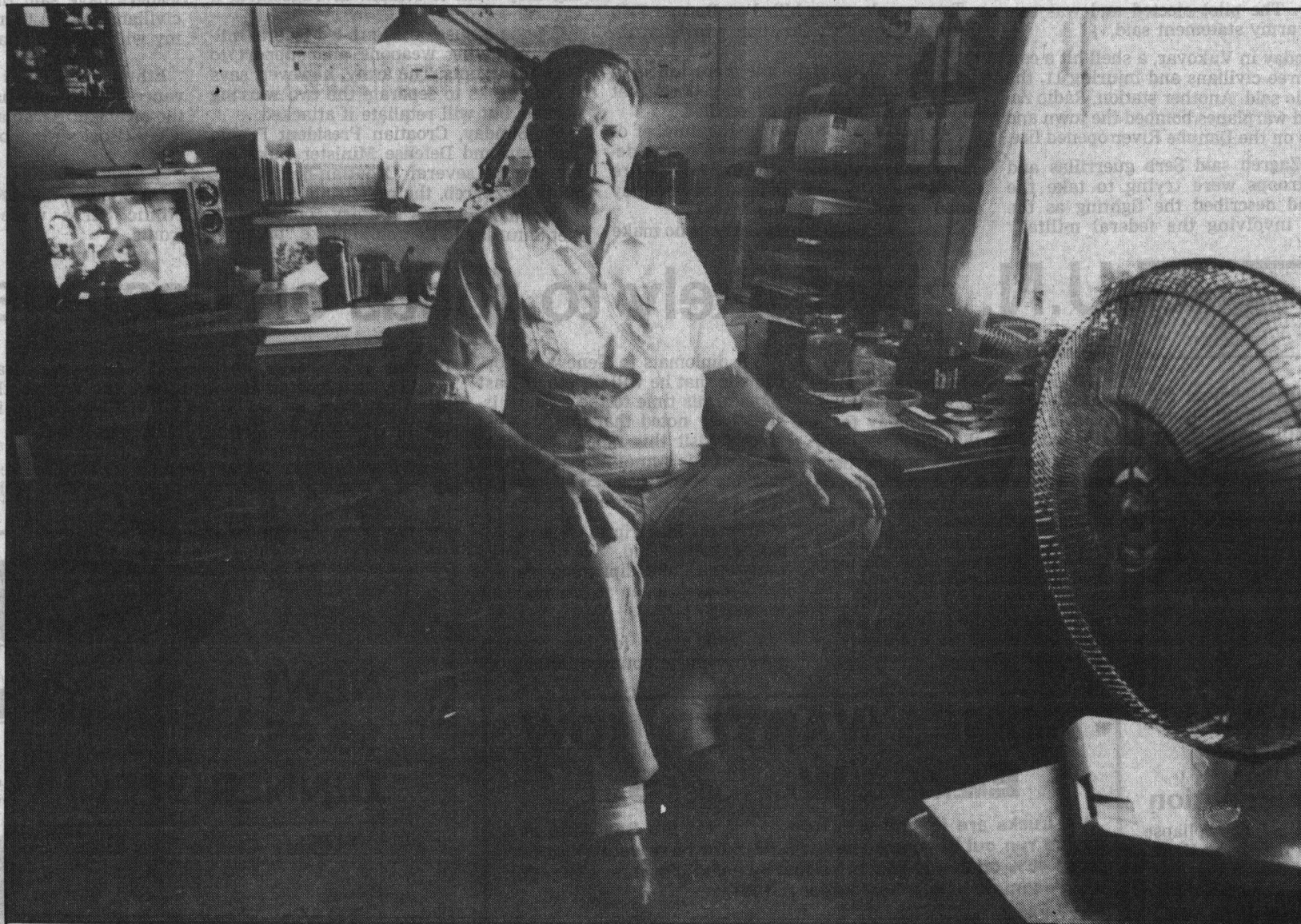


'Homeless Secrets'



After years without a place to call home, Allen Ashton lives in a Watsonville hotel.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

One book publishers may not find

By WALLACE BAINE
Sentinel staff writer

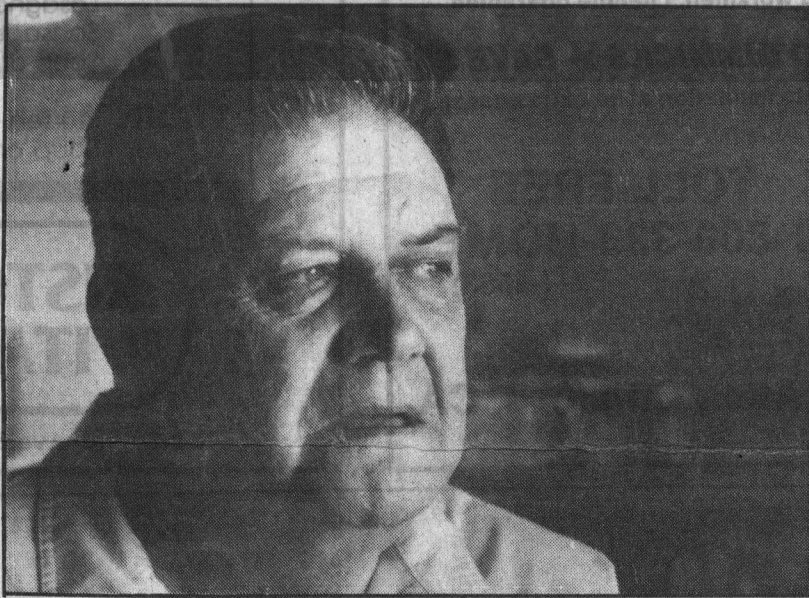
ALLEN ASHTON descended into the ranks of the homeless eight years ago after a lifelong battle with alcoholism left the wreckage of three broken families behind him.

He spent five years without a place to call home. He slept in parks and parked cars, worrying about hunger and a heart condition. He became familiar with the struggles of those on the margins of society.

The book that has emerged from this experience is not a memoir, a novel or a political treatise on homelessness. "Homeless Secrets" is more a glossary of the homeless experience, a dictionary of the disenfranchised.

"I'm not a writer," explained Ashton, 59, "but I like words. I have a funny brain. I laugh sometimes at things other people don't think of as too funny."

"Homeless Secrets" is not the sort of book that would look good on the shelf next to the glossy celebrity bios found in most bookstores. Indeed, it is a low-budget affair, printed in Ashton's own longhand manuscript. Inside are more than 400 entries from the poignant to the sarcastic to the



vulgar.

"These definitions are not all from my own experience," said Ashton. "They are what I heard from other (homeless) people and what I know about how addicts act."

Ashton now has enough income from disability and social security to pay the rent on his Watsonville hotel room. He is, he says, not wealthy by anyone's definition. But he has mixed feelings about sending his book to a publisher.

"I tried to publish it last year, but didn't get much response," he said. "Unless you have a big best-seller, I know that the publishers make all the money on the book anyway."

It took him six months to gath-

er his short definitions and put them together in book form.

"I'm not saying I have any great answers," said Ashton, who has been a recovering alcoholic for 17 years. "But I do have one answer. I really believe in 12-step programs. But a lot of times, there's waiting lists for people to get into them, and sometimes you gotta be drunk to get into them."

"I would like to see something like Homeless Anonymous, a 12-step program for people who are homeless that will help them wake up so they can live decent lives."

Before his period of homelessness, Ashton helped run a rehabilitation unit in San Jose. That experience also gave him insights

into the social and psychological dimensions of homelessness.

"Because of the complexity of the problem, it's very nearly unapproachable. So many are mentally ill, so many are addicts, so many are Vietnam veterans."

"What I would tell our leaders is that a many-pronged attack is needed. No one perspective is going to do much good, because there are so many problems involved with homelessness. It's not just being without a home."

The entries in the book focus on alcoholism and drug addiction (*YOKE — What your addictions have become around your neck.*), as well as the experience of homelessness (*UNDRESS — A thing you would like to do more often*)

Definitions from life

A random sampling of the wit and wisdom of Allen R. Ashton, reprinted from "Homeless Secrets":

DIGNITY — A condition most of us deserve but seldom receive from a sadly misinformed society.

LASSITUDE — A faintness that pervades your entire mind and body when you contemplate any kind of labor.

MURDER — An occurrence you worry about ev-

ery time you lie down to sleep.

OLEO — Will do to make a sandwich if you can scare up a couple slices of bread.

PHOTO — What you carry in your wallet to remind you of loved ones you once had.

RACCOON — An animal that scares the wits out of you when you awake to find him dining on morsels of food in your sleeping bag.

laced with cynicism (*TRUST — What you can no longer place in anyone, even your loved ones.*) and humor (*FRITOS — Sometimes used as communion wafers.*)

Many of the entries are crude sexual or scatological references and some are flavored with resentment (*BUTTER — Fatty food provided by the government to hasten the demise of the ill, elderly and disadvantaged.*).

"I don't claim to represent homeless people," said Ashton, who has also written a book of limericks. "But I would surely like for them to read it."

"Homeless Secrets" is \$7.95 and can be ordered by calling 724-3068.