because they get to do their first love—which might be mason work—but they also develop other new skills. This keeps our group energized and creative."

North Twin Builders is totally pro-training. If the company lacks knowledge in a certain area, John will send his people to a seminar or do whatever it takes to help them learn more. Two years ago, he paid for anyone on his staff who wanted to attend the Better Buildings: Better Business Conference held in the Wisconsin Dells. The annual three-day conference - sponsored by the Energy Center of Wisconsin—offers various

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seminars on high performance building, energy efficiency, green building techniques, air quality and other building issues. North Twin Builders attended the conference five years straight.

For the past 6-7 years the company has been working on energy efficiency. North Twin Builders is now a Wisconsin EnergyStar certified builder. The company is also a strong proponent of the Wisconsin mandate that requires builders to have DCQ and DCC qualifiers to be considered a licensed contractor. "Without qualifiers, building permits cannot be obtained," states John emphatically. "and, if a contractor does not have a permit he should not be doing the work."

John is also a licensed home inspector, which brings a special skill to the art of building quality homes. "I can help people understand the benefits of quality insulation and energy efficient construction methods." He has even authored technical papers that detail building standards for the consumer – part of his pro-education mentality.

Quality Reputation

It is easy to get to know John Volkman—he has a high drive business ethic complemented with a low-key demeanor. He has surrounded himself with employees that are conscientious and caring. John clearly wants North Twin Builders to be recognized as a

high-quality contractor and he takes steps to ensure the homes they build are "the best we can build".

"Once I was at a conference and the guest speaker asked builders in the audience to raise a hand if you believe the house you build should last 30 years, 40 years, 50 years, and so forth," recalls John. "I was the only guy to raise my hand at 100 years. I believe that if built properly, a home should last 100 years. Homes in Europe are 200 to 300 years old. Why shouldn't our homes last that long?"

North Twin Builders started an annual customer appreciation party last year and invited 215 clients. Over 100 people attended the event including the owners of one of the very first home that the company built. "It was neat to get everyone together for a social event and I enjoyed hearing about the positive experiences people had with us," proclaims John.

The company has also periodically sent mailings to clients. "We offer to visit the house and check on things (for free) or fix something that is not quite right," says John. "Recently we sent out 40-45 letters and only 2-3 responded back. One comment was..." "Well there's really nothing wrong with the house, but we'd love to see you again!"

TBJ

