

Builder/Architect

Feature
The Water Closet



Cates Fine Homes

Family Owned Since 1970

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By Mason Riddle

The age-old phrase “blood is thicker than water” could be Cates Fine Homes’ motto. A family business started in 1970 by Judd Cates, the enterprise is now managed by three of his children — Jay, Jeff and Jennifer — and employs an in-law or two. Although semi-retired, Judd never strays too far away. Thirty-six years later, the business is still located in Stillwater, MN, where the entire Cates family was born and raised. No reason to change a good thing.

Jay and Jeff started learning the trade from Judd before they could drive. Both remember a lot of the basics: cleaning up job sites and sweeping. Eventually, both began to learn real carpentry skills from Judd, and they were required to go to the office at night for sales meetings to see how the business side worked. “We did all the work on every house,” states Jay. “Early on we would

frame it up, side it, and do all the finished carpentry work on the interior. Then at night and on the weekend we’d meet with the clients and subs, and look for the next project.”

By the late 1990s, Cates had logged a slow but steady increase in the number of jobs completed each year. To reflect this 30-year trajectory, the business name was changed four times from The Carpenters, to J. L. Cates & Sons, to Cates Construction to the current Cates Fine Homes. “Our volume of fine custom homes was growing and we had to reconfigure how we do the business,” explains Jay. “And, by this time, Cates was supporting three families.”

When Jennifer came on board in 1998, jobs were redefined. Jay and Jeff, who had originally done all the carpentry work themselves, took on more administrative roles. Jay and Jeff now

Formal living room



PHOTO BY JOHN HANSON

Eat-in kitchen



oversee all of the work on their increasingly detailed building projects, communicating continually with clients, subcontractors and architects. Jay is now the front man. Mild-mannered, he talks to the potential client to identify their needs and, hopefully, secure the job. "I am also on several sites every single day, making sure everything is moving forward," says Jay. Jeff is the projects manager, intimately involved with the client and subcontractors; he follows the nuts and bolts progression of a home on a daily basis. Jennifer, a former CPA, is in the office much of the time, overseeing the finances, fielding old and new clients, troubleshooting and making sure everyone is getting what they need. She also makes sure projects stay on time and on budget. All

of the carpentry has now been delegated to two fine carpenters, Ken Bernardin and Dave Johnson, who have been Cates employees since the late 1980s.

"Our years of hands-on experience building homes and tearing apart others has really helped working with clients and architects," Jay says. "It was tough to stop doing the actual carpentry. I had a hard time learning that I was *not* the only one who could do it exactly right."

Cates' business consists of new construction, remodels and additions, the majority of which are located in the Twin Cities' eastern suburbs and along the St. Croix River Valley. In the last five years Cates has moved from building basic, nice quality homes to higher-end building, which "requires so much more timing and planning," explains Jay. Cates also has begun to do more work with custom architects such as Robert Gerloff, AIA, with SALA Architects, David Salmela at Jackson Meadow in Marine on St. Croix, Larson Brenner of Stillwater, and Michael Huber Architects, among others. Over the last three years, several of their projects have been featured in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune's* "Home of the Month" section, and *Midwest Home & Garden*. Their projects usually range from 1,500 to 12,000 square feet and currently they are working on a remodel that is close to 9,000 square feet. "We are thrilled to be lined up with various custom architects," Jay comments. "It is just a blast to work with architects of distinction and we are doing it more and

more." Jay recognizes that architects all work differently and design in different styles, which requires significant skill and knowledge from the carpenters.

Cates takes the time and has the patience to figure out what the architect — and the client — really wants. Then they provide options. "If the architect can draw it, we can build it," Jay says. "Our guys are great, they can do anything." And if something is not a good idea from a building perspective, Cates will have a conversation with the architect and client.

Cates is also a business with a heart and has not forgotten its more humble beginnings. They continue to work on small projects for people including windows, roofs and overhangs. Jay



PHOTOS BY JOHN HANSON

relates a recent job for an elderly woman that involved rebuilding the small porch and overhang at her front door. She was so appreciative that Cates took the time and effort to help her that she showed up on their doorstep the next morning with a check in hand. “We just loved that,” Jay says, laughing.

Jay underscores that Cates is also very business conscious and respectful of their clients’ and subcontractors’ time and calendar. “We are very conscious of our schedule — our book,” explains Jay. “We book out, but we don’t overbook. We have everyone lined up and we always meet our schedule. We don’t leave our clients wondering if they will see us again.” To stay on top of the calendar, Jay, Jeff and Jennifer have biweekly meetings where they confirm a job is on track. They seldom work on more than six projects at time and they are staggered. “Timing is really critical when you are doing a remodel. You can’t keep a family and kids out of a house longer than what was determined,” comments Jennifer. “We are goal setters and calendar watchers.”

One of Cates’ current projects is *Inspiration* in Bayport, MN, developed by CPDC. Cates is one of four custom builders for the 245-acre site, 170 acres or 70 percent of which is restored prairie and savannah. *Inspiration* will consist of 250 single-family homes and 73 condominiums in cluster arrangements. The development also features a nature center and trails, and is billing itself as an eco-friendly neighborhood with a “new, small-town” feel.

Cates’ model home, sited in the southeast part of the development, has a prime location since the land directly across the



Master bath



PHOTOS BY JOHN HANSON

road will remain open space. Modest in scale when compared to most contemporary development homes, Cates' model has 2,200 square feet of finished space and 800 square feet of unfinished space on the lower "lookout" level. The home, designed by Larson Brenner of Stillwater, is in a vernacular, country/arts-and-crafts style with steeply pitched rooflines, a spacious front porch with tapering rectangular columns and paned windows. No energy-eating entryway here; just a comfortable, human-scale approach leading from the exterior to the interior.

The open-plan first floor comprises a living room with slate-faced gas fireplace, a light-filled dining room, a kitchen with high-efficiency appliances and an island with space for four

Dining room



PHOTO BY JOHN HANSON

stools, and a large eating "nook" with banquet that will seat eight comfortably. The floors, fireplace mantle and stairs are milled from Douglas fir salvaged from former Montgomery Ward stores and stained a rich golden brown. A small office, half bath, a mudroom with storage and bench seating, and a laundry with a counter made from recycled paper composite product round out the first floor. All the millwork is painted white, giving a casual but tasteful ambience.

A broad staircase off the main entrance leads to the second floor that features three bedrooms and two baths. The master bedroom suite is roomy but intimate with great views to the prairie across the road. Its bath is outfitted with a walk-in shower with dual showerheads, a large tub, ample closets and storage. The other two bedrooms have nice-sized closets, plenty of windows and share a bath.

Jay points out that the home is Energy Star compliant and that there is radiant, in-floor heat in the two-car garage, lookout level, mudroom-laundry and baths. The boiler is 98 percent efficient and the home is insulated with foam.

Is the home a good value at \$674,900? The potential buyer will need to determine that. The home does provide a pleasing sense of scale and proportion for those unhappy with the mega entryway, energy-eating suburban development home. Ecologically friendly and energy respectful, Cates' model is made more desirable because of its natural, outdoor amenities — from views to gardens to trails. And, it is hard not to believe that the house has been built exceptionally well.

The ideal project for Cates is one where they can work as a team with the architect, client, contractor and interior designer. "Our projects are truly custom," explains Jennifer. "We are custom builders. We are not the architects; designing is for the experts. But we can do whatever is needed." Cates also puts a premium on customer service. "We build homes, but we also build relationships with people. Doing a good job at making our clients' dreams come true is something we are proud to be a part of," Jennifer says with satisfaction. "We build fine custom homes." ■