

# "TO EVER SERVE OUR CUSTOMERS BETTER"

**From Humble Beginnings, Fabick Cat has Grown  
as a Premier Caterpillar Dealer  
and Service Company**



By Patrick Lapinski

**W**hen it comes to quality products, reputation, recognition and respect, there's no better name than Caterpillar. Servicing and supporting the Caterpillar brand carries with it a lot of pride and responsibility. And in Northwest Wisconsin, Fabick Cat of Superior is the authorized dealer for this prestigious product.

If you're unfamiliar with the Fabick name, you may be surprised to learn that its origin actually preceded the formation of Caterpillar. The John Fabick Tractor Co. started out in the St. Louis area in 1917, selling farm and agricultural implements, before becoming an official Caterpillar dealer in 1927, which was two years after Caterpillar was formed.

Over the next half-century, Fabick Tractor steadily built its own brand as a Caterpillar dealer, serving portions of Missouri, Oklahoma, Illinois and Kansas. As a family-owned business, each succeeding generation left their stamp on the business. In 1982, Joe Fabick Sr., one of the sons of founder John Fabick, broke away from his siblings, leaving Missouri to start his own Cat dealership in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with the assistance of the Fabick Tractor Co., which led to the founding of the FABCO Equipment Co. of Milwaukee.

Joe Fabick Sr. operated FABCO from 1982 until 2001 before turning the business over to his son, Jeré Fabick. In 2015, Jeré and his cousin, Doug Fabick of Fabick Tractor in Fenton, Missouri, brought the two independent dealerships back together in a move that strengthened the business relationship with Caterpillar and reunited family ties.

Following the merger, the Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin dealerships were renamed Fabick Cat, with Doug Fabick appointed CEO and dealer principal and Jeré Fabick serving as president and co-dealer principal. The press release at the time of the merger stated that "Fabick Cat capabilities now include more than 1,100 employees including 550 professional service technicians, 37 locations with 200 service bays and a fleet of over 200 service vehicles."

Leveraging its strong business foundation and product knowledge, Fabick Cat continues looking for growth opportunities to increase market territory. Today, the business employs about 1,200 people and has a total of 36 locations: Eau Claire, Green Bay, La Crosse, Madison, Milwaukee, Superior and Wausau in Wisconsin; Marquette, Michigan; Mount Carmel, Salem and Troy in Illinois; and Cape Girardeau, Columbia, Fenton (where headquarters are based), Foristell, Joplin, Springfield and Willow Springs in Missouri.

"To Ever Serve Our Customers Better" is the motto that employees live and breathe, says Branch Product Support Manager Mike Olson. Fabick Cat in Superior is one of a number of Fabick dealerships located throughout Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, all connected through a supply chain network.

Fabick Cat supports several major customer groups, one being the equipment most of us instantly recognize – big construction machinery. The road graders, dozers, articulated trucks, excavators, backhoes and similar machines that fascinated us as kids are still impressive, even to adults. In Superior, you can find Fabick Cat products at work along the waterfront at the Midwest Energy Co. coal dock or Graymont's lime plant, and in the five-county area on rights-of-way





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— BRANCH PRODUCT SUPPORT MANAGER MIKE OLSON

and environmental projects for Northern Clearing Inc. in Ashland, or on road projects for Northern Interstate Construction of South Range. Up until recent downturns in the paper industry, Fabick Cat has also been supporting local loggers, dedicating as many as three service technicians a season to keep machinery up and running for the timber industry.

Emergency electric power generation is another strong suit of Caterpillar. Fabick Cat in Superior supplies and services emergency generators for a range of customers, including hospitals, banks and farms as well as diesel power

generation engines for ships in the Great Lakes maritime industry. The American Steamship Co. is one of Fabick Cat's big customers during the winter months, when ships are in seasonal layup. Olson said that Fabick has two dedicated Cat marine diesel mechanics who work virtually nonstop on overhauls and maintenance from the middle of January until early April in the shipyard and on various docks around the Twin Ports harbor area.

It's no surprise that a lot of its customer base comprises large, industrial-based businesses. However, Fabick Cat also generates a lot of revenue from smaller clients, too – local landscapers, electrical contractors, city municipalities and farmers. Caterpillar offers a variety of products such as skid steers and small excavators, accessories from tillers and mowers to snow removal attachments, and a full line of compressors and power generation options.

"Downtime is very expensive for them," said Olson, especially here in the Northland when worktime is limited by seasonal changes. "Being able to get customers back up and running with little or no downtime is what I kind of base my day on. It makes me happy and satisfied at the end of the day if I can get that landscaper back up or that truck driver back on the road, or help a guy that's out on a pipeline doing some work and has a cylinder or hose that blows. To get a guy out there immediately and get it taken care of, and later see a text message back that says, 'Hey, thanks for the great service' – that's why I'm here. That keeps me coming back every day: customer service."

Nobody knows customer service better than Mike Lurndal, the territory manager in Northwest Wisconsin for Fabick Cat. He began his career in 1981 with the Nagle-Hart Tractor and Equipment Co., one of two authorized





Caterpillar dealerships operating in Wisconsin at the time. When Caterpillar made the decision to have only one dealership in the state, Lurndal soon found himself working for the newly incorporated FABCO (the predecessor of today's Fabick Cat) in its Eau Claire warehouse. Three years later, in December 1984, he moved with the job to Superior. "At that time

Caterpillar's Cat Financial, which is headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee.

After 39 years in the industry, Lurndal knows one thing for sure: The best part of his job is dealing with the customers. "We've got just some awesome people in our industry – hardworking, honest, just a pleasure to deal with," he said.

## "WE HAVE THE HIGHEST QUALITY, MOST DURABLE AND LONGEST LASTING EQUIPMENT ON THE MARKET."

– NORTHWEST WISCONSIN TERRITORY MANAGER MIKE LURNDAL

there was one parts man, which was me, and one field service mechanic," Lurndal recalled. In those days, FABCO was located on Tower Avenue next to Pete's Tower Service Station.

Being a salesman for one of the most admired and prestigious brands in the world has its advantages. "We have the highest quality, most durable and longest lasting equipment on the market," said Lurndal. Fabick Cat employees work hard to maintain that reputation for excellence, of course, because there's always competition. "Everybody wants a piece of that pie; we're all after it," he added. "The competition is obviously the hardest part of it."

Customers expect less downtime and more production with Cat products, Lurndal explained, reinforcing the Fabick Cat service-oriented approach to business. "We push hard on service after the sale as well as the uptime of equipment and the resale value. We do hold an advantage generally in the resale end of things," he said. Fabick Cat can also offer financial incentives for customers through

To differentiate itself from the competition, Fabick Cat offers robust after-sales support. Product life for Cat components in machinery is usually rated on operation hours. For instance, a new excavator should typically operate for 10,000 to 15,000 hours before the first rebuild. Depending on the customer's location, Fabick Cat will perform the maintenance either in its shop or on location. Regular maintenance is based on hourly usage increments ranging from 200 to 500 hours, depending on the machine and working environment.

Shop Lead Man Steven Langjahr heads a team of technicians driven to keep the machinery running for their customers. "I maintain the customer workflow coming through the shop. I'm also the lead mechanic, so if there are complications, I work through them, whether it's working with our technical support people or just hands-on troubleshooting," he explained. When a machine comes into the shop, Langjahr coordinates

the repairs and makes sure the right mechanic is on the job. After their work is complete, he also ensures that the billing is done, the product heads out the door and most importantly, that the customer is happy.

Originally from Central Wisconsin, Langjahr was interested in pursuing a career in engine mechanics when he enrolled at the Fox Valley Technical College in Oshkosh. The college, in partnership with Fabick Cat, had established FABTECH, a service technician education center. FABTECH provides two Caterpillar-specific career tracks for service technicians – one focusing on electric power generation and marine engine service technicians and the other on Caterpillar construction equipment.



"Basically, it was a job interview," recalled Langjahr. "They were looking to train mechanics so that they could hire knowledgeable mechanics right off the bat and get a good career for them. I was in farm equipment before that. After high school, I was working for a New Holland dealership and then got ahold of this [training opportunity] out of high school, and I went straight down to FABTECH in Oshkosh. They gave me a job after a year up in Superior." For Langjahr, that decision to enroll in FABTECH has led to a 13-year career with Fabick Cat.

In today's age of computers, the term "mechanic" is almost becoming obsolete due to this profession's integration of technology. Langjahr refers to his mechanics as "technicians" in deference to their combined mechanical skills and computer savvy. The integration of computer technology – utilizing GPS (Global Positioning System), in particular – has transformed the road machinery industry, for example. Thanks to GPS technology,

Caterpillar's grade control system can establish precise grades down to an eighth of an inch for grading with a dozer. And the technology just keeps progressing. "If you want to set slope on a road so that the water runs off the road into the ditch at a 2-degree angle, you set the blade at that 2-degree angle, and you just watch the computer and drive the machine," Langjahr said in providing another example.

Computer technology also enables Fabick Cat technicians to "jump on" a machine virtually anywhere in the country, Langjahr noted, since



they can pull up the codes and troubleshoot it over the phone. Still, there's no replacement for the actual hands-on work after a problem is diagnosed. Fabick Cat in Superior has four field service technicians with trucks that are geared for 24/7 field service as well as six full-time technicians in the shop. All of the techs have their own laptops set up to assist customers.

Fabick Cat and Caterpillar invest heavily in training, sending their technicians to an internal training school regarding all aspects of Caterpillar machinery at Fabick Cat in Green Bay. Olson says this training is critical to stay up to date with changes. "One week you might train on motor graders, one week you might train on skid steers and one week you might train on generators,"



**"ONE WEEK YOU MIGHT TRAIN ON MOTOR GRADERS, ONE WEEK YOU MIGHT TRAIN ON SKID STEERS AND ONE WEEK YOU MIGHT TRAIN ON GENERATORS. ALL OF OUR TECHNICIANS ARE TRAINED 80 HOURS A YEAR MINIMUM IN OUR LOCATIONS."**

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he said. "All of our technicians are trained 80 hours a year minimum in our locations." Staying current with ever-evolving technology provides Fabick employees an important competitive edge to better serve their customers.

And that's the most satisfying part of the job for this company's employees: diagnosing and correcting equipment problems that most people wouldn't be able to pinpoint. "When you can fix something and get a customer going, when the machine's up and operating so the customer is happy and back on the road, that's the most satisfying thing for me," Langjahr said.

In Superior, plans for expansion are always in the back of the mind of a branch manager, says Olson, although due to the recent economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, those plans are on hold. In the meantime, however, the School District of Superior has joined Fabick Cat's service roster. The company added a parking lot facility and wired it for electricity so that buses can be plugged in during the cold weather months. "We made a big expansion that way with letting them put their buses right here on our grounds," Olson explained. "That's something I'm kind of proud of - that we've taken the school district and brought them up to speed to keep their buses in tip-top shape."



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**"THE PEOPLE THAT WORK HERE ARE KIND OF CLOSE-KNIT, ALMOST LIKE A FAMILY... WHEN YOU LIKE THE PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH, IT MAKES IT EASY TO GO TO WORK."**

– WAREHOUSE COUNTERMAN BROCK ZYCHOWSKI

Fabick Cat in Superior employs 22 full-time staff, including Office Manager/Service Coordinator Bethany Karaba, whose job is to juggle all the incoming jobs and handle initial customer service calls. In addition to the technicians and a shuttle driver who continually moves parts and equipment between Superior and the Eau Claire branch, Fabick Cat employs three parts and counter workers in its warehouse. And keeping supplies on hand for future

orders and current jobs is a busy job, says Warehouse Counterman Brock Zychowski.

A typical day for Zychowski and his work mates usually begins around 6:30 in the morning in Fabick Cat's 5,000-square-foot, two-story warehouse. They start by putting stock away, sort all of the customer parts that were ordered the day prior, and then prep the parts for the in-house mechanics to get them situated and ready to go each day. As noted,



Fabick Cat operates a shuttle system throughout its Wisconsin territory, so Zychowski and his associates can order out of Eau Claire or Madison and usually have the parts in Superior by the next business day. In Northwest Wisconsin, Fabick Cat also utilizes drop boxes in Sarona, Spooner and Hayward, so customers don't have to drive all the way to Superior to pick up their parts.

"By the time we're done putting stock away and sorting out parts, it's about 7:30 – and then the phones start ringing," Zychowski said of a typically busy day at the Superior location. In addition to his warehouse duties,



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Zychowski works closely with the Eau Claire branch to facilitate equipment rentals. It's not unusual for a customer to sign a long-term rental contract for a one-time project on a piece of machinery that could cost millions of dollars to purchase.

Keeping customers satisfied is Fabick Cat's top priority – but not at the expense of employees. Mirroring corporate leadership, Superior branch leaders value the people who work for them, which is why Fabick Cat has

a well-earned reputation as a great employer. "The people that work here are kind of close-knit, almost like a family," said Zychowski. The pay, health benefits, and retirement plan are "pretty close to spot on," he added, noting that "When you like the people you work with, it makes it easy to go to work."

"Most of my employees are 10-plus years in Superior," Olson said. "Once you get here, it seems like you're here long-term." He's proud to work for the Fabick family and with his own

"family" of employees as well. Fabick Cat's "To Ever Serve Our Customers Better" motto is succinct and timeless, and everybody here understands that brand. "I've been here for 10 years, and I've been in the service industry for 30," said Olson. "I would say that this company is probably the best company that I've ever worked for." 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.



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