



Newsletter

May 2021

Please call us at:
(209) 618-5387

History Lesson

It is **May** and Summer is upon us. On May 4, 2021 "the Modesto Nuts" will face off "the Stockton Ports" to kick off the 2021 baseball season at John Thurman Field. Thurman Field, located in West Modesto, has a rich history for baseball fans. However, few recall why in October 1983 the previously named Del Webb Field's name was changed. It was to honor the public servant who served West Modesto for the majority of his life, Assemblyman John Thurman.

From 1912-1945 various semi-pro teams competed in Modesto as "the Modesto Reds." In 1946, a permanent Class-C California League was created, and "the Modesto Reds" became a permanent staple in the City. The Reds were a Minor League team affiliated with the "Pittsburgh Pirates", the "St. Louis Browns" (now the "Baltimore Orioles"), and later, the "Milwaukee Braves" in those early days. "The Modesto Red's" fans would sit on old wooden bleachers at Roosevelt Park until the winter of 1954 when the park burned to the ground. In 1955, a new park opened. It was named for former local baseball player, builder, and then current owner of the "New York Yankee's" Delbert "Del" Webb (1899-1974) with the hopes its namesake would help with future improvements, which never happened. In 1975, The franchise was re-named the "Modesto A's" and remained until 2005 when the team was re-branded "The Modesto Nuts."

But why change the name of the field 28 years after its 1955 opening? Because of the man who served West Modesto, John Thurman (1919-1983). On April 21, 2021, the MM&HS was generously granted an interview with Julia Forni Thurman, John's widow, who will turn 94 later this month. Mrs. Thurman was delighted to give insight into the man with whom she shared her life for 36 years.



John Edward Thurman Jr. was born in Richmond, California on May 6, 1919. His family moved to Stanislaus County when he was young, where he later attended Ceres High School. John, ever the avid sports fan, played baseball and football throughout his school years. Julia Forni Thurman was born May 27, 1927 two weeks after her family purchased their dairy farm on Dunn Road in West Modesto. Her Father was an Italian Swiss Immigrant. Her sister attended high school with John Thurman. The Thurman family became neighbors of the Forni Family and she became acquainted with John after his service in the Army during World War II. He was shot through his lung while serving and lived the rest of his life only having one functioning lung, something for which he never complained.

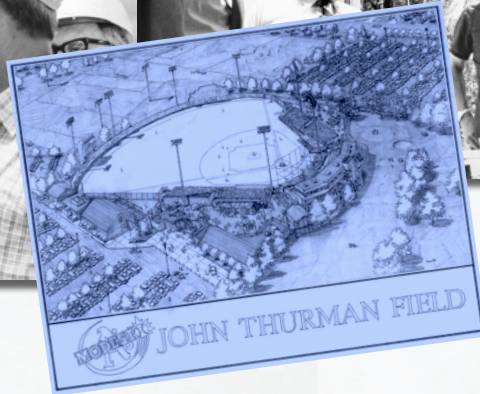
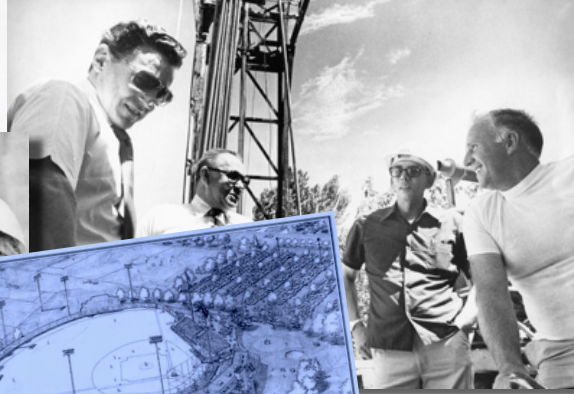
Julie Thurman says her husband loved people and politics. She remembers how her husband wanted something for everyone. They married on April 20, 1947 and were blessed with three children, Robert, Janice (1950-2011), and Susan. John, who was a dairyman by profession, ran for his first office, with the Hart-Ransom School District Board of Trustees. Whenever he ran for office, he walked every precinct to meet as many constituents as possible. In 1962, he was defeated in his bid for the Modesto Board of Education. However, in 1970 he defeated incumbent Charles A. Brink to become the Stanislaus County Supervisor for District 5. As Supervisor, Thurman championed causes for mental health, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, and air quality. Just two years into his position, he ran and was elected California State Assemblyman for District, 27, a position he held until his retirement in 1982. Agricultural became his number one concern during his tenure as Assemblyman. Numerous Agricultural Acts were passed with Thurman's aid. He had a love for children and became involved in numerous bills on education. Julie Thurman believes her husband's greatest legacy was advocating and successfully bringing the first flu-shots into Stanislaus and San Joaquin Counties in 1973, his first bill. The following year, Thurman was instrumental in the passage of a bill offering low cost or free vaccinations to senior citizens. He also served as Grand Marshall of every Stanislaus County Special Olympics, even after suffering his first heart attack in mid-1982. In December 1982, he retired to spend more time with his family. At his retirement dinner he received a check to take Julie on a Hawaiian vacation as a thank you. In his typical generous fashion, he donated the check to the Special Olympics. Just months after leaving office, he suffered another heart attack and passed away on July 27, 1983.

Continued on Page 2 >



Julie and John Thurman

His love of people and the community was his top priority, baseball his favorite pastime. Every year following his 1972 election to State Assembly, John sponsored an annual John and Julie Thurman night at Del Webb Field, where he purchased in upwards of 10,000 tickets for the underprivileged of Modesto. Following Thurman's death Modesto City Councilman Richard Patterson put forward a motion to re-name Del Webb Field, John Thurman Field. Voted unanimously in September 1983. This Summer, for anyone enjoying a socially distanced ballgame at John Thurman Field, remember the man for whom the field bares its name. Remember him just as the woman who still loves and remembers the person she lost nearly 38 years ago. "John loved people and baseball so much. He will be shinning down on "the Nuts" first game, delighted the people of Modesto can once again gather together."



Updates

The Museum still remains closed due to COVID-19, Follow the MM&HS on Instagram and Facebook for updates.

- A meeting was held with the City of Modesto on a possible opening date for the museum, no promises, but we are hoping for mid-June.
- Website is still under construction, but we should be able to renew memberships soon.
- Any member who would like to help with our re-opening, please let us know.

We will need help with:

- Running of the Bookstore
- Acquisitions
- Docents
- Please contact David Seymour at david@mchenrymuseum.org



Information for the historical article comes from:
• An April 21, 2021 phone interview with Julia Thurman.
• Various *Modesto Bee* Articles (1975-1984).
• Information from historian Ken White.

Photos from the *Modesto Bee* and available in the archive of the McHenry Museum.