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## Erb Lumber builder, philanthropist dies at 90

By [Sherri Welch](#)



Erb Lumber Co. founder and philanthropist Fred Erb.

**Erb Lumber Co.** builder and philanthropist Fred Erb died last Thursday at home after a 12-year battle with Alzheimer's disease.

Erb, 90, built his uncle's lumber and coal business into a multistate enterprise with \$280 million in sales before selling Erb Lumber in 1993.

He also was active in real estate development and management through **Edgemere Enterprises** in Bloomfield Hills until his retirement. Erb and his wife, Barbara, became noted philanthropists beginning in 1951 with a gift equal to his annual income — at that time, \$5,000 — to help establish a camp for troubled children in northern Oakland County. The couple challenged their business associates, friends and neighbors to give as well, helping raise more than \$20,000 for the project.

In 1996, the Erbs made a \$20 million gift to his alma mater, the **University of Michigan**, to establish the **Frederick A. and Barbara M. Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise**.

They went on in 2007 to establish the **Fred A. and Barbara M. Erb Family Foundation**, seeding it with more than \$100 million, to nurture environmentally and culturally vibrant communities in metro Detroit and support initiatives to restore the Great Lakes basin.

The foundation, now led by son John Erb, today provides about \$5 million each year in grants and is increasingly at the table with the area's major funders, providing support for initiatives such as the **Detroit Future City** project, arts programming along Detroit's RiverWalk, the city's inaugural **Dlectricity** festival last fall, Detroit's **Heidelberg Project** and **Eastern Market**.

In addition to his wife and son John, Erb is survived by another son, Rick; daughters Wendy Elaine Erb and Leslie Erb Liedtke; and younger brother George Erb.

A memorial service is scheduled for 11 a.m. Saturday **Christ Church Cranbrook** in Bloomfield Hills.

The family requests memorial tributes be made to Christ Church Cranbrook, 470 Church Road, Bloomfield Hills, Mich. 48304.

Erb, who attend **Cranbrook Schools** in Bloomfield Hills, went on to study engineering at **Cornell University** before transferring in 1942 to UM, where he met his wife.

He joined the **Army Enlisted Reserve** after World War II began and was called to active duty in June 1943. After the war, Erb married and returned to UM, switching his studies to business and graduating with honors with a bachelor of arts degree in 1947.

Shortly after graduation, Erb took over his uncle's Royal Oak lumber and coal business. Erb built the company from one store, seven employees and annual sales of just less than \$170,000 — a third from coal — to 45 stores, 1,300 employees and \$280 million by 1993 when Erb sold the company.

Last fall, the Greater Detroit Chapter of the **Association of Fundraising Professionals** recognized the Erb Family Foundation as its Outstanding Foundation of the Year.

The foundation has provided grants since the first \$1 million it made late in 2008 to support emergency food and assistance programs at **Forgotten Harvest** in Oak Park, the **Salvation Army Eastern Michigan Division** and **The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW)** in Detroit.

The foundation, which had reported assets of just under \$108 million in fiscal 2011, also has supported initiatives including restoration of the health and resiliency of the Great Lakes, the **Alzheimer's Association** to fund research on the prevention and treatment of the disease, the developing **RecoveryPark** urban farming project in Detroit and Michigan's participation in the national Cultural Data Project.