



Mert Thomas Class of 2023

Mert graduated from Oroville High School (OHS) in 1948. He played baseball all four years and football, basketball and track as a freshman. Right after graduation, he was employed at Hobbie Chevrolet detailing cars and assisting mechanics.

He then attended Yuba College majoring in accounting earning his associate of arts degree. He then went on to study mathematics at San Francisco State University.

Mert joined the United States Army in 1951 serving two years in the 101st Airborne Infantry Division and also as a paratrooper during the Korean War.

After coming home from the war, Mert began working at the Butte County Hospital in Oroville, starting out in the housekeeping division and after exemplary service, was promoted to Head of Housekeeping. He was well-respected by management and staff in that position and wore many hats such as driving the hospital ambulance transporting patients to and from places like Sacramento, the Bay Area and as far as Los Angeles. He also taught safety classes to the entire hospital staff. Virgil Scott, janitor at the hospital, remembers, "Mert was fair and just as a supervisor. Even though he faced lots of opposition as a supervisor because of his color, he never backed down."

During the summer months, Mert worked two jobs, maintaining his position as supervisor at the hospital during the day and working the night shift at the Stokely Van Camp Cannery. When the hospital closed in the early 1970's, Mert began working full time at the cannery as a warehouse supervisor. He worked there until his retirement in 1998.

Church activities played an important part in Mert's life. As a child he participated in activities at Bright Star Baptist Church in Arkansas where he grew up. After moving to Oroville, he joined the Taylor Memorial Church working tirelessly, always lending a helping hand to those in need. In 1985, he became a minister at the Taylor Memorial Church, a congregation he would lead for 15 years, serving as a true inspiration to its members. In 1989, he was honored with the prestigious title of Church Elder. He was also a member of the 9th Episcopal District in San Francisco and known there as "Mr. Oroville." He was extremely dedicated to the Word of God, and he lived by example every day.

Mert's public service life began in the mid 1980's, when accepted his first public position as a Park Commissioner for the City of Oroville. In the mid-eighties, he was the first African-American elected to the Oroville City Council, the first to serve as Vice-Mayor and then the first and only to serve as mayor. After serving as mayor for one year, he retired from public service.

In 1999, Mert received dual awards as Citizen of the Year and Humanitarian of the Year! He was honored by the South Oroville African American Historical Society, recognizing him as the winner of its Legacy Award in 2012. The Fireside Room at the Southside Community Center is also dedicated in Mert's memory. The center was a 30-year dream of Mert's and he was a key player in securing grants and donations exceeding five million dollars to build the facility.

Aside from his City Council service, Mert's community service was extensive, having memberships in the Butte County Association of Governments, Martin Luther King Jr. Park Committee, Oroville Schools Drug Abuse Committee, Oroville Head Start, Oroville United Way, YMCA, Butte County NAACP, and the El Medio Fire Department Board.

Mert was also the first Black disc-jockey in Butte County with the "Jumpin Joe Thomas Show" on KOMR

Upon Mert's passing, Butte County Sheriff, Perry Reniff, wrote, *"He was a friend. It was a heck of a loss for the community. There were many times, countless times in fact, when we called upon Mert for his assistance with community relations problems and projects in the Southside neighborhood. I can't begin to express the value of his effects or the impact of his loss."*

Mert was born in Schaal, Arkansas on October 31, 1930 and passed away on October 14, 2001. He married his high school sweetheart Lorraine Stovall and they had six daughters and one son.