

Rte. 66 Town of Amboy,
California to be Restored

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New Kicks on Route 66 for Commercial Builders



Darrell Miho for the New York Times



The sign for Roy's Motel and Cafe in Amboy, Calif., along the old Route 66, as seen through a hole in the cafe window. The Cafe and Gas Station are to be restored.

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

AMBOY, California - ALONG Route 66, which connected Chicago to Los Angeles from 1926 to 1985, roadside motels and their signature neon signs have been celebrated in books, songs and movies, as motoring west became an expression of American independence and freedom.

Since Route 66 was decommissioned as a federal highway, however, many motels have been lost to the wrecking ball, while others have stood vacant, ready to be revitalized by a movement to create a heritage corridor along the historical highway.

Route 66 aficionados hope that the restoration of one of the most famous stops for travelers along the highway, Roy's Motel and Cafe in Amboy, Calif., will anchor a revival of motel culture and Route 66 tourism. Roy's, about three hours east of Los Angeles, was bought by a San Bernardino restaurateur, Albert Okura, who acquired not just the motel and cafe but also the entire town. He promised the previous owner, Bessie Burris, that he would preserve and restore the town, which was in decline for decades and shut down completely in 2005.

As a collector of Route 66 memorabilia, Mr. Okura jumped at the chance to buy Amboy for \$425,000 in 2005, betting that revived interest in Route 66 will make Amboy commercially viable again — and he may be onto something. The World Monuments Fund, a New York-based organization devoted to saving architecture and cultural sites around the world, recently put Route 66 on its 2008 list of most endangered sites.

"There is a whole revival happening around Route 66," said Mr. Okura, who owns the Juan Pollo restaurant chain. "I'm the baby boomer generation, and we want to be young and live in the past. But you need somewhere to go, so they follow Route 66. But progress is disjointed. The more I looked into Amboy, the more I realized, there's no other place like this."

In addition to a gasoline station, post office, garage, church, cemetery, four houses and an airport runway, Amboy is most known for its at-

omic-age sign for Roy's. The original lodging in Amboy consisted of six bungalows built in the 1920s. A single-story motel with 20 units and a lobby were added in the 1950s, when Route 66 tourism was at its peak.

Despite slow progress in getting things back up and running, word has spread throughout the Route 66 subculture. And before Mr. Okura has even been able to make the gas station functional, tourists are arriving to monitor Amboy's progress.

"Fifty tourists from London had their cars shipped to America to drive Route 66," said Joanne Fuentes, who is helping to oversee the refurbishment for Mr. Okura. "It was an awesome sight. They parked right underneath the Roy's sign. We just had a group of about 20 people from Germany that had their motorcycles shipped over, so they can ride along the route. So there's a lot of people around the world that are waiting for this to happen."

Mr. Okura expects to open the gas station soon, followed by the motel and cafe. He has hired a preservation architect, Taylor Loudon, who is based in Culver City, Calif., to guide the restoration, particularly of the bungalows, which have been picked clean by vandals over the years. "It's a classic ghost town that isn't quite dead yet," Mr. Loudon said. "The context is, you see these buildings for miles because there's nothing else around. In the background is this barren lunarlike landscape. It's significant that the place still exists at all."