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Burt Farbman's farm in Northern Michigan started out as 160 acres. It now encompasses two-square miles and includes several lakes.

PERRY CLARK

By Al Stark
News Staff Writer

Burt Farbman, the real estate man, is lunching at the London Chop House with three bankers. They finish their money talk, close their folders and then someone asks Farbman what for him is a magic question:

"How's your farm?"

Make no mistake, money is the reason Farbman lunches with bankers, not farming.

Ever since he was a boy, Farbman says without apology, his goal was to be rich. Today, at 46, he is head of Farbman/Stein and Co., a full-service real estate and development firm headquartered in Troy. By Burt Farbman's account, it owns or manages or is partner in 11 million square feet of office buildings, shopping centers, industrial buildings and apartment complexes, most of it in the Detroit suburbs. That doesn't count the open land it owns outright or in partnerships, awaiting the right time for development.

NOW FARBMAN and his firm might be poised to make a big mark on Detroit proper, his place of birth.

As the first wave of business moguls who stepped in to help the city after the 1967 Detroit riot die, age and wane — Ford, Fisher, Hudson — Detroit looks to new white patrons. Well-heeled men in their 40s and 50s with ties to the city, like Farbman, are already hearing the call.

He's already been active in Detroit. Farbman is a key partner in the private syndicate that bought and restored the historic Wayne County Courthouse. He has a project in mind for another downtown building that may not be historic but certainly holds a permanent place in the memory of many Detroiters: 1040 West Fort Street, for many years the home of the draft board for Wayne County. He is one of the syndicate whose members bought (or, to use the word so often applied

Field of dreams

Developer Burt Farbman turns real estate into green acres

the farm and it's as if he is transported.

"**HAVE ANY** of you ever plowed a field?" Farbman asks the bankers at lunch. There's a big, boyish smile on his face. "There's nothing like it. Do you know you have to go over the field four times? The first time you turn the earth. Then you go over it again and you spread lime. Then you go over it again. The fourth time you plant. They had to tell me everything.

"I went out the first time and took a couple of turns around the field. Then I began to look beyond the field, at the vista, and I began to get a sense of how much land there is. Then I told myself, act like a farmer, so I made myself look down and concentrate on what was directly in front of me, looking for rocks or roots, the way a farmer would.

"I loved it."

Farbman's wife Suzy, the Detroit Monthly magazine writer, says that everybody who visits the farm, which is just south of Charlevoix in northern Michigan, is urged to get on the tractor and plow a little. Burt almost insists. He wants everyone to know what it's like.

"**WE WERE** putting in oats that first time," Farbman tells the bankers at the Chop House. "For our horses. We have nine horses. We had planted more oats than we needed, and the fellow who takes care of things for me in Charlevoix said, 'You know, you can sell those oats.'

"I hadn't thought of that. I figured, not counting my time on the tractor, that those oats had cost me \$3,000, so I waited to see what we could sell them for. The fellow checked around and called me and said we could sell all the oats we didn't need for \$300.

"I told him, don't sell a one. Not a one! I went right back up there and bought a silo and we kept all those oats. We're still feeding them to our horses."

It's difficult to tell that kind of story about yourself without sounding like a braggart. You know, if I want a silo, I buy a silo. It has that look-at-me ring to it. Yet



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Farbman

Developer turns real estate into green acres

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and those oats. He is so open about his enjoyment that it takes off the edge that might be there if someone else told the story.

OR CONSIDER the size of the farm: It started out as a 160-acre parcel, near Ellsworth, nine miles south of Charlevoix.

"I asked a real estate agent to find us 20 acres where we could ride," says Farbman. "He suggested this." Now, because Farbman has been buying adjacent parcels as they become available, the "farm" has grown immensely, to two full square miles, including a couple of lakes.

You might wonder if that's not maybe too much land for any one person. Should anybody control that much of Northern Michigan, already overrun in places by developers?

Then Farbman says, "I was out on the farm one day when I realized that I could shout as loud as I could and no one, not one single person, would hear me. I never realized there could be that much land. I shouted again and again. It really got to me."

LISTEN TO that and you might think he's exactly the sort of fellow you'd want owning as much of Northern Michigan as he can afford, because he loves it the way it is and hasn't been driven to redesign it.

Farbman's rise in real estate has been attended by very little personal publicity. Neither by personality nor style does he seem to court it.

He was born to Edith and Simon Farbman, she a schoolteacher and he an obstetrician. The family lived off West Seven Mile Road when Farbman was born, then moved to the Sherwood Forest neighborhood when he was about 3. He has two sisters, one older and one younger.

"My father died when I was 11," says Farbman. "In those days they made house calls and it seems he was always gone when I was a little boy. I don't know that I ever really knew him."



DALE G. YOUNG/The Detroit News

Burt Farbman was a key partner in the private syndicate that bought and restored the historic Wayne County Courthouse. He'd also like to restore 1040 West Fort St., the former home of the draft board for Wayne County.

says, "Some time ago, I was sitting around with a group of guys and a bottle of wine and we got to talking about how deep the relationships are that you have with your parents. I was absolutely shocked by some of the things the other guys said. One fellow told how he could never have much respect for his father because his father had never been as successful as he was. I couldn't understand this. Here I had had this wonderful relationship with the one parent I had really come to know. I couldn't understand what it would be like not to have a relationship like that.

"Not long ago, I arranged to take a whole summer off. I wanted to spend it with our two sons, so I would have the chance to really know them and they would have the chance to know me. We spent the summer at Charlevoix.

"**DAVID, WHO** is 17, came in one day with this new haircut and asked me how I liked it. It had something hanging way down in back. I told him I didn't like it, didn't like it much at all. A few days later, he and I were in the car up there and he looked at his watch and he said, 'I'll make you a deal if you can find

"Then I got in trouble," he says. "Well, not real trouble." Whatever it was, he was sent to finish high school at Valley Forge Military Academy. He returned to major in business at Wayne State University, but he says:

"I really couldn't wait to get out and get to work and make money. School was always secondary to me."

He worked as a digger for Rose Builders and then worked at Burton Title and Abstract Co. and at Advance Mortgage.

NEXT STEP was a job in the brokerage section of Schostak Realty, where he stayed 10 years. He was promoted, then was named to the board and became a stockholder. He served on the important development committee, charged with unearthing new opportunities. Another member of this committee was Lee Stein, who became a friend. They left Schostak and formed their own company, Farbman/Stein.

If you want to invest in real estate, Farbman/Stein's brokerage division will find you something, for a fee. If you already own real estate, say an apartment house or a block of storefronts, the management division will operate them for you, for a fee. If it's vacant land you own and you want a set of stores or apartments on it, the construction division will build for you. If you have the land and an idea but not the capital, the financing division will hunt up the money. In any of these scenarios, Farbman/Stein might become your partner.

"Each division is designed to be a profit center, to pay the overhead and supply money for our developments," says Farbman.

Development, in turn, dreams up projects to be financed through the financing division, built by the construction end of the firm, managed by the property management wing.

WHEN IT works right (Farbman says, "When you're lucky."), everything feeds everything else and it grows and grows.

"In real estate," he says, "most often you are using others' money, not yours. What Lee and I really had to offer when we started on our own was our expertise in every area of real estate. You use that to attract money. Sometimes it is individual investors, or it's the banks or insurance companies."

"Of course, when you are operating with money from the banks or the insurance companies, that interest clock is ticking all the time. It doesn't stop. For a long time, when I lay my head down on my pillow I could hear the interest clock going, like a metronome."

What was Farbman/Stein's first big deal?

Farbman says, with a laugh, "Well, it wasn't really big, but it sure was big to us at the time. It was the Pearle Vision Center on 14 Mile Road across from Oakland Mall. It was a triple-lease deal. I still own the building, with Lee Stein's estate."

Stein was the outside man in the partnership, says Farbman, the more visible and out-and-about of the two, the salesman. In 1987, while bicycling in Michigan's Thumb, Stein fell dead of a heart attack at the age of 52.

"**I MISSED** the back and forth with him," says Farbman. "You know, should we get in on this deal, should we stay out. You know each other and you toss things back and forth between you. That was gone."

"And, of course, I lost a good friend."

Farbman, the inside man in the partnership, became both. He says he now makes a point of taking four or five speaking engagements a year, to help him get over being uncomfortable speaking before groups.

Today, he says he's also spending more and more time in Detroit.

"The suburbs today probably have more office buildings, apartments and shopping centers than they need," he says. "In Detroit, on the other hand, there is demand and need."

Farbman would not, by any

means, be the first developer to turn to Detroit after making a pile in the suburbs.

Max Fisher helped populate Troy with the huge Somerset Park Apartments complex before coming downtown to try to repopulate Detroit with the Riverfront Apartments. Alfred Taubman got enormously wealthy with suburban malls before lending his name to the aborted effort to build a mall downtown. In each case, more than money-to-be-made was at stake. Praise was heaped on Fisher for doing Detroit the favor of Riverfront, a profit-making venture which local, state and federal government made easier and less costly through loan guarantees, tax abatements and more; Fisher is regarded as a benefactor for building Riverfront. It was said that Taubman regarded the never-built Cadillac Center mall as the project that would raise him to benefactor status. Richard Kughn, who made his fortune in Taubman's company and continues to hunt opportunity of his own in the suburbs, is another who has been honored for gestures toward the city, such as his Whitney Restaurant.

FARBMAN HAS had a small taste of this, with the Chop House deal and with the old County Building. Much publicity has attended both. In Detroit, those are the kind of projects that make celebrities of their principals. Witness the attention that was suddenly showered on Heinz Prechter, a longtime friend of the Farbman's, for saving the Chop House.

Attention hasn't really showered yet on Farbman. It could, but maybe not. He doesn't seem at all disappointed that he hasn't had a lot of personal publicity so far. Successful as he is, happy as he is to be successful, he doesn't seem to need the kind of attention others work at.

He's talking about the old County Building, a grand old edifice let slide in grace. He was the partner who oversaw its restoration.

Says Farbman:

"Every once in awhile when I drive past the courthouse I see someone out on the sidewalk taking pictures of it. Whenever I see that, I really feel good. I think that's terrific."

"My father died when I was 11, says Farbman. "In those days they made house calls and it seems he was always gone when I was a little boy. I don't know that I ever really knew him.

"**HE WAS** diagnosed as having tuberculosis, and when I was 11, the family moved to Saranac Lake, N.Y., where there was a well-known clinic, and he was a patient there. Every evening, my mother would drop me and my sisters at the movies in Saranac Lake and she would go to visit my father. Then she'd come back and pick us up when the movie was finished. One day the movie was *Gone With the Wind*. When it was finished, my mother wasn't there, so we had to sit through it again. For a long time, I really didn't like that movie. When we came out of the theater the second time, my mother was there with my uncle. My father had died.

"My mother was a very special person.

"She had been a teacher and she went back to work. She and Suzy have always been the most important people in my life. Whenever I succeeded at something, made a good deal or something else, as long as my mother was alive she was the first one I called to tell about it.

"After I was a success, one of the things that gave me the most pleasure was doing things for my mother. I used to pray every day that she would live long enough for me to make the money I could use to do things for her, and she did. She lived to be 71.

"**I REMEMBER** her asking me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I said I want to be rich. I had jobs as a kid. Paper routes, Big Bear supermarkets, drugstore, other things. It was a custom for us to go to dinner as a family every now and then to the old Northwood Inn, on Woodward, and one day when I was still a kid I announced I was going to take care of the check. The check was something like \$11, I think, and I had enough to cover that but I had to borrow money from my mother for the tip. I thought right then maybe I ought to have two jobs, so I could make more money.

"She told me real richness was inside you. Was she right? Well, having money is very nice. But I can think of things in my life that are very, very valuable that have nothing to do with money. Money is nice, though."

Farbman shakes his head, then

one day with this new haircut and asked me how I liked it. It had something hanging way down in back. I told him I didn't like it, didn't like it much at all. A few days later, he and I were in the car up there and he looked at his watch and he said, 'I'll make you a deal: if you can find something to cut hair with in the next 10 minutes, you can cut the tail off.'

"Well, we were on a country road and there are no stores out there. I didn't have scissors in the car or anything else that would do. I'm driving faster and faster, looking for something and I can't find any place to stop. Then we get to Ellsworth and I see a general store and I pull the car over and rush in and there in front of me are those big shears you cut hedges with. I grabbed a pair and ran back to the car and David was laughing and he said, 'Sorry. It's 30 seconds past 10 minutes. You lose!'

"Then he said, 'Dad, if you really don't like my haircut, you can cut it off no matter what time it is.' So I cut the tail piece off with those shears, then I went back into the store and paid for them."

The other son is Andy, 14.

"Andy and I were playing golf one day at Belvedere Golf Club," recalls Farbman. "We were out on the fairway, I'd swing, he'd swing. He wasn't having any luck and suddenly all kinds of things came pouring out of him. He and I forgot golf right there. We went over to a small lake on the course and we sat there for what must have been a couple of hours, and we had probably the first real conversation we had ever had.

"**YOU FORGET** all the things kids worry about. You know, he asked me if I had ever been afraid of anything, and I said, yes, yes, sure."

Burt and Suzy Farbman, who have been married 18 years, were a blind date. Suzy says, "That first date was very romantic. We ended it by going ice skating at midnight at Franklin Hills Country Club. There was a little warming house out at the lake on the golf course and we had a bonfire.

"Years later, when Burt was president of Franklin Hills, the one capital improvement he was determined to make was to rebuild that warming hut. It had fallen into disrepair and had to be torn down. He saw that it was rebuilt, and it's there today."

Farbman attended Mumford High School in Detroit, for a while.