CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley

Oral History Program

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE:	Robert Lewis Kessler, Jr.
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Guthrie, Logan County, Oklahoma
INTERVIEWER:	Michael Neely
DATES OF INTERVIEWS:	May 26 and 28, 1981
PLACE OF INTERVIEWS:	Auberry, Fresno County
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Preface

Mr. Kessler lives in a rustic mountain home on a small farm-like, tree covered piece of land. His window overlooks the Fresno area and valley. He is a nice man and dresses simply. He seems to enjoy his life very much and to be at peace. We conducted the first interview down in the valley at his mother's home. He wanted the second session to be at his own home so that he could show it to me. He is proud of his accomplishments. Mr. Kessler is direct and easy to talk to. He was able to provide information about his adjustment as a young man to some of the problems young people coming to California from Oklahoma experienced. At the close of our second session he let me look at some of his prized possessions. He and his wife were together in the yard as I left. They looked very much at home.

Michael Neely
Interviewer

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INTERVIEWEE: Robert L. Kessler, Jr. (Age: 59)

INTERVIEWER: Michael Neely

DATED: May 26, 1981

M.N.: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Lewis Kessler, Jr. for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Michael Neely at 42704 Cony Lane, Meadow Lakes, Auberry, California on May 26, 1981 at 11:30 a.m.

M.N.: What's the first thing you remember as a child?

Kessler: I was about two years old. I remember myself in a Model T Ford with these Eisenglass side deals on it. There was a tornado coming up over the hill. My folks didn't think I could remember that. It was a two seater. We ran like the devil and here come these tornadoes. Everybody was excited about it. How I could conceive this car with Eisenglass and know it was a Model T and everything kind of makes me wonder sometimes whether it was true. Anyway, I do remember that.

M.N.: What's the next thing you remember?

Kessler: What Dad did. He was a Caterpillar Tractor salesman. He would sell heavy equipment to the county commissioners. It seems back in the midwest they had these meandering little creeks that, in a mile, they'd cross the road maybe six times. They would sell the culverts and the tractors to do this. We'd move from one place to another and I developed a problem. Every time you'd move into a new school, everybody would try you out to see who you were and what you were doing. You'd get the hell beat out of you. It didn't do my scholastics too well. I was having problems with this.

M.N.: Was your father a traveling salesman?

Kessler: No. He would move into a town like Enid and maybe stay there for a year or six months. Then he'd move on to another town and sell these things. All I can remember is that it was just one

school after another. I never finished one year at one school while I was in Oklahoma. When I got to California, I stayed at a school for two years. You remember this in your childhood. You've got to make new playmates.

M.N.: How did your father come to be in Oklahoma?

Kessler: His parents, Winfield and Rhoda, came down from Iowa on the 1889 run for land when Oklahoma was a Territory. They got a place southwest of Guthrie with 160 acres. His brother Pius got 160 next to him. Then, in a few years, it wasn't his cup of tea. Pius sold to Grandpa so we had 320. Then Grandpa took the sandstones out of the farm. They built what they call a cooler house for the milk and everything. They dug a hand dug well. The windmill would pump the water around the bottom of the cooler or spring house and this would keep cool in the hot summer. This would at least keep the milk for a day or two. Dad was born on the ranch in a bedroom. The doctors came out. I think all five children of Winfield Scott Kessler and Rhoda were born there on that farm.

M.N.: What year was your father born?

Kessler: He was born in 1900.

M.N.: And your mother also?

Kessler: She was born in 1900 in Guthrie. I think she was born in a hospital.

M.N.: What happened to your mother and father up until the time you were born?

Kessler: Dad schooled and lived on the farm on the Kessler side. On the Nelson side my mother, Nancy Evalina Nelson, and her family came in and got 160 acres. They didn't continue to farm. They moved in town and started a hardware store. One of the sisters had a furniture store that was quite prominent in Guthrie. They lived in the town of Guthrie itself and had twelve children. Mother was the seventh or eighth one. Grandpa Nelson was a registrar of deeds. When they would get the face up on their homestead, they had to make so many improvements, then they got the deed to the place. He got to be a deputy sheriff plus a hardware store merchant. The boys followed along and I think one of them got to be fire chief in Guthrie.

M.N.: Is this the fellow that was in the picture you showed me?

Kessler: That was Grandpa Nelson. Grandpa Kessler became a fireman on the railroad. He would make a run to Wichita. When he'd get his time off, he would work the farm. Rhoda and Grandma Kessler would stay on the farm and raise the kids. There'd be three or four months with no man around until he got back off the road. He'd

make his money and then they would buy their crop, their seeds and a plow. Whatever it took. He had a job where he'd stay three months on and three off. He would try to make it on the farm. Evidently he didn't do too bad. He'd always get a crop in. The prices, after they'd make a crop, were sometimes awfully low back in those days.

M.N.: What did they do up until the time you were born?

Kessler: My parents? Nancy Evalina attended school there in Guthrie. They had one of the first women's business colleges. The aunt that had the furniture store was kind of interested in seeing that the girls educate themselves. She was instrumental in getting Mother to also go to high school and graduate and then go to this business college. I think Mother was one of the first women that would work in a bank. She worked in the National Bank in Oklahoma City down in the stockyards. She was a teller and a bookkeeper, or whatever women did in those days. She seemed to be pretty good at it.

She worked all the time. I'd stay at the grandmas'. I stayed mostly with the Kessler Grandma and then her younger sister. Mother really wasn't what you would call a home body like Grandma Kessler with pies and canned stuff. Grandma and Grandpa would watch the kids and be there as the driving force in the home. Mother wasn't. She was more or less trying to be a woman worker and these different things that women did in those days.

M.N.: What were your parents doing at the time of your birth?

Kessler: They thought they could run the farm. Grandpa had had it for 25-30 years. They thought they would make a go of the farm. They moved out to the farm along with my mother's sister and husband. He worked also on the railroad. They were going to see what they could do but they just fell flat on their face. I guess they weren't the man Grandpa was. They didn't seem to do a good job. Financially, it was kind of a disaster. When I was born they were farming the 320 acres southwest of Guthrie. I was born in 1921 and they were married about a year before that. They were both 21 years old.

M.N.: What did they do from the time you were born?

Kessler: Dad left the farm. He just couldn't handle it. He went to work in several different jobs--I remember one of them. We moved to Oklahoma City, out by the ball park. They rented what they called a garage home. It was written up in the Oklahoma City big paper. It was a very small place but it was a new subdivision. They didn't call them that in those days. You'd open the front door to a front room. You'd have a little kitchen and and little bedroom. It was quite small but it was very reasonable. People bought those things up.

We lived in a garage home which was neat and clean.

Dad had a job with the old Jewell Tea Company selling coffee, tea, spices, dishes and different things. They had a wagon. A horse would pull the wagon. The guy before him left the company for some unknown reason and nobody knew the route. Dad had the list of the people but he didn't know where they were or what address. He'd hitch the horse up and the horse would just go down the road and stop. He thought, "Well, what the heck is the matter with the horse?" He'd get off and walk up to the place. This was Mrs. O'Brien and she'd say she was a customer, "Have you got this and that?" He'd ask if she knew Mrs. Smith up the road. She'd say, "Yes. She's up the road." He'd get back on the wagon and the horse would walk up to Mrs. Smith's place and stop. The horse knew the route. From then on all he did was just get in the buggy and the horse would stop and he'd go in. This lasted several months. He was always saying that the horse knew more about the damn business than the guys on the route did. I think from there he went into selling Caterpillar Tractors. Then we bounced all over the middle part of Oklahoma.

M.N.: Why did you move so much?

Kessler: I think that Dad was drinking. He didn't drink or smoke until he got married. He would seem to get a fairly good job. He would go into a place and do a good job of selling. Pretty soon he'd either get fired or something. He'd sober up and get a little religion and we'd move on to another place. He'd stay there and then he'd do the same damn thing. I don't know whether this was the true reason because I was a little too young to figure it out.

In the early days in California he'd just go like a son of a gun. The best guy you'd ever seen. If he'd stay off the bottle, he could do it. They bought seven or eight homes. They'd put the stuff in storage and then move to another place. They'd never go back and get it. It was quite bad for Nancy and maybe she nagged him. We'd bounce from one place to another.

I remember these schools I'd go to. One particular one was at Guthrie. It was called Banner School. It was made out of this same old sandstone that the spring house was made out of on the farm. It was a two storied, square building with steps on three sides. There were these real stern teachers there. If you got to know them, they really weren't that bad. They would play the piano as you'd march in and go to your school room. The steps were all worn down and made out of wood.

M.N.: You seem to have a really strong memory about that.

Kessler: I remember the wooden stairs being worn. They had these silos on all four sides of the building. They seemed to really dote on fire drills. You'd have a fire drill and all the kids would get up and march. They'd walk out the second story and they'd

get in this silo sort of a thing. It was a kind of a cork screw slide. The first guy would hit the bottom door and it would open. We'd slide down these things and all come out of the building.

They seemed to be more expensive than the damn building. They'd have these big red silo deals on every room that was on the second story. The boys would have a lot of fun going down the slide. The girls would get their little dresses all dirty but this is what they did. The students on the bottom floor would all march out. The guys at the top would get in these tube things and slide down. After school you could go in there and play on these deals. You could shinny up to the top and just slide like the devil. Of course, you could take a pan of water up and get it slicker and slide down faster.

M.N.: You obviously did this.

Kessler: Oh, yes. We played in the thing and we'd get our pants all dirty. They were very good schools. They had a music section. I'm just no good at music at all but they taught me how to play a harmonica. I could work it with numbers. I'd blow on this thing and get a little red, white and blue harmonica. We'd be in the band and you would play these different instruments. Some guys had what they called a Jew's harp. They had a long thing like a cigar that kind of vibrated paper. I think you know what I'm talking about.

M.N.: A kazoo?

Kessler: Yes. The kids played the kazoo, the harmonica and the triangle. They'd ping on it and they did pretty good. I think I was in the first or second grade there.

M.N.: So you have your strongest memory of that school?

Kessler: It was a pretty good memory. I remember the teachers seemed to be quite kind when the Depression hit. They brought me in the office and said,"Has your dad got a job?" I said, "Yes. He's working for the Guthrie Daily Leader. He's an assistant press man and he gets $10 a week. He got a raise and, if things go right, he'll get $17.50 a week.

M.N.: That was true?

Kessler: Yes. The rent on our house was $10 a month. I have good memories, particularly the schools in Guthrie. I have horrible memories of the one in Oklahoma City. That was the Horace Mann School. I was in third grade. They had kids who would line us up to see that we weren't horsing around in the bathroom. Then if we did anything wrong, they'd write it down. They'd take the list to the teacher or principal. You couldn't even say anything. It just terrified me. It made me feel like we were living in the Soviet

Union or something like that.

I'd go to each school and the bullies would try me out. I'd try to be funny to keep them from beating up on me. I'd try to see what I could do to keep them off of me. I never did arrive at how to handle them until I got to California. When I was thirteen, it came to me. Man oh man, it changed my life.

I remember in Enid I was in the fourth grade. They said, "Well, you're doing all right, but your spelling is way behind. I had a keen memory and I took the spelling book home. I could memorize the whole four pages real easy. I'd go and make 97 or 95 at spelling. The next day I'd forget it. I couldn't go back and pick it up.

To this day, I can't spell past the fourth grade. I got by all right. I went to college a couple of years. I kind of bulled my way through. Reading didn't come to me until my second year in college. I was terrified if somebody asked me to get up and read. I couldn't do it. Spelling and reading hurt me. I could handle arithmetic.

M.N.: What was the problem with reading?

Kessler: I'd move from one school to another. I'm a great reader now. I take four newspapers and 125 magazines. All I do is read them all the time. No problem now but then, if somebody asked me to get up and read in school, I'd think up the damndest things. One time I told the teacher that I couldn't read because I was over at a welding place. I welded some stuff and the arc got in my eyes. I couldn't see.

M.N.: You had a good imagination.

Kessler: Oh boy. She excused me. If I did have to read, I felt terrible. I was seventeen years old. I couldn't read in front of a class. Whatever it was, I came out of it.

M.N.: What did your father look like?

Kessler: He was a tall and had a dark complexion. The Kesslers were German. He had a nice hue to his skin and a long nose. He was a handsome man. He had a sense of humor that wouldn't quit. He had quite a bit of psychology about him but he did like to dip his beak, so to speak. This was a problem.

M.N.: What was your relationship with him?

Kessler: I put it this way. I learned more from my father, about getting ahead in life through psychology and how to deal with people, than I did in the schooling that I took. For example, when we came to California, he was selling tractors. He moved into Dinuba area. They sold 57 Caterpillar Tractors and he was selling the Allis Chalmers. Before he sold them, he knew the Caterpillars

were a hell of a good tractor. You can't kid anybody about that. Anyway, he had the Allis Chalmers. He moved into the Dinuba district and, through some phenomena, he sold 55 Allis Chalmers. That year, they only sold two Caterpillars. They were after him to go to work for Caterpillar.

I would ride with him out to Dinuba to talk to these farmers. I said, "Well, how did you sell this guy down the street a couple of these Allis Chalmers?" He said, "Well, the guy was a Caterpillar man and he was a farmer. He must have a weak point someplace. I was looking for it. I'd go out to his place and he'd have a wife and four kids. What I thought I'd do is go through the kids and the wife. I went out there and didn't pay any attention to him. I brought the kids candy. I would hold my hands out and they would sit on my hands. I'd lift the little tiny tikes way up to my shoulders and flip them over. The bigger boys got some candy. I'd talk to them and pay attention to what they were doing. I the meantime the wife was looking at me and thinking, 'What's that guy doing out there?' The kids would come to her and say, 'Oh boy, I met Mr. Kessler. He gave me this and he looked at this and he listened.' Pretty soon the kids were all for me." The wife and kids got warmed up and thought that the Allis Chalmers was a pretty good tractor. He'd throw a demonstration. They'd talk at home at the table and all the kids would say the farmer should buy the Allis Chalmers. The wife would say she thought the Allis Chalmers was a better tractor. The farmer didn't stand a chance. He had the whole family against him. So he'd end up buying the Allis Chalmers. Dad would win them over.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

M.N.: Your father was quite a salesman.

Kessler: A very good salesman. There was one thing I wanted to touch on back there in Oklahoma. Everything back there was white people--Bible belt type of guys. You didn't know what a Mexican was. You didn't know what an Oriental was. You never even saw anyone from Asia, a Chinese. Even though we were close to the Mexican border, we saw no Mexicans. There were just plain white people. The colored people lived in the elbow in Guthrie. It was down on the Cottonwood River in the bottom land. I never did see a colored guy in town. They all stayed in their own place and this was in 1931 or 1932.

When we came out to California, we'd see a dark complected guy or an Oriental guy and just look at that fellow. He wasn't a white man! Of course, we didn't fraternize with the colored people. They all stayed in their own place and didn't seem to have any problems. We couldn't understand. There was a Korean guy. I just couldn't understand that.

M.N.: You mean when you went to school in California?

Kessler: It just seemed like I was in a foreign country almost. I couldn't get used to guys not being white. That's something that not everybody brings up but it stuck in my mind as a kid. We never heard of them back there. We thought everybody was white. I didn't have any animosity toward them or anything. I just never saw them before. I just didn't know what they were or what they looked like or what they did. I wanted to bring that up.

M.N.: What was your mother like?

Kessler: Mother came from the Nelsons. We have some family portraits of them from earlier times. They were all seventeen or eighteen. They were about the prettiest girls you ever saw. Bonnie, her older sister who is 90 years old now, just holds her age tremendously. The girls were just damn good looking. They weren't rich people but they weren't poor. They were kind of in the middle and active in politics in a small way. Grandpa was the sheriff and then later he ran a beanery there in Guthrie. I think the political winds blew the other way. He wasn't in office anymore so he opened a beanery. It was kind of a small cafe that served beans. You could go in and buy a bowl of chili beans and an apple pie for 10 to 15¢. Bonnie's husband was Levi. He went out with the folks to start the farm. When I was born he worked for the railroad. They had a strike back in 1921 or 1922. He went out on the strike. He was quite a union man and he wouldn't go back. They didn't give them the contract they wanted. He started a hamburger place.

It was an old caboose right on the main street down by a theatre. Hell, he made more money on that than he ever did at the railroad. He'd sell these big old Grisweld hamburgers for 5¢. Everybody would come in there. He would have the modern day McDonald's type of thing. You'd plop your nickel down and he'd shoot your order out. They didn't have anyplace to eat in there. You had to walk up and get it and take it home with you. He did quite a job. He never did go back to work for the railroad. He stayed in that business and I guess he just did wonderfully. It was just a good operation. It had an old popcorn machine. It was clean and painted bright red. This went over quite well.

M.N.: Your mother was exceptionally well educated.

Kessler: I would put it this way. She went two years to a business college, not a state college. She graduated from high school. For the woman of that time, she was way over the average.

M.N.: She was a working mother?

Kessler: Yes. I remember, in my growing up, that I was with Grandma Kessler more than I was with my mother. My mother won't agree with this, but that's what I think. It was no problem at all. She was a good mother and always made sure I had clothes. I remember one time. Grandma Kessler was a Bible-belt type of woman and she went to

Protestant Church. This was the First Christian Church she belonged to. God help you if you ever went to a Catholic Church because that was out. She was a Protestant lady and she'd drag me to this church all the time. I almost learned the Bible from one end to the other. I'd get up when I was a kid, you know you don't have any fear of audiences, and sing those songs. I was a singer. I would sing and recite those scriptures. Now, I resent it. I don't want to be forced to go to church.

Back during the Depression days we had a place east of town that had no running water. When the Depression hit, we moved out there. It was two and a half acres. We planted corn. All the ladies would come together and husk this corn. One of them had a pressure cooker. We'd all go to her place. It seemed to me like it was a jillion cans of corn in quart bottles. All the ladies would do this thing along with my mother. Dad would pick it. We paid $7.50 a month for the place. We didn't have any furniture. We were in Enid living in a big house when the Depression hit. After that we had no big house, no job, no nothing. Here we come with no furniture. Dad would get some boards and make a table. We didn't have a damn stick of furniture. I think we slept on the floor. We'd maybe borrowed Grandpa or Grandma's mattress or something until we got something going. The kitchen table was made out of boards and he made it.

He'd make home brew. I remember guys coming to the house, getting the brew and away they'd go. I imagine he made 50 to 100 gallons of it while we lived at that place. That was beer. That wasn't naughty. I think you could make beer in those days. He wasn't a big operator. He made just enough for a few of the friends. He didn't have a job or any money. I guess people would give him the stuff to make it and they'd come out and get it. He just made a percentage on the thing.

I remember one of them lent him a cow. It was my job to take this cow to pasture. Evidently there were a bunch of other guys in the same boat. We'd get about three of us together and go out with four or five cows out in some pasture. We'd go back in the evening and bring the cows back. They'd eat over there and then he'd milk this cow. Sometimes he'd get drunk and wouldn't show up. The cow would have to be milked. We'd have to phone Grandpa Kessler and he would come over and milk the cow. He didn't gripe too much about it. I'd have been pretty damn mad if they had called me to drive six miles out to milk a damn cow because the son was drunk.

I was living in this place and Grandma Kessler wanted me to go to church. I didn't have any shoes. I had knickers and these lace up boots. So I trotted into Sunday school and didn't think anything about it. The guys were looking at my shoes. It finally dawned on me that you were suppose to have shoes instead of boots. I told my mother, "I went to Sunday school and these guys made fun of my boots." I don't think anything ever came of it because

we moved again. We went on the west side of Guthrie and there was another one of these big old square schools. They set me back. I was in the fifth grade and they set me back a year because I didn't know how to read or spell good.

M.N.: That made you angry?

Kessler: It made me sick at my stomach. What was the matter? Wasn't I smart enough to go ahead? I wasn't reading too good. I'd get in a school and it would take me three months to adjust. You don't pick up very good like that.

M.N.: Did that make you feel later that you had to prove something?

Kessler: You mean being set back? It embarrassed the hell out of me. I was born in November. If you were born in December or January you would automatically stay back a year. I was right on the edge. When I got in high school nobody knew the difference.

M.N.: You knew the difference.

Kessler: I knew the difference.

M.N.: I don't think you ever forgot it.

Kessler: No. I never forgot that.

M.N.: Was that part of the reason for your being so successful later on?

Kessler: I attribute my success to my dad. He talked to me about the different ways he would use psychology to get his ideas across. You don't learn this in school. You don't learn how to apply yourself in different situations. When we got into California, he gave me another tip that I think affected me in my determination a lot more than the psychology thing.

This was when I was in the eighth grade in 1934. I came into the school in Ontario, California. There was a great big old curly headed guy that's a bully. He wanted to fight. I'm not a big person. I weigh 175. He must have been 200 pounds. Maybe I weighed 100. He'd wait for me after I'd go to school. I'd have to go over and get on the bus.

I told my dad that this guy wanted to beat me up. He said, "Son, I can't go to school with you and fight your battles. If a parent goes down with his kid to school it doesn't work out. What you've got to do is figure out how you can handle him." I said, "Well, how am I going to handle this guy?" He said, "You probably can't whip him. Usually bullies are cowards. He wouldn't be picking on you if he weren't a coward. What you want to do is to hurt him. The best thing to do is to get close to him. You know you're going to get hurt and get your eyes blackened or something. Haul off and hit him just as hard as you can right in the nose--right

between the eyes. This will probably break his nose and black his eyes. If he's what I think he is, he'll probably cave in."

So this guy grabs me by the arm and wants to fight. I'm just terrified. I did just exactly what the old man said. I hauled off and hit him with everything I had right between the eyes. He just flopped right down on the ground and started crying and didn't get up. Of course it broke his nose. He just left me alone. He came to school the next day with his black eyes and his nose in a cast. I thought, "Boy, that worked!" Then from Ontario I went into Bakersfield and from Bakersfield into Lindsay and from Lindsay into Dinuba. Just about a year in a high school.

M.N.: You left a string of broken nosed bullies behind you?

Kessler: Yes. Then, when I got to be an adult, I sort of figured this is more or less the philosophy you have when you start a business. You do a little politics and have a problem with a partner. You just go in with both barrels and give them what you've got. They usually cave in on you. I'd make your hair stand on end if I told you what I used to do. I hated bullies.

M.N.: What was the Depression like for your family?

Kessler: It seemed like in 1929 everything was roses. We were riding around in a car and we were happy. Everybody had a job and all the people thought we were really in prosperity type of thing. We were living in a big house and making good money. It just seemed to me that it just happened overnight--POW. Dad didn't have a job anymore. What were we going to do? How things could happen so quick, I don't know. But it did. We were just poor guys. All we had were the clothes on our back. From there we went out to the $7.50 house with the corn and the home brew and the cow. We were paying $75 a month in Enid. You can imagine. It was a doctor's house with five or six bathrooms, a porch, and real nice. Then we came out with no furniture and so forth. Being a kid, I really didn't know what it was. But, boy, you were a poor guy. I do remember that the wages back there for a common laborer, if you were a good guy, were 10¢ an hour. If you worked ten hours a day, you'd make $1. You'd make $6 a week. Then Dad got a job as a press man at the Guthrie Daily Leader. He made $10 a week which was good.

Roosevelt got in and he immediately started the WPA* They were trying to get Dad on the WPA. I think he worked on it for a while. They had the Cottonwood River in Guthrie. This was an old muddy river that went through town and they dumped their sewer in the end of it. It would go on out to the Cimmaron River. It was a good old river. It had crawdads in it and fish and everything. It had a lot of trees on it. The WPA project cut down all the trees. That river didn't have any trees for two or three miles. All these guys would do was come in and cut down the trees. Of course this gave them a job but it made the river look like the devil. Dad

*[Works Progress Administration]

was saying he didn't think that was very good. He said one guy would take a piece of wood. He'd walk way down, like a quarter of a mile, with this one piece of wood and lay it on the thing. Then he'd come back. Dad said they're loafing and it was just a job to keep them from the breadlines. He didn't think too much of it but it did put the people to work.

M.N.: Did your family use the breadline at all?

Kessler: Dad got this $10 a week job. The school was hinting whether I needed lunch or anything like that. I was so proud of the fact that he had a job and that we didn't need it. Boy, when you're down and out you're down and out, that's all there is to it.

M.N.: What was it like for you being down and out?

Kessler: I really didn't comprehend how poor we were until they made fun of my boots in Sunday school. The fact that we didn't have any furniture. You know you'd invited somebody in and you wouldn't have any furniture.

M.N.: How did you handle that?

Kessler: Well, I seemed to get by all right. We didn't have any plumbing. We'd heat water up. Put the water in a tub. We'd take a bath every Saturday in the hot water. We had an ice box. I never did remember being hungry or anything like that. We finally got a bed from someplace.

M.N.: You were actually better off than other people?

Kessler: I think we were. We were living high compared to some people back there. I had no complaints on that. If things got real bad, we could always go to Grandma Kessler's place.

M.N.: Why would you go there?

Kessler: Because we had no place else to go. They had two places in town. He was an old German guy and she was an Irish lady. They were very industrious people. They weren't going to let anything get them down and it didn't. They had furniture and they had a cellar full of food and an old 1928 Pontiac. I'm an old car collector now. I was thinking about Grandpa's old car. It knocked and spewed and putted but it got them there and back. They were very industrious people. He could make the farm pay where the other guys couldn't. She could knit and sew and they just didn't want for anything because they were industrious. They didn't let anything bother them. The Depression didn't phase them at all.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

M.N.: Let's talk about the things your family did in the year or two before you came to California and the way you made the decision.

Kessler: The decision was more or less made for a person economically. When you're working like Dad was, making good money, living in a $75 a month house, and you get the props knocked out from under you, you try to make it the best way you can. So, he was working at the Guthrie Daily Leader. He got to be a pressman. When they would run the printer's ink on the paper, he'd have to wash his hands after he finished the run. They'd wash their hands in gasoline. Not knowing any safety precautions then, they used ethel gas. After a few months of washing his hands in ethel gas, he couldn't hold his legs up. He was getting weak in the calves of his legs. He went to the doctor wondering, "What's the matter?" The doctor asked where he worked and said that he had lead poisoning. [The doctor said he needed] a lot of orange juice and sunshine. He wasn't going to be able to do too much hard work.

M.N.: He wouldn't be able to work permanently?

Kessler: Well, he could hardly walk. He could handle being a salesman and riding in a car and going out to talk to people for a few minutes. Mother was acquainted with quite a prominent lady in Guthrie named Stella Gelsma [who wanted to come to California]. Mother bought [a used Studebaker] President. It wasn't really much of a car. It looked real good. It had a metal top. In those days the cars had the old cloth tops. It had a streamline back end. My dad, mother and I and Stella got in this car and came to California. The decision was made because Dad couldn't even work at the printing place. There were no jobs in Guthrie that he could handle. He was almost a non-working person. The minute we got into San Bernardino he hit the tractor places. Sure enough, there was a job opening in Redlands at the Citrus Belt Tractor & Implement Company. The guy had a cabin up in Forest Home above Redlands. He said Dad could just go up there and stay and work for him in Redlands. So Dad started selling tractors in Redlands. He was quite a good salesman.

M.N.: Do you remember the trip out?

Kessler: It took about four days to get through. We averaged 35 miles an hour.

M.N.: Do you remember when you left?

Kessler: I just remember packing up and leaving. When we got out of Oklahoma and were going through the Panhandle, we looked up and it was flat back there. We could see this big red dust that they talk about. I imagine the thing was 300 to 400 miles long. It was just a big rolling thing of dust. We came down through Texas and it was clear on one side. Here this dust was [on the other side]. We'd go into this dust and our visibility was cut down. We were kind of fogged in with this red, dry old dust. We never saw it

in Guthrie. It was out in other places in Oklahoma. You'd cough and sneeze. It would get all over the car. We drove in that maybe for a day and came on out in New Mexico. It wasn't there anymore.

M.N.: This was 1934?

Kessler: This was 1933 or 1934. I've never been back. I remember that dust though. We never stopped at a motel. We'd just drive all day and all night. My mother would drive and then Dad would drive. Stella didn't drive. We'd just sit in the car. I don't remember ever stopping anyplace to eat. I guess we ate sandwiches or something.

M.N.: Where did you come into California?

Kessler: We came by the southern route. We came in at Yuma [Arizona].

M.N.: Do you remember being stopped there?

Kessler: We pulled up and they checked us. Then we went on. Our car was new and we looked pretty good so no problems or anything.

M.N.: Did your parents bring a lot of money with them?

Kessler: Brought nothing. No money. Just the clothes on our back. We had the clothes on our back and I don't think we had $5. Stella was buying the gas and footing the bill. We drove because she was a big fat lady and couldn't drive.

M.N.: How many children were there?

Kessler: In my family--just me. The Nelsons had twelve children. All their children, starting from the top on down, had one. Uncle Tom had one child, Bonnie had none, Marie had one, Nancy had one, Ruth had none. They didn't have the children because I guess it cost so darn much to raise them in the Depression. They just weren't a popular thing to have.

M.N.: You must have had a fairly close relationship with your parents?

Kessler: Well, I never went fishing with Dad. The uncles would teach me more than my dad did. What I learned from my dad was his insight on how to deal with people. As far as going to church, Grandma Kessler took care of that. The folks were never real pushy on that type of thing.

M.N.: Do you remember what you thought of California before you came?

Kessler: You wonder what the devil the desert is. When you drop down into San Bernardino your first impression is that they've got roads that are out of this world. They've also got orange trees that grow green. They irrigate the farms and orchards and have vineyards.

You wonder what's lacking back in the midwest. Here in California you can joke with people. Back there, they're not motivated and aren't as open as California people. California people seem to be more uninhibited. The streams are clear and clean. Back there they dump oil. You wouldn't believe it. They dump oil in the rivers. They'd run an oil well and just dump the oil in the river. It ruins the river and ruins the fish. The river is just filthy dirty with this sewage and oil. You come out to California and the streams are crystal clear and clean, the roads are wide, the towns are cleaner. The Cottonwood River ran through Guthrie and Grandpa had the beanery. I would walk home with him. We lived on the west side down the river and up the hill. The higher up the hill you got, the more well off you were. we had to cross the bottom to get up there. We weren't too far up the hill, but we were at least off the bottom. All the places down there were built high. The flood waters would come up and it would almost raise up to your floor. If the old Cottonwood would flood, your furniture would float. Anyways, we'd go down through there. We'd go by these places. These were white people's places. It wasn't colored. The places would stink. Boy, I mean stink just like somebody urinated all over. It would smell like this if the wind would be right. We'd go down there it would almost make you throw up. When you'd walk down there to get across the river, it would smell terribly. Oh, gosh it was bad.

M.N.: So you came to California and were taken aback?

Kessler: Taken aback. At least the rivers weren't all full of oil. The streams were clear, the roads were wide. I'd never seen such good roads.

We got settled there in Ontario. They were coming through with the Colorado Aqueduct. This was a great big pipe about the size of a one story house. They were coming right down through Ontario with these giant big things to bring that water over. I wondered what on earth was going on. I just could hardly fathom it. I think California was engineering. Back east you have corrupt county commissioners. My dad had to pay off every commissioner or they wouldn't buy his tractors. The better he paid off, the more business he'd get. Out here, they didn't seem to operate that way at all. One of the things you pick up the minute you cross the border into southern California is how far advanced they are. It's a different world altogether.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

Session Two May 28, 1981

M.N.: You came in at Redlands?

Kessler: First we came into San Bernardino. We didn't have any money and were at the disposal of Stella. She went right to her relatives. I didn't think about this until years later. Here her brother

had to put up complete strangers. We only stayed there for a week or two. I asked my mother who paid for everything. It costs a lot of money to put people up for the day or the week. I guess we lived off of those people for about two weeks before Dad made his connections in Redlands at the tractor implement agency. His boss had us live up at his cabin at Forest Home out of Redlands. We lived there. Dad did such a good job selling those tractors for them that they wanted to open up a branch in Ontario.

M.N.: How long did you live there before you moved to Ontario?

Kessler: About three months. It was a summer cabin. I guess it gets cold there during the winter months. We moved right to Ontario where he opened a small branch in a filling station. The old Associated Stations had a place for parts and things. One of the stores was empty and we'd run the tractors in there and have the showroom. He'd work out of there all over the Cucamonga, Alta Loma, Etiwanda, Ontario, Chino and Uplands area.

M.N.: This is when you had problems with the schools?

Kessler: I already had the problem. I was in the eighth grade. We went up to what was called a junior high school. I'd signed up for speech. The teacher there was quite a cracker jack. She took an interest in what a person was doing. I was terrified to get up and talk. After getting out of her class, it seemed easier. Another good thing they had in the schools was mechanical drawing. That helps a man. You can see plans and know what they are. That has helped me all through my whole life. They had wood shop. You learn little things about wood shop and metal shop and things like that. I would say the schools in Ontario at the time I was there were some of the best in the world. They still didn't catch on too well that I couldn't read or spell well. I had to go through the bully thing there too.

M.N.: What was your personality like?

Kessler: At that time, I didn't have much personality. I was just a kid. I really didn't know what it was all about.

M.N.: Did you have an accent? You don't seem to have one now.

Kessler: I had an awful accent. I still think I have a little midwestern accent. I had a real big midwestern drawl. I was from back east and didn't really sound like these guys. I wasn't really happy about the fact that I had a drawl and was from the midwest because possibly they looked down on some of us.

M.N.: Did you consciously try to lose your accent?

Kessler: No. I didn't know I could. You didn't really know how you sounded without a tape recorder. They didn't even have them in

those days. I wasn't aware of this.

M.N.: Did you dress differently?

Kessler: No. I think I dressed about like the rest of the guys. No noticeable difference.

M.N.: Your father had an adequate income after he started working?

Kessler: After he started working he did great guns. He provided clothes and so forth. He seemed to have a knack to run onto good deals all the time.

That was a very beautiful setting in Ontario. The Chaffee brothers had come in from Canada. They named the town after them because they were from Ontario, Canada. They put in this street called Euclid Avenue. It had pepper trees and was ten miles long. It went from the foot of Mount Baldy clear on down to Chino. It had green grass and it seemed like all the municipalities along the way would maintain it. It seems like when it got up in the county they quit growing the grass on it because nobody lived on it. It became just a thoroughfare. It was one of the most beautiful avenues in the world right there. They named the school Chaffee High School and named the town Ontario after these boys. Evidently they did quite a job on the town.

Getting back to my dad, he kind of maneuvered his way around. We went out on an orange grove on what they called Baseline Street. It went all the way from San Bernardino clear into the city of Los Angeles. This orange grove was forty acres. It was owned by a Mr. Snyder who I guess made his money in Nevada as a mining engineer. It was just the beautiful house of a millionaire. We moved in there and evidently he wanted somebody to take care of it. We paid $25 a month with all utilities. It was set up with electricity. We were living in this place that had solar heating for hot water. It had the panels up on top. It didn't have 50 to 60 gallons but if you timed it right you could take a bath or wash the dishes. This thing sat up on the roof. We didn't know what it was. We'd never seen one before. It worked tremendously well. Here we come from Oklahoma without a dime and we livedin this guy's house. Dad just seemed to maneuver things around. That was quite a place to live. I was still in junior high. The folks finally got the idea that maybe it wasn't a good idea to move me to another school in six months. So Dad made arrangements and I'd ride with the high school kids down to the eighth grade there. Next year I graduated. I think we stayed there for another year or so.

M.N.: Did that make a difference?

Kessler: Yes. It helped me. It really did. I went back to school the next year and I knew somebody. The other times I was frustrated with new people and I really couldn't make too good a friends with

new people quickly. This made a lot of difference.

M.N.: Did you make a big jump academically?

Kessler: No. I wouldn't say that. I didn't really get into that until the latter part of high school when I got pretty active in things.

M.N.: It doesn't sound like it was a bad time for you.

Kessler: No. I enjoyed it. It was a good time with no problems in that area.

M.N.: How did you look at that house?

Kessler: I liked the house. It had a basement with a big furnace in it and the orange trees were there. I wasn't used to this kind of citrus. Oranges were almost prohibitive. When you didn't have much money you wouldn't buy oranges because it would just cost too much. We could go out and pick our own oranges and grapefruit and so forth. I got a little job on the side back east where I came from. The wages were 10¢ an hour for a kid. Out here I remember the first job I got. I was working the smudge pots when the frost would come on. I got 50¢ an hour. I'd work at night and really make what you'd call money. I got a little job there with the orchard right there where we lived. Dad made another move and we went to Bakersfield.

M.N.: What was that like?

Kessler: We lived out at Casa Loma Acres and rented a place. This threw me up in my sophomore year.

M.N.: At which high school?

Kessler: The main high school in Bakersfield by the railroad tracks. We'd bus into there. Several things enter my mind. I never did see so many people in one school in all my life. This was my first experience with colored people. There were colored people there.

M.N.: What year was this?

Kessler: This was in 1936 or 1937. We'd go out and all the buses would line up. It seemed like there were 200 buses. There probably weren't that many. They were these old, old buses. Each seat had a door and they had great big brown leather seats and the big radiator cap that would come up. Looked to me like they were 1927 or 1928 style buses. All these kids would get in these great big soft seats and sit down with leather clear up to their shoulders. Away they'd go. Nobody seemed to pay any attention to it. You'd get on this great big old long slow bus and you'd putt-putt-putt to wherever you were going.

Bakersfield has a tremendous agricultural department. I entered into that because Dad was still on the tractors. I thought this is what I ought to do. They seemed to take quite an interest in a person and I felt that I was in about the best school I ever had. One of the teachers was assigned to me and asked why I didn't get a steer. I thought it'd be a lot of money. They even had the deal worked out at the bank where it would lend a kid money. He says, "Well, why don't you go ahead and do it? It's probably more than you can chew but just chew it anyway." I thought that was a good thought. I never did get around to getting the steer. I think we were moving again at that time. I do recall that Bakersfield was so big I didn't see how they could keep track of anybody. In those days I had oily skin so I had pimples. I didn't go suit up and I didn't get a good grade in gym. I would hang around out there during gym. I thought I might play handball. There was a kid that Dad knew. His father was the head of the Allis Chalmers and he was quite good looking. He had a 1922 Chevrolet sedan and all the girls would follow him around. He was a hell of a tennis player. He played handball with me and just beat me hands down. I thought I ought to do something about that so I started playing handball. Finally I got fairly decent at it. I think I had a run off with a large Mexican for the sophomore class championship. We had to go into two out of three then we went into overtime. Finally the guy got me by one ball but it made me feel pretty good. I was a good player. This was in a period of about one and a half months and this kid wanted to play handball again. I think he wanted to rub everybody's nose. He was a good handball player, good basketball player and a good tennis player. I beat him and beat him bad. He was mad. I couldn't understand how you could get to anybody like that. He was just as mad as he could be. He wasn't a good sport. I had thought he was a good guy.

M.N.: Were you working on a farm at this time?

Kessler: No. We just lived in a larger lot subdivision at Casa Loma Acres. Maybe it had a place for chickens, goats or sheep. I think the guy next to me took agriculture and he had several sheep there. He'd take them to the shows. We were out in the country. We weren't in town.

M.N.: Was your mother working at this time?

Kessler: No. She wasn't working. Dad was working on old Union Avenue at what used to be Barnett's Tractor and Implement Company. At that time it was an old metal building across from the Tractor Agency down there. From there we went on up to Lindsay. I finished the last two months of my sophomore year in 1937. This was a screw up deal. I had to go into a new place and I didn't know nobody again. I didn't make any friends and the teachers all gave me straight C's because they couldn't figure out whether I knew anything or not. They didn't have a chance to get a fix. I came out with as good a grades I would have gotten down in

Bakersfield I suppose. From there we moved to Dinuba. I'd just about had it with this moving. I was getting a little older. At Dinuba I started to come a little bit mentally. I was about 16 or 17. Dinuba, at that time, was a little aristocratic town. It had big trees all over and had a church on every corner. It was a pretty little place.

M.N.: Was your father's income pretty good?

Kessler: He was the manager of Stansfield McKnight Implement and Pump out of Lindsay. I would say it was above average.

M.N.: So you were doing pretty well economically?

Kessler: Economically, no problems. We had a new car and new house to live in and had a business in town. This was in 1938. I went to school there for junior year and got to stay a whole year in town. My background of having these bullies beat the hell out of me started coming in. They had a club in Dinuba. It was called the B.D.P.. It took in all the athletes, the student body president, class president, everything. Anybody who was a class officer was in the B.D.P. if you were a boy. I got to hearing about this deal and it kind of galled me a little bit. I didn't know whether this is the right thing for them to have or not. I wasn't going to knuckle down and get my ass beat till it was purple like some of the guys I'd seen.

M.N.: You're talking about the initiation?

Kessler: The initiation. They had no restraint. They just did what they wanted to. If one of the B.D.P. members would ask a girl for a date and she didn't want to go, they'd put her on the black list. Then she just couldn't go anywhere with anybody unless it was a Mennonite or somebody that wasn't in school. I said, "Hell, we've got to knock that stuff off. I got acquainted with a few prominent people who weren't in the B.D.P. We'd come to Dinuba in the summer. I got the picture during the summertime. When school opened, I was ready for them. I thought they shouldn't do this.

One way or another, we organized two clubs. One for the good guys who could hold the office. One for the guys who were a little bit tougher from across the tracks. The ones from across the tracks were quite numerous but you wouldn't want to use them for student body president. They had what they called freshman day. The poor old freshman would come and they'd get printer's ink on their cheeks that they couldn't get off. They'd have to bow and scrape to these B.D.P. guys. I was tall and weighed about 140 pounds. I thought this wasn't right for these poor freshmen to have to do this. I was a junior. I got several of the members of this club to be kind of organizing during the summer. We were coming along pretty good. The B.D.P. didn't know what was going on. They'd start to rough up one of these freshmen and I'd tap the old boy

on the shoulder and say, "Maybe you'd better leave him alone." He said, "Well, I can handle you." He was a football player. I said, "You can handle me but you can't handle those six guys standing over there by that building looking at you." He kind of looked them over and he didn't think he could either. So he left the little freshman alone. I said, "We're going to put Maxwell up for student body president and you be sure and vote for him because he's not in with guys like this." Of course, you do that to several of them and the word gets around. When the election came, no B.D.P. was elected.

M.N.: That was quite a feat.

Kessler: Oh, it was. It was the first time for 25 years that no B.D.P. was elected. Our guys got to be student body president, senior, junior, sophomore, freshman--the whole deal. The ones that were thinking about going into B.D.P. would drop out and take our club on. When I left there in 1940 there wasn't any B.D. P. left. All the girls were happy they could date whomever they pleased. They had actually been in fear of these guys. They had an air about them that would make you madder than hell.

At the Dinuba school I entered into debating and went into the print shop. I would go from an F in English to an A in printing. We printed the Emerald & White which was the school paper. Speech would be an A, English would be an F or D. Seemed like languages and things I just couldn't handle. I wasn't good at it at all. The other things I just excelled in. We had a newspaper there. This poor old teacher was plugging along. I said, "Hey, why don't you make twelve pages instead of four." He said, "We don't have enough advertising." I said, "You have an assistant advertising manager and I'll work with her. We'll just get this thing going." So, we used her car and we got every little store that you ever thought of. The paper was the biggest it had ever been since it'd started. This guy got recognized as putting out the best paper of the schools in the Valley. It made him a big deal. Boy, did I get an A out of that.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1

M.N.: You were quite an organizer.

Kessler: Yes. It seemed that that took off. All these guys that were in the club are all quite prominent people. One is the head of the bank in Visalia. He was the 1940 class president. We go back and see him and he's quite successful. I think every one of the nine of us that started are prominent citizens.

I remember the poor B.D.P. guy. His dad had the Ford agency. He wanted so much to be student body president. To this day he says, "Why in the hell did you pull on me? I wanted to be student body president and I came up with 43 votes." The other guy got 200 votes. I never did tell him what happened. He still kind of holds

it against me. What was I doing there? He was a nice guy, but he still wasn't a good example. They would put down girls who didn't go out with them and just terrified the girls. When we broke them up the girls really thought it was something.

M.N.: It sounds like there's some incident you haven't mentioned which really jelled your thinking about this particular club.

Kessler: Our class president came from a similar background to mine. His dad was a camp laborer and they lived out west of Dinuba. He was very poor and was trying to get ahead. He was very ambitious so they took him into the B.D.P. He was a friend of mine. We talked. His brother was nice looking. His sister was a very nice person. He said he wanted to join that club because he thought it was the way to go. I said, "Oh God, don't let them beat you up."

He went in and they had him take off his pants and strip down. They beat him and then they used these damn paddles. When he showed me his butt, it was blue and there was blood running because they beat him so much. I thought, "We couldn't have anybody get into a thing like that where they humiliate a person." I said, "Pull out of the damn thing and we'll get our own club going." I knew several guys that we could get. He said, "I can't even walk. On top of that, they made him do a lot of things that were degrading to a human being. I wouldn't want to mention it in this interview. It was terrible. They pushed you right down in the dirt and ground it in.

So he pulled out and we got the other guys and defeated them. This was one of the things that made us go ahead with the other club. Of course we dissolved after that. We didn't want to pull the same thing they did.

M.N.: What did you do after Dinuba?

Kessler: The war came on. I stayed in Dinuba and graduated.

M.N.: Your reading problem?

Kessler: It was bad up to senior year. I graduated and from there on I got to be a prominent young man in town. I got to be master councilor of the De Molay. I went to Reedley Junior College and they had some nice professors up there. I went into speech and got to drive a bus to help. I was a clerk in J.C. Penney's at Reedley. The same thing was happening there. They had fraternities and they were doing the same thing they had done in Dinuba. So we organized our own fraternity. We started a new one so the guys wouldn't have to get beaten. I think it's still active. The name of it is Beta Chi. We had a nice sponsor. I think he was in agriculture. When we had our initiation, we didn't go in for this humiliating thing. It was more or less funny stuff. We beat all of them in sports. They weren't really that bad up

there. They weren't like the one down in Dinuba at the high school.

M.N.: You provided an alternative for some of the students?

Kessler: A lot of them were shy and didn't want to be humiliated. We were pretty fast talkers and got the good guys in it before they knew it. We got a charter and got good fellows in it.

We'd tell the boys that we were going to have a dance. When we had our dance we weren't going to dance with just the pretty girls and let all the plain ones sit on the side lines. They have feelings too. It doesn't hurt you any if you ask one of them to dance. It might be a big thrill and it might not be but we aren't God's gift to women. When we had our dance at the school, we had 26 and all of them were instructed to pick up the stag line, the girls, not to let any girl go without a dance. We didn't let somebody sit there. The girls appreciated it so much they elected me sophomore class president. I was in complete shock. The girls afterwards said that that was the best dance that they ever had at high school or college.

The war broke out. Dad was taking off again from Dinuba. I said, "Hell, I'm through moving. I'm not going no place. I'm not going back with you." They wanted us to take flying lessons.

M.N.: Where was your father going?

Kessler: He got right in the Navy. He got into the Seabees.

M.N.: Was his health better?

Kessler: He got in for six months and they had to put him back out. He got in and went through basic.

M.N.: Did they make him an officer?

Kessler: No. He got out on medical. He really wasn't healthy enough. He was 42 and wasn't a kid anymore.

M.N.: You started flying.

Kessler: I started flying. They asked for volunteers. The Air Force asked for volunteers and they put us in civilian pilot training to see if we could handle an airplane. They were going for the big push across from England and using gliders. We went to Twentynine Palms or to Bishop. I got through primary. I went down to go in the Air Force and I had a small hernia. They didn't want to fool with me so I went out on a physical and couldn't go in. I went down to Fresno and thought, "By God, maybe they're wrong." I went to try to join the Marines. This guy examined me and said, "Hey son, you've got a hernia. We can't take you right now. See what you can do. You can go get it operated on and in a year you might

be all right."

M.N.: Were you upset by that?

Kessler: I liked my country and it was at war. I wanted to help it. Patriotism comes to the front and you want to do what you can.

I wondered what else could I do. Dad had already crossed the country and got a job back in Norfolk, Virginia. He made acquaintance with the captain of construction back there. They said they had a job out at China Lake, California.

M.N.: Do you mean a military captain?

Kessler: He was a Navy captain which is a little higher than an Army captain. He was Captain Sanquist. I don't know how Dad did it but he came out to China Lake. This was in 1943. He said, "I've got a job over here. You can work over here in defense." I'd just been married.

M.N.: Did you meet your wife in college?

Kessler: Met the wife in Dinuba. She went to Reedley too. I went to Reedley two and a half years. We married in 1943 and then went to China Lake at the end of 1943 or 1944.

M.N.: What did you think about China Lake?

Kessler: I think I was the 1200 guy that came in. We had maybe 20,000 people. They went by badge number. My number was 1243. My dad's number was about 400. You could tell how fast they were coming in there.

Anyway, we moved to China Lake. A lot of strange things happened over there too. Dad said, "We can put you in the parts department and you can learn this tractor business." He could work it so as to get me in as Navy inspector. A Navy inspector has a lot of ego. You get this list of parts and you make sure the contractor gets the parts. I thought that wasn't for me. It was a waste of the government's money.

I would go help the contractor put the parts up. The parts would come in. Then we'd wait in the office and smoke cigarettes waiting for another load to come in. As soon as we got the load in we'd check the parts off. I'd go help him put them up and helped to get a system set up so we knew where they were or at least he did. Other guys would all laugh at me say, "What the hell is the kid doing there?" I said, "Well, I'm not going to sit on my butt. We're at war."

I wanted to help this guy and it didn't hurt me any. I thought I might learn something. I helped these parts guys. They'd have big deadlines. They got to confiding in me. "Hey, I'm

going to order this for this truck what kind of part do we need?" I said, "Well, you need this part." We'd order it and it would come in and we'd put it up. Finally, word got around and the guys from construction would knock at my door and say, "Hey Bob, we want to get this truck going tonight. Do you remember what you did with this part?" I said, "Sure. It's on so and so," or I'd go with them to find the part and get the truck going. I guess I did a job for them. I was 23 going on 24. They gave me the whole parts department. I had maybe 40 people working for me. Civil service bothered me because people were taking advantage and not working.

M.N.: Were you making a pretty good income?

Kessler: Well, thanks to the Navy, we were making a very good income. We paid $17 a month for rent. We'd pay 70¢ a day for food and eat right with the sailors.

M.N.: Your wife too?

Kessler: Wife too. The lunch was 30¢ and dinner was 20¢. We'd go up with a tray and they'd give it to us on the tray.

M.N.: Was China Lake fairly isolated at that time?

Kessler: Isolated. Really isolated. We'd eat with the sailors and lived in our little old place. Finally we got a place together and paid $17 a month rent to the Navy. All we could do was save our money to buy war bonds. I just signed up my check for war bonds. The wife would keep hers out and we lived on hers. She worked in supply. She could type and with the things she learned in college she got a typist job in the purchasing department. We'd live on her salary. We'd save $36 a month on her salary. We didn't need any more. We couldn't go any place. We couldn't get any gas to go anywhere. So, there we were.

M.N.: The job turned out to be a windfall?

Kessler: Well, we saved up about $25,000. In those days that was big money. The Civil Service disenchanted me. It had politics in it. I was 24 and had 40 guys under me. Some guy had been there from back east and he was a number one mechanic. He resented a moving type of person like me.

M.N.: Did you get bumped by someone like that?

Kessler: No. I quit and started the store.

M.N.: How long had you worked there?

Kessler: I guess I worked there about three and a half years.

M.N.: You saved $25,000 in three years?

Kessler: Yes, I did. We figured we'd put up a fruit stand. We had the knowledge from Dinuba. We'd pick up our stuff from over here in Fresno and take it over there. So we put up a fruit stand.

M.N.: You did your own hauling?

Kessler: We did our own hauling. We took this $25,000 and built the building. Little Bobby did it. That's me. Dad didn't have any money saved up. We picked a partner up over here in Dinuba and we started that store.

M.N.: Was your partner someone that you knew?

Kessler: Yes. I worked for him in the cement pipe yards and got to know him. My dad knew him.

M.N.: Do you mean a financial partner or was he actually doing work?

Kessler: A working partner. He was handling this end of the business. It worked out quite well. He brought his father-in-law over. We took the $25,000 I had and tried to build the building. You couldn't buy any buildings. You couldn't get any lumber. The war was still grinding down. We did go down to L.A. and got the material by hook or crook and brought it up. His father-in-law had a table saw. We'd saw this lumber and pound our nails in to build the store. We ran out of money to get groceries with. I remember sitting in the store working and some guy came in and said, "Hey, I'm Beaver from Bakersfield. How about me putting in a meat market?" We were only figuring on a vegetable stand. I said, "I'd guess that that would be all right." I talked to my dad and we added the meat market. We didn't have to buy the stuff for it. We didn't have the know how for meat.

M.N.: You had another partner then?

Kessler: No. He wasn't a partner. He was a leasee. Dad wouldn't let Mother save any money. He'd find it. If she had a ring he'd go get it hocked. He wasn't a good manager at all but he was a very likeable person.

We'd borrow money from Mother and not let Dad know it. She would save her money. We borrowed $1200 from her and with whatever else we had we came over to Fresno. We filled up an old Army ten wheeler that Roger had to haul fruit with. We went over the old Tehachapi road. It wasn't the good one. It was the old winding one. We brought it in and stocked the store.

We opened the door in September 1947. We did a fair job of pricing. We didn't want to jack everybody up like in a boom town. We opened the door that day and we sold every damn thing we had in the store except one box of White King soap that had a hole in it. Everything. They just cleaned out the whole store. We just got in the truck as soon as we closed up at seven and drove back to

Fresno. We made up an order riding along on this bouncy old truck. They loaded us up and we tried to make it back in time to open up the store in the morning. We just had volume that way ever since. It's what you call being in the right place at the right time in a business. We remodeled nine times. I think we had the highest volume per square foot of any store in California except some place in San Francisco.

We worked pretty hard at the thing. We worked all day. We opened at nine and we worked till nine at night. Then we'd go home, eat and come back to work till twelve o'clock to stock the shelves. We did this for four years at a time because we had no money to get it bigger.

M.N.: When did you finally quit?

Kessler: 1972. I sold out in 1973. When it burnt down, I think the store itself had a $400,000 loss. It was on six commercial lots. We'd built it up quite a bit from 1947.

M.N.: You owned the whole lot?

Kessler: We owned all those lots. It was quite a business complex. It was sort of a Midway Shopping Center with a drug store, liquor store, a market, an optometrist, and a beauty shop.

M.N.: You did quite well on a $25,000 start.

Kessler: Yes. We did quite well. I kind of wondered whether I should have worked for Knudsen Dairy and had been a milk man. I might have just rocked along.

[In a business] the line of making a profit or not making a profit is so fine that if you get off of that one way or another you just lose. In a big operation, if you get it going sour, you can lose faster than you could ever make it. You've got to be on your toes all the time. It's hard work. It keeps you wound up awfully tight.

M.N.: You don't seem like that now.

Kessler: I unwound for about eight years. But, when I went to work in the morning at that place, I'd go in there and face all the problems you could think of. The girl didn't come. The checker wasn't there on time. The bakery oven would be off. The refrigeration in the meat department might be three degrees hot. I'd just work like that all day and at night. I'd just go home like a rag. Of course I had a good wife so I could rest right behind the house and shut it off and take a nap. It kept me from having a coronary right there on the job.

M.N.: You look healthy now.

Kessler: Oh I'm healthy. I don't have any health problems.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 2

M.N.: How did you come to be up in the mountains?

Kessler: Up in these mountains right here? Having my wife's background back in Dinuba, we acquired a cabin sight up at Huntington back in 1952. We'd come from the desert through the mountains. As soon as I got to the mountains I'd say, "Oh man, this is where I want to live the rest of my life." Some people want to live in Hawaii or Florida. When we retired, I told her, "We don't have to live in Ridgecrest. It just blows all the time there. It's really not that nice of a place. We can live in the mountains if you want to." So we found this place because it was close to the cabin. We think it's quite nice. We feel the mountains up here. You can look down and see the city.

One of the things that I'm happy for is that I've got a good woman. I have six children. I always told my boys, "Whatever you do, if you want to be successful in life, and not necessarily financially, is you want to treat your woman right and get a good woman." By this I mean that you pay attention to her and take care of her. Watch out for her. A lot of times you have to be a little bit of a showman. By this I mean that, when I go to town, I get something extra and just throw it in a grocery bag. When you go to town, buy something for your wife because she's home taking care of the kids. She has a worse job than you have and she's doing good at it. When you go there, you bring her back a surprise. You walk into the house with a big smile on your face. You tell her, "I've got something for you." Maybe this will make her day. She knows you think about her. You kind of hold it behind your back and say, "Which hand will you choose?" Do it different every time you bring her back something. This makes her support you. The first obligation you have is to your family. That means your wife and your children and then your job and you're going up the line. If you have time to get active politically, you've got to make sure that you've got your family covered or your job covered before you can step up. You can't step over because you'd fall flat on your face.

M.N.: You worked hard all these years. You had to have some place to go to get away from the pressure.

Kessler: I have a good wife and she'd protect me. When I did go home I'd have a refuge that I could go in and rest and relax and come out of it. If she hadn't done that or told me to go to hell, to do this and do that, to cook the dinner and watch the kids, I don't think I could have made it. A person isn't that strong. You've got to go around the road together. They've got to pull the wagon all in the same direction. Sometimes the man shows up as successful but really the woman is the one who put him there or made it possible for him to get there. You don't want to forget

that the two of them together did it and not just the one.

M.N.: You were on the city council?

Kessler: Yes. You almost have to be political if you're a prominent businessman to keep your town going the way you think it should go. You have to do things. You can't be business, business, business all the time. Sometimes you have to help your community along. I used the same psychology I used in the days of high school when we got this B.D.P. out.

We were over in Ridgecrest in this God foresaken little town where the wind blows all the time. It's quite a prominent place as far as research and development goes. It's important to the country but they couldn't get any housing for the town. Nobody seemed to know a damn thing about how to do it. You have to humble yourself.

What we tried to do was to get those dummies out of the city council. They were trying to pattern the town after Los Angeles and trying to hamstring people.

It should be noted that in 1966, due to the actions of the First Council and some individual businessmen, China Lake and the city of Ridgecrest were not getting along at all. In fact, some of the people were boycotting some of the businesses and Ridgecrest was not very highly thought of by the China Lake people.

They were trying to pass laws that were not needed in the desert. They were egotists. Always the first bunch after you incorporate are the people that want to be in office. They aren't the leaders of the town because the leaders really don't want that kind of a job unless they have to take it. Anyway, we lined up some old-timers, a lawyer, a doctor, and myself. We thought we'd run for office but the main thing we wanted to do was build the town.

We thought we'd get the smartest guy that was available regardless of who he was. He happened to be the administrative officer of the China Lake station. He was a civilian who worked under the captain. The guy was absolutely a genius. We said, "We haven't been getting along with China Lake too much but we want to help you guys. We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the Navy and we want to quit this bickering. We want you to also help us build the town. You know things that we can't even do so how about it?" He said, "We've been looking for something like that." I said, "You've got it maybe for two terms but that's about all I can hold together." We said we needed housing and this guy agreed. Jim McGlothin was his name. He agree. He said, "You've got to sell your town, the Navy and the whole thing together back to Washington and down to Los Angeles and up to San Francisco. I'll make a flip chart." The flip chart was to sell the bureaucrats, the financiers, and the builders that Ridgecrest was not a one industry town and that it would not collapse if the Navy facility withdrew. "If you'll travel with me and act like the town and

the city is getting along together, we can put it over."

This took six months. We made several trips here and there to get FHA [Federal Housing Administration] interested in breaking housing. We had been sitting out there in slumville with all the housing on the station. The military back in Washington didn't understand why a Navy installation would have to have housing for civilians. We sold FHA the housing deal. They said they would give us the money. We had to get some contractors.

In the meantime, we used to be under the county. We had building inspectors who thought they were gods. They wouldn't let anybody pour cement. They'd make the guy wait. His cement truck would get stalled and he couldn't pour. They just did everything wrong. What we did was to appoint our own city inspectors. The word to the city inspectors was that we didn't want any dumps built out here. We wanted good buildings but we wanted to have this a good contractor town because we're going to really build it. We're going to build it and we want you to be out there when we pour. We don't want you to give them a problem with ego. We don't want them to put anything over on us but don't give them a bad time. Go up and shake their hand and say, "I'm your inspector. You're going to build it to the codes they have, but we'll work with you any way we can. I'll come out in the middle of the night if you're making the pour."

Word got around, but we couldn't get any contractors. We had to get a guy named Deeter. We kind of laid it out. I said, "I'm here. I'm going to talk to you. I can speak for the council because I've got the vote. I'm not here telling you what I think. I'm telling you how it's going to be. You come in this town and you build. We aren't going to give you any problems with an inspector. It's going to be nice. It's going to be legitimate. It's going to be fair with no payoffs to anybody. We want you to build a good home and sell it at a good price but we want it right. The city isn't going to hamstring you at all. We're going to help you any way we can. We're going to open this ground and we want this place to be built."

We got these guys in. I would go down to the airport because I had these old cars. They wanted me to take one of those old cars down to impress the guy. We'd pick him up in my Mercedes Benz with the big leather seats. So we went out and picked old Deeter up and brought him in. Evidently, he bought Ridgecrest. He started building and we beat Bakersfield in building permits for two years in a row. That little old town of Ridgecrest just built, built, built.

As long as we were in office, these guys didn't have any problem. The town got what it wanted. We got the park going where they put the post office. We got the swimming pool put in and got the roads built up. We got a Safeway complex up there. They

said we needed some more stores out there. They asked if I would fight that. I said, "I can take care of myself. I don't have to beat people down and try to keep competition out. I can make it. I can only get so big and this is as big as I'm going to get. I'm on the town's side, so here we go."

They'd bring these guys out to talk to everybody and they'd say, "Boy, we're sold on Ridgecrest. Here we come." They put the Safeway in and put a Grants store in. The real estate guys were giving us a real hard time. They wanted a whole lot of money for nothing. They were trying to stifle growth. Some of them were trying to get the growth into their end of town. We just broke it all to pieces. We got it going and they came in and built all those places. It's been going pretty good ever since. That was one of the things we did by using our heads. We weren't smart men that way. Common sense isn't so common. We just used our common sense and let things go and got the town built. That was an interesting twist on politics.

M.N.: I find it fascinating that the little boy from Guthrie, Oklahoma came out and found himself in the center of a growing community. Ridgecrest is a fairly large community.

Kessler: It's getting to be a biggie. This old boy on the base, the smart one, was from Oklahoma City. I think my opportunities when I left back there were almost nill. You might be a clever person but you couldn't get yourself in a position to do any good. Guys would come from there and they would pick up all this activity that California was generating. Some of them made good. The people back east were more or less backward. They just weren't goers or promoters.

M.N.: When you look back on things, how do you see it?

Kessler: I never did go back to Oklahoma. I never had any desire to. It never did do too much for me. When I look back, I just kind of look at that as almost a lost cause. I guess it's a pretty damn good state [Oklahoma]. California is the state that gave me the break. The teachers in college were especially helpful and the ones when I was in the eighth grade starting in public speaking. The woman would pat me on the back and so forth.

I think it's the people who help you. In Dinuba the principal of the school thought I had something. I was a little bit rowdy, but he thought something was there. He and another fellow named Wright who was in the insurance business both took an interest in me. With this Valides Club we had, they got me in the De Molay right away. This helps you put the gavel down and you understand how parliamentary things work. You also learn a little bit about respecting your mother and parents. This helps a teenager have something to grab a hold of instead of just trying to be a bum and running around. I think it's the people along the line that help you. Then, when you get in the position to help somebody, you

do it a little different way. Maybe I didn't exactly help a lot of people, but I did help a town get started. You help the things that are going to be there for years. Things that are going to be good like the park and the commercial areas. The people were denied this before. So actually I've gone in and done something. It's sort of a thankless thing too, because everybody thinks you're out for a buck. One thing I can say is that, with every step I took forward, I didn't step on anybody. I didn't have to be dishonest.

M.N.: But you could have?

Kessler: Oh yes. I could have.

M.N.: Why didn't you?

Kessler: I didn't want to because it would have bothered me morally. I remembered how the kids beat the hell out of me when I was little. Then, when I got to be in a powerful position I didn't want to hurt people or the little guy. We'd put in all these curbs and gutters to make Ridgecrest look pretty. In Ridgecrest you'd get sand up on your door and we wanted to put curbs and gutters in. Everybody went in together and put the money up. You have to pay in but it's going to make your house look better. One poor old guy didn't have the money. I think it only cost $170. We had to call a special meeting to pay his bond because he was going to have to pay and he didn't have any money. We all divided up. Unbeknownst to the public, we got this guy going. We was the only one who was hurting financially.

M.N.: It sounds like you became more or less your brother's keeper. Someone who respected other people.

Kessler: Well, yes. I didn't want to see women get beat up. I didn't want to see poor people who weren't as fortunate as me get some guy that's pushy and wants it for his own self push them around. I was kind of sensitive to these sorts of things. I didn't want to see this happen to them. If you're a big enough guy you can stop it. You can tell the guy to lay off of a couple because they're old and they don't have the money. Don't do it because, if you do, you're going to hear from me and the whole club. When you are looked up to in town, they usually listen to you. You just have to suggest that he leave them alone.

M.N.: You were able to make a difference with your own life?

Kessler: Yes, I made a difference. But, you can only do this while you've got the team together. You can't do it forever. I served two terms. I didn't keep on because I think the job that I could do was already done and gone. The challenge was more or less was met. So, I retired to see if I could live a few years and enjoy myself.

M.N.: Do you feel good about what you're doing now?

Kessler: Yes, I feel good. No pressure. Nobody knows where I live. I don't have signs on the road. I am way back in here. I'm relaxed. If I'd stayed at the store, I'd probably be dead by now. I probably wouldn't have lasted. There was too much pressure.

M.N.: You're proud of your accomplishments and the way that you lived your life?

Kessler: Oh yes. I don't have any regrets. I just wish I could have done a little bit more. But, sometimes, you have to be satisfied with what you can do.

M.N.: I see a smile in your eyes when you talk about those accomplishments.

Kessler: Yes. It makes me feel kind of good to think that I could take a little desert town.... That town has been kind to me. When I left those people I wanted to have done something for them. The Navy has been kind to me. Sometimes, when you're in business you can just sell them bread and milk. But then, when it comes right down to it, I helped bring in a Safeway store and an Albertson's. That was competition. I didn't really care. That really didn't hurt my business. It helped give those people in Ridgecrest a choice. They had places to shop they didn't have before. If I had been a greedy so and so, I would have turned down everything. In my position, with those same four men, we could have stopped all that development. Instead, we just went right on in. You might say I did it to help my fellow man and humanity a little bit. Nobody can be a great big guy but, in a little way, in a little town I've helped to make things better for the guys who will be there after I'm gone.

END OF INTERVIEW

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