

# **Bert Hughes: historian, family man, community treasure**

**By Nancy Dingler**

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This is going to be a very personal column today - a tribute to Bert Hughes, who recently passed away. Bertram Augustus Hughes was a true Renaissance man and will be greatly missed by local historians. If any one person could leave a deep void in the community, Bert's departure has done that.

He was a historian, baker, gold miner, road worker, mechanical genius, Marine, businessman and community activist, He was also an award recipient, the driving force to restore Vacaville's Town Hall, build the Vacaville Museum, develop the Solano County Archives and publish a catalog of Fairfield's historic buildings.

Bert also held an honorary black belt in judo through his work with local youth. He was instrumental in creating the local Boy's Club. He won many awards and accolades.

However, he was more proud to be devoted to his family and the children in the community.

His daughter, Judy Lopez explained, "Even though he was so active in the community . . . he always knew what was going on in my life and he never missed any major event. He was always there for me, and then for my children." Judy's husband died when her oldest of four sons was only 16.

I met Bert after I had returned to college to work toward a bachelor's in history and teacher's credential. The assigned term paper theme: Native Americans.

Everyone in the class chose famous tribal chieftains from the East Coast or plains. I decided to do a thesis on our own local well-known native, Chief Solano. My professors advised that material may be scant to nonexistent.

I began my search. Sure enough, I ran into difficulty immediately. Solano was not famous outside the county. I could find some secondary sources, but where was the primary documentation?

My friends advised that I seek out Bert Hughes. "Bert will know where to look." I had heard of the Vacaville Heritage Council, but it was just in passing. This is where I would

find Bert.

Little did I realize then, how vast this man's experience and what a wide range of interests and the people that he touched. He was so open and helpful to anyone who asked. Without Bert's help, I might have given up and tried to write a thesis on a better-known subject.

Born Feb. 9, 1915, on the Votypka Ranch in Suisun Valley, Bert was the youngest of five children. His parents divorced when Bert was 9. His mother took the children to Oakland to find work.

The financial situation was always difficult. Bert was sent to live with different relatives. "I was never in any one house or any one school more than two years . . . all the way up to high school."

According to his daughter, the year her father spent with his grandmother in Mendocino County was the most memorable in his childhood and the happiest. Upon graduation from high school at the height of the Great Depression, in 1933, Bert went to work in an Oakland bakery before joining one of his brothers in Trinity County for a summer job working at a new hydraulic gold mine.

His next job was with the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) that was building a road and installing telephone lines between Redding and Eureka.

Bert returned to Oakland in 1935 and found employment with the Marchant Calculating Machine Co. He learned how to repair the machinery and soon found himself being sent to Georgia, South Dakota, Iowa and Nebraska over the next six years.

While still learning the trade, Bert met a lovely young lady, Dorothy Louise "Lou" Matthews. They shared the same childhood background of impermanence. Soon, they married and "Lou" traveled with Bert wherever the company sent them. Their only child, Judy was born in Nebraska.

The new family returned to Oakland in 1941 at the outbreak of World War II. Bert went to work for the Moorer Drydock Shipyard. Bert wanted to get into uniform and get into the war. But, because he was in such a crucially needed position to supply the war effort, he couldn't get a release until toward the end of the war.

He enlisted in the Marines, who sent him off to technical school to learn shoe repair. After his discharge, Bert took advantage of the GI benefits to further his training. He opened up a cobbler shop at the Alameda Naval Air Station and his own neighborhood shop as well.

"Lou ran their neighborhood shop during the day. She took in the shoes . . . and in the evening I'd come home and after supper I'd go to work down at the shop," Mr. Hughes recalled. "We thought we knew about business, so we bought a shop here in Vacaville."

Bert's brother Warren was the chief of Vacaville's volunteer fire department. Bert and Lou opened their new shop in 1952 on Main Street near the Ulatis Creek Bridge. "I was there until 1954, when I went out in a blaze of glory." A fire destroyed the shop and two adjoining restaurants.

Picking up the pieces, Lou found work as a bookkeeper and Bert found odd jobs until he went to work for the school district to paint Elm School over the summer.

The temporary job turned into full-time employment as custodian and school bus driver. In 1966 he was transferred to Alamo School and put in charge of the maintenance department.

Bert's work at Alamo became legendary. The teachers and students would clamor for Bert to be their bus driver on field trips because he knew so much and made it interesting. Lou began to show signs of Alzheimer's disease sometime in the 1970s. Bert, with his customary patience, cared for her until her death in 1985. Bert tirelessly cared for Lou and his own mother, along with Judy's family, while he continued to maintain his community commitments.

Even after he had suffered the stroke that would kill him, earlier this year, committee members would say, "Ask Bert. Bert will know," not realizing of course, that they could not ask Bert about anything any more.

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