

# A man in love

## For half a century Ted Meriam personified leadership and service in Chico

By Robert Speer, *Chico News & Review*  
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Ted Meriam was hard to figure.

He was quiet, unassuming and unremarkable in appearance. He wasn't a showy speaker. He didn't try to impress. He wasn't especially ambitious. He didn't have money, or at least not a lot of it. And yet he was the most important and respected civic leader in Chico since the Bidwells.

When he died, on Sunday, Aug. 5, at the age of 91, he left a legacy that is unlikely ever to be equaled.

At his memorial service, which was held last Friday at the Chico Masonic Family Center, his friend of 35 years, retired banker Ned Kirkham, attempted to explain just what it was about Meriam that made him such an exceptional leader. What was it, he asked, that led people to put so much trust in him? Why was it that, whenever he joined an important group, whether it was the Chico City Council, where he served an unprecedented five terms as mayor, or the Board of Trustees of the California state colleges, which he eventually chaired, or the League of California Cities, which he also chaired, that his colleagues inevitably asked this soft-spoken, sweet-tempered man to be their leader?

Answering his own question, Kirkham said Ted Meriam had seven important qualities that made him an effective leader. First, he did not seek adulation or public honor, "though he accepted them gracefully when they were given." Second, he listened deeply to others. Third, he had uncompromising integrity, which is why he never sought higher office, Kirkham said. "He knew the price he would have to pay, and he did not want to be beholden to anybody." Fourth, he completed every job he began. Fifth, he was a "very intelligent and wise man." Sixth, he put great value on friendships. And, finally, he looked out for the disadvantaged, and in fact during his last years was very involved with the Salvation Army out of concern for the homeless in Chico.

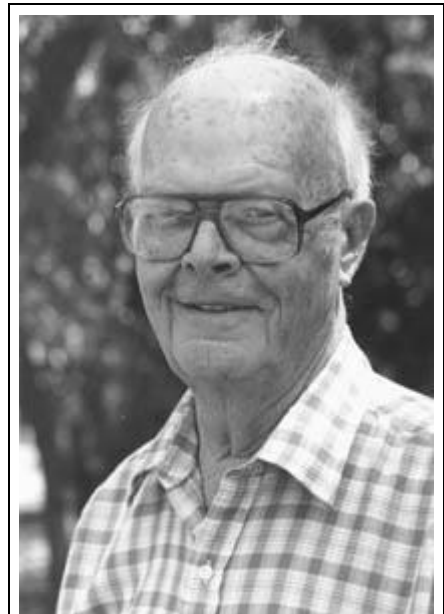


photo by Mark Thalman

A local boy: With the exception of two years at Stanford, Ted Meriam spent his whole life in Chico. By all accounts, his knowledge of local history was phenomenal.

Everything Ned Kirkham said I knew to be true, and in listing his comments so tersely here I haven't done them justice. As he spoke, though, I kept picturing Ted in my mind. What I remembered most from the few talks we had over the years wasn't what he said, though he was indeed a smart and wise man. No, what I remembered most vividly was the sparkle in his eyes, the way they seemed to look upon me, and everything else, with undiluted delight. And I realized then that what I'd been feeling when I talked with him was the sense of being in the presence of a man in love, deeply in love.

I didn't know Ted well enough to experience the most personal dimension of that love—to see him with his family, that is. But I did see him with some of his friends, including most notably the late historian and storyteller W. H. "Old Hutch" Hutchinson, to whose rollicking humor and oversized personality Ted happily played straight man. And I know that his friendships were many and deep and that he reveled in them.

What I saw in Ted, I realized as I listened to Ned Kirkham speak, was his love for Chico. He loved this town that he'd grown up in so much that he formed an instant affection for anyone who he felt shared that love, even a young reporter asking him what no doubt were silly questions. He saw that I cared about Chico, and he loved me for it.

I've lived in this town for going on 30 years, and I've known many people whose love for Chico is bone deep, perhaps as deep as Ted's was. These things are impossible to measure, of course. But one thing is for sure: Ted Meriam lived his love for Chico more than anybody I've known—as mayor, as a leader on the board of Enloe Hospital, as a state college trustee, at the League of California Cities, as head of the drive to create the new visitors' center at Bidwell Mansion, as a business person ... the list goes on and on.

For fully half of the 20th century, Ted Meriam was the most influential and respected leader in Chico. And yet in all that time, as Kirkham pointed out, he made no enemies. He had opponents, yes. People sometimes disagreed with him. But it was impossible to dislike Ted, if only because it was always so apparent that he had no interest in personal gain. He just wanted what was best for Chico.

Not that Ted didn't care what people thought of him. He had no enemies, but there were people in town who resented him for positions he'd taken, and that bothered him. I remember talking with him once, sometime during the mid 1980s, about the late-1950s battle over putting the freeway through Chico. It hurt him, he said, that 25 years later some people remained angry with him about the issue.

At the time, the freeway controversy was the biggest environmental fight Chico had ever seen. The state had determined that it needed to replace the old Highway 99E, which ran through downtown and simply couldn't handle the ever-increasing number of cars and trucks. But there was no place to put a freeway that wouldn't be painful.

In the end the City Council, with Meriam as mayor, came down unanimously in favor of the state's preferred route—just east of downtown—over the two alternatives offered. Resistance was huge. Many well-to-do Chicoans owned homes along the route, and

there was also widespread, heartfelt opposition to putting the highway across Bidwell Park.

Meriam was able to use the tremendous opposition to the route as leverage to compel the state to pay for major improvements, including upgrading The Esplanade to its current condition as the town's grand boulevard, building expensive overpasses across North and South Park drives, and spending millions on freeway landscaping at a time when the state ordinarily didn't pay for such things.

Was it the right decision? Many long-time Chicoans, including former City Manager Fred Davis, say it was. In any event, we can only speculate about the freeways that weren't built. What we can know for sure is that Ted Meriam was trying, as always, to do what was best for the community.

There will never be another Ted Meriam, not with things the way they are now in Chico. The town has grown rapidly in recent decades, and as growth pressures have mounted local politics has become increasingly polarized into opposing ideological camps and interest groups. The time when a man like Ted Meriam could emerge as the consensus leader, the person accepted by all parties as someone they could trust to do the best for Chico, is over.

It's impossible to imagine, for example, the members of the City Council picking the same person to be mayor for 10 years in a row, as happened to Meriam. For the past 20 years, in fact, no mayor has served more than one two-year term.

I've argued before in these pages that the mayor's position should be made elective and expanded to four years, if only to create a position for a consensus leader to aspire to. That would be a good start toward filling the leadership vacuum that has existed since people like Meriam sat on the council.

But there's no replacing Ted Meriam in the hearts of Chicoans. Long ago we gave him the only nickname that fully suited him, and it's a name that will remain his for as long as this town survives: "Mr. Chico."