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Web posted **Friday, March 5, 2004**

**Area firm hits milestone**  
Lakewood Builders has been constructing Wausau Homes for three decades

By **JENNIFER STOCKINGER**  
Staff Writer



BAXTER -- Leaving the concrete business in the Twin Cities area to start a company in Baxter has given Bob Ruud 30 years of pride and joy.

Ruud started **Lakewood Builders** in 1973, which constructs and sells Wausau Homes, or paneled homes that are built in a manufacturing plant in Wausau, Wis.

This model home built by Lakewood Builders in Baxter earned the 2003 Best Model Home Award by Wausau Homes. The ranch-style home, accented with Minnesota River rock, is on Emily Circle in Baxter and recently was sold. (Dispatch Photos by Jennifer Stockinger)

In its first year of business, **Lakewood Builders** constructed 28 homes. To date, the company has built more than 700 homes. One of the first model homes Ruud built was on Highway 371 north of Baxter, which now houses Gull Lake Brick Fireplaces and Spas.

One of the biggest challenges Ruud has faced in the past 30 years is people's perception of Wausau Homes. He said many people think the homes are double-wide manufactured homes or modular homes that

come in two pieces.

"We do everything we can to avoid this image," said Ruud. "This is a stick built house."

Ruud said to help people understand what a Wausau home is, the company tries to get people into one of the model homes so they can see for themselves what the house is like.

Wausau Homes are engineered and built in a manufacturing plant in components in a controlled environment and are independently inspected. When all the components are complete, such as the dining room wall, they are sent to the job site. **Lakewood Builders** crews and local subcontractors then have the home's structure built in two days, with a 90-day completion date.

Ruud said, "**Lakewood Builders** uses only the finest materials from some of the most respected vendors in the world. A home is only as good as the components and materials used to build and outfit it."

When customers come to **Lakewood Builders**, Ruud said the company offers several floor plans and options. From flooring to paint colors, from counter tops to wood finishes, customers' homes are outfitted to reflect their personal styles, said Ruud.

When **Lakewood Builders** began, it had about 10 floor plans available with eight or 10 options. The average home then had a low-pitch roof and paneled walls. Through the years the number of plans increased with technology and customers were able to bring any plan to **Lakewood Builders**. The number of plans rose to more than 300 and today the company can build any plan.




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The living room in this model home features a stone fireplace accented by lights. The living room is open alongside the kitchen.

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Soon the company will have software that will show customers a virtual tour of their home, Ruud said. The software allows homeowners to change floor plans on the computer and then switch over to the virtual tour. They will instantly see how the room or house changes from the inside and out.

Ruud said today everyone wants a maintenance free exterior home, with a lot of glass and an open floor plan. In the early years, **Lakewood Builders** constructed many two-bedroom homes that were about 960

square feet on the lake. The average price of the home then was around \$70,000.

Today the average home is a three-bedroom rambler about 1,700 square feet in size. The home has a full basement to add onto the square footage with 2 1/2 baths. The average price now is around \$175,000.

While the company continues to build lake homes, the number of non-lakeshore residential homes has increased.

**Lakewood Builders'** service area also has expanded from within 40 miles from Brainerd to 80 miles. However, Ruud said the company will build a home for anyone in any location. The main service area is in central and northern Minnesota.

When the business began Ruud hired one person to help build homes. Today he has a staff of around 13, plus subcontractors.

The economy and interest rates have greatly affected Ruud's business. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, interest rates were as high as 18 percent, which had a dampening affect on business, said Ruud.

He said one year they only built about eight houses, compared to an average of 30.

Six years ago, Ruud began a new venture. He bought 26 acres of land in Baxter and developed a residential plat called Westwood Oaks. Of 40 lots, today 17 remain.

"This is my retirement," said Ruud. "In the next 30 years I hope to retire and pass this on to the younger guys that have been here."

Ruud said they have a model home in the development to show customers, and when it sells they build a new one. Ruud said they try to stay one house ahead of schedule in the development.

The company recently sold a model home in the development. **Lakewood Builders** earned the 2003 Best Model Home Award by Wausau Homes for this home. The ranch-style home, accented with Minnesota River rock, was judged on criteria that included curb appeal, layout, use of colors



Wes Wagner of Wagner Electric in Brainerd used a power drill to drill a hole in the stud to prepare to wire this home. **Lakewood Builders** is working on this home in its

and innovative designs.

Westwood Oaks development in  
Baxter.

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The three-bedroom home has a full basement, two baths, a gas fireplace, hardwood floors, three-stall garage and sits on a large corner lot of Emily Circle.

**Lakewood Builders'** main business is building residential homes. However, it has built a few motels and small apartment buildings.

So far 2004 is off to a good start, Ruud said. Currently the company has five basements complete waiting for components of the home to arrive.

Residents will have a chance this spring to look at one of **Lakewood Builders'** homes in the Lakes Area Tour. Last year the company took home Best of Show by the Mid-Minnesota **Builders** Association.

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