

# Freedom's first postman retires to his garden

By COIMBRA MAHER

**T**HE LETTERS ON THE back of Dick Kesling's navy blue T-shirt read: "Eat your heart out, I'm retired."

"My daughter gave it to me," said Kesling, who retired two weeks ago after working 36 years for the post office.

"The only reason she put it on my back is on my stomach you couldn't read the bottom of the letters."

Since 1946 when he and his 29-inch waist pulled into Watsonville on a furlough from the Navy, Kesling's stomach has gained considerable girth.

He met his wife at a dance at the Eagles Hall on West Beach Street, then called Wall Street. They were married less than two months later.

"He was 17 and I was 18," Bernice Kesling said as she leaned against the entrance to the kitchen of her home on Bowker Road.

"Cradle robber, that's what she was," said her husband, continuing the endless

teasing that goes on between the couple.

Kesling's story, told in the droll style of the main character, reads like that of many from his generation.

He drifted into town in the late 40s, displaced by the mobile currents of wartime. Shortly after he married, he decided to return to Delta, Colorado, his home town, but he couldn't find a job.

"We ran out of money and it was getting cold, so we came back where the weather's warmer," he said.

On April 1, 1948, Kesling began working as a mailman, first in Watsonville and then in Freedom. When Freedom's post office started providing door-to-door service to its residents in 1963, he became the first mail carrier.

Kesling delivered mail to Kendall Pfaffle for more than 20 years and the retired 71-year-old owner of Charlie's

sure do miss him.

"He would holler, 'Hey, you all better come get your mail,' and stop and talk to us. We always knew when he was coming round. Now we don't know when the new one comes and goes."

Mrs. Hoyt's sister Faye Dotson, a minister's wife who also lives on Kesling's former route, gave him a present when he retired.

"Would you believe she gives this to me," said Kesling, bringing out a ceramic figure of a cheerful hillbilly perched on a barrel of moonshine. "She's pretty broad-minded."

Mrs. Dotson says her gift suits him, and judging by the trappings of the former chicken shed in Kesling's back yard, she's right.

A dirty-white Hotpoint refrigerator sits prominently in one corner. From its side protrudes a Coors beer nozzle.

Kesling opened the refrigerator to display the 15-gallon keg inside, a gift from his co-workers at the Freedom Post Office.

"Beats buying six-packs," he said, a glass mug of beer in one hand and the ubiquitous, home-rolled Prince Albert cigarette in the other.

"You don't save any money, but you can drink a lot more beer."

Kesling's new profession of backyard farmer makes him particularly pleased with his "beer shed."

"It's handy to the garden," he said.

Kesling and his friend Archie Ushiyama, a retired truck farmer, are preparing the half acre of land that stretches out behind the shed to plant tomatoes.

"It's nice to have him home," said Mrs. Kesling. "But it seems like he's at work 'cause he's always back there."

Furniture in Freedom refers to his former mailman as a "nice kid."

"He's 'bout one of the best mailmen I've ever had," said Pfaffle. "He'd visit with everyone. That's why he was so late getting around his route."

Kesling hopes the nightmare that has plagued him over the years will disappear now that he's retired. "There's too much mail and I can't deliver it. It's falling out of my case. It's getting dark. I'm running out of time."

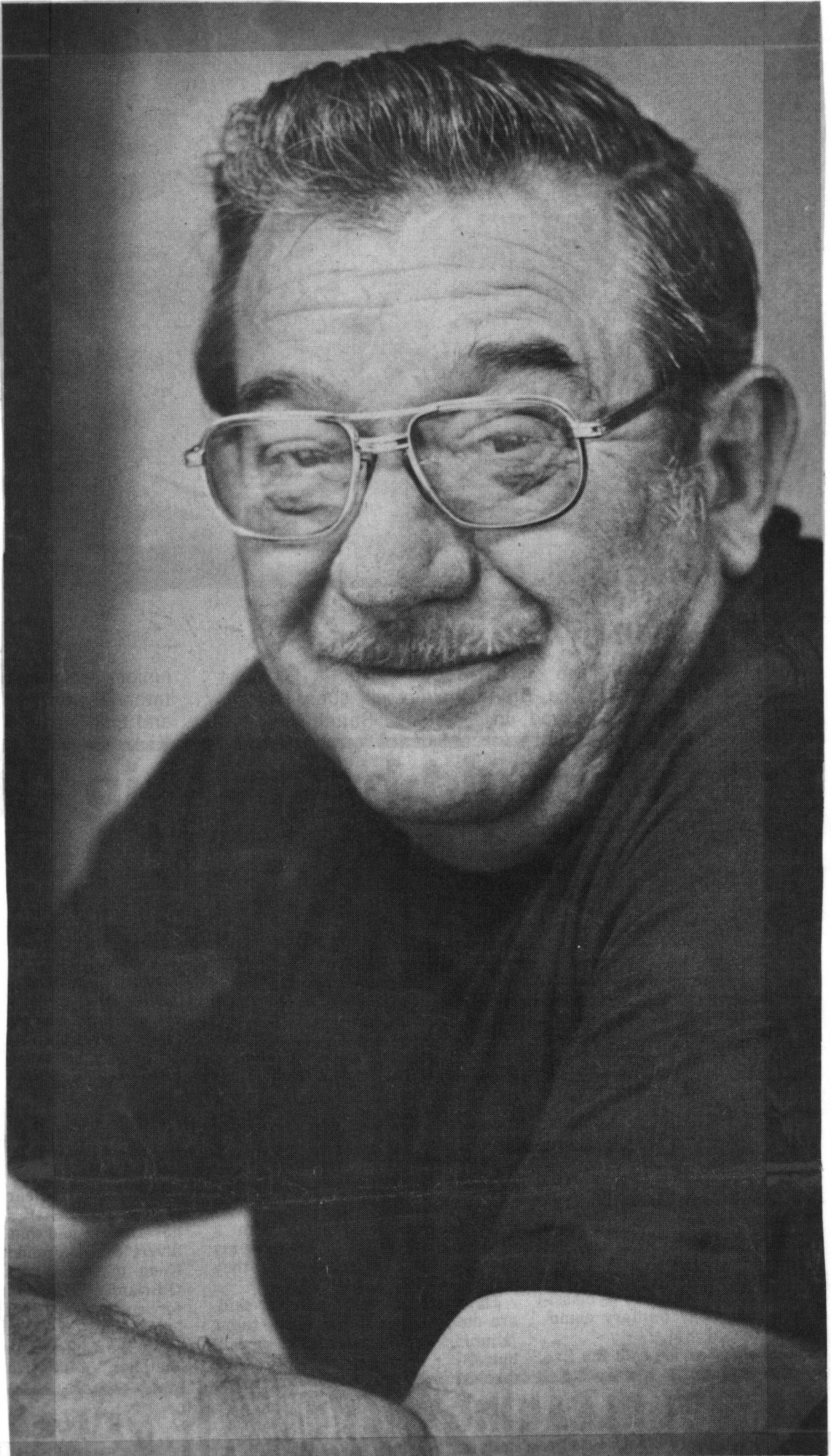
If Kesling took his time delivering mail, he did it in ways the people on his route appreciated.

Jenny Hoyt, 74, lives at the Green Valley Apartments, a complex that caters to senior citizens on Ross Avenue.

"He was gorgeous," she said in a throaty voice. "We



Richard Kesling, 1946



**Richard Kesling**

Photo by Kurt Ellison