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Photographs By Mark Boster Los Angeles Times

THE PICTURE TODAY: Roy's Motel and Cafe is framed by a bullet hole in the window of the hamlet's closed gas station. Amboy, in the Mojave Desert off Interstate 40 between Ludlow and Cadiz, was once a popular stop on Route 66. The town offered tires, thick malts and overpriced gas to motorists caught between stations

Destiny in the desert

COLUMN ONE

Breathing life into a faded desert landmark Amboy was lively till old Route 66 was bypassed. Now a fast-food magnate has a vision of reviving its crumbling modernist cafe and motel.

By Mike Anton, Times Staff Writer

B Amboy, Calif. — BEFORE Interstate 40 bypassed them and drove a stake through their heart, this broiler of a town on old Route 66 and its modernist landmark, Roy's Motel and Cafe, thumped with life day and night.

Roy's atomic-age neon sign competed with the stars three hours east of Los Angeles. It was a beacon of civilization to weary travelers rocketing along America's Mother Road, a sign of hope to motorists whose cars had croaked in the desert heat.

Amboy was the domain of Buster Burris, a rough-hewn entrepreneur with flinty eyes, sun-toasted skin and strong opinions about rowdy bikers and men with long hair. Burris



LAID - BACK: Caretaker Larry Stevens talks to a woman in the closed cafe in Amboy when he heard of plans to restore the town, he drove from Las Vegas to San Bernardino to ask for the caretaker job.

and his father-in-law opened Roy's in the 1930s and for decades did brisk business selling tires, thick malts and overpriced gas. At times so many cars awaited service that one might have thought they were running a used car lot too.

Today, Amboy and Roy's are the only tourist stop for about 100 miles that didn't disappear after progress shut off the flow of customers in the 1970s. But it's fair to say they're on life support. The town's population is approximately four, the school closed years ago, birds have turned the church into a poop-caked aviary and the post office barely survived.

Roy's, shuttered for about two years, is a mess of peeling paint, rotting floors and broken glass.

Each windstorm takes another piece of the Cafe sign with it.

Burris, who sold Amboy before he died at 92 in 2000, would have been heartbroken by what has become of his creation. For fast-food chicken baron Albert Okura, it was love at first sight.

"I believe in destiny, and I believe my destiny involves that town," said Okura, 55, who got rich by founding the Juan Pollo restaurant chain in the Inland Empire. "It's hard to explain. How many people can say they own a whole town?"

IN 2005, Okura bought Amboy from Burris' second wife, 90-year-old Bessie, who regained ownership of the property after he previous buyers lost it in foreclosure.

Okura convinced her to sell him the town because he pledged to restore and reopen Roy's and because he had \$425,000 in cash. For that, Okura got the hotel and cafe, the church and post office, four gas pumps, two dirt airstrips and a variety of scattered buildings. (Burris is said to have been the one who bulldozed the rest of Amboy after I-40 wrecked his business.)

Okura also got several hundred acres of adjacent desert that he believes could skyrocket in value if development in the Inland Empire continues to push east.

"There were better offers, but they didn't want to run a hotel and diner. They were going to tear them down. I didn't think that was a good idea," said Bessie, a city girl who embraced Burris' love for the remote outpost he rarely left. "We were married in 1982. I was from Hollywood. I didn't know anything about living way out there. I didn't even know how to fry eggs. Buster showed me."

AMBOY had long been a railroad town when Route 66 put the place on the map during the Great Depression. Roy Crowl saw gold in the parade of migrants escaping the Dust Bowl.

He began buying land in the area and opened a service station in Amboy in 1938. Texas-born Burris, a civilian Army Air Corps pilot whose first marriage was to Crowl's daughter, joined him a year later.