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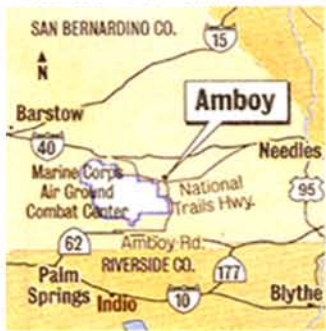
INLAND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S NEWSPAPER

SAVING A BIT OF ROUTE 66

Town has faded to lore, but its owner has dreams

By DARRELL R. SANTSCI

Albert Okura says chickens can save Amboy. The chickens are cooked in rotisserie ovens and sold at Okura's 35 Juan Pollo chain restaurants, at locations from Whittier to Yucaipa. Sell enough chickens, he says, and he'll raise the \$1 million he needs to restore the luster to Amboy, a way station in the Mojave Desert between Barstow and Needles on old Route 66.



Amboy remains a curiosity in Route 66. Its population has dwindled from 800 to six over the decades

His project got some welcome news last month when Route 66 motels made a list of America's 11 most endangered historic places. A Route 66 preservation group then pledged to help raise at least half the cost of sprucing up Amboy, home to one of those old motels.

The 500-acre town has clung precariously to life since Interstate 40 came through 35 years ago. Two previous owners tried in vain to make a go of Amboy, but as its population dwindled from 800 to six people, so have Amboy's prospects.

With broken windows in its motel cottages, gas pumps that don't operate and weather-worn outbuildings, Amboy looks as abandoned as the other largely abandoned towns along the old highway. Occasional light patches from salt mines, moonscaped mountains in the distance and the blackened rim of the dormant Amboy Crater form a desolate backdrop.

The only sign of life -- when freight trains aren't passing through -- are the tiny buildings against a hill 10 miles, maybe 20 miles to the south. They too are a mirage, built by the Marines to train warriors from the Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms who are preparing to fight in Iraq.

The town made headlines four years ago when a celebrity photographer from New York and a former Caribbean restaurateur tried to sell Amboy -- the motel, the gas station, the café, the post office and the church -- on eBay. The best offer at the time, \$995,900, was \$1 million below the asking price.

Then it got worse. After two more years with no buyer, mounting debt and the photographer and former restaurateur unable to make payments, Bessie Burris, the now 90-year-old

widow of Amboy owner and icon Buster Burris, foreclosed on the town. She put it back on the market, priced to sell at \$700,000 or the best cash offer. It was an opportunity for Okura, 55, a former Taco Bell restaurant manager who broke out on his own 23 years ago to start a chain of takeout chicken restaurants. He had spent a total of four hours in Amboy over two visits when he tried to buy the place after the eBay sale fell through.

He wanted to take another crack at it. "I believe in destiny," he said, settling into a booth in his San Bernardino restaurant. "When the right thing comes along, I have to jump on it. "I knew it was the right thing to do. I know when something is right. That's how I got Juan Pollo. I knew the time was right. That worked out very well."

"I WILL RESTORE IT"

On Good Friday 2005, Okura got an e-mail telling him that the town was going to be sold that day. "I told them, 'I want to buy your town and I'll give you \$700,000, but I need terms,'" he said.

The owner, Bessie Burris, had settled in Twentynine Palms after the death of her husband, who owned and ran Amboy for half a century. She said by phone that she was frustrated at having to foreclose on her husband's now rundown town. She wanted to get rid of it and focus on her first love: painting. She wanted a quick sale and she wanted cash. She was not interested in taking payments from Okura.

The best offer on the table at the time was \$375,000.

ROUTE 66: Owner says he didn't buy town to make money but sees potential as tourist attraction



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ALBERT OKURA, OWNER OF AMBOY

AMBOY ORIGINS

So Okura made a new, cash-only, offer. "I said, 'I'll give you \$400,000.' I told them if they sold it to me I would restore it, not use it to make money." He meant what he said, Okura insists.

"Everyone who has owned Amboy has been in it to make money," he said. "You can't. I see this as a marketing avenue for Juan Pollo restaurants. In the next 20 years, the biggest growth in Southern California will be in the Mojave Desert.

Everything is built out in the Inland Empire." But no, he won't launch a Juan Pollo in Amboy.

"That would not be in character with the town," he said.

"Amboy has the potential to be the greatest Route 66 attraction on the West Coast. There's nothing like it anywhere. The good thing about the town is that it's paid off. There is no debt." This is where the chickens come in. "Primarily, we will fund the restoration through the company," Okura said. "We will pay as we go, however long it takes. What we get is the good will. I will get more good will by keeping it, as best I can, the way it was."

With some of his restaurants located on Route 66, the main cross-country route between Chicago and Los Angeles for five decades until the interstate highway system came along, Okura has hitched his chickens to the Mother Road.

He has been a vendor and participant in downtown San Bernardino's Stater Bros. Route 66 Rendezvous for the last 10 years. He bought what is reputed to be the original McDonald's restaurant in San Bernardino. It is now a Route 66 museum.

Amboy, which eventually became a Route 66 landmark, began as a mining camp in 1858. It got its name when the railroad built a depot and a water station for steam locomotives along a string of such stations stretching 70 miles to Needles. The stations were named alphabetically, with Amboy followed by Bolo, then Cadiz, then Danby, then Essex and so on.

The first rental cabins went up in Amboy in 1917, followed by construction of six roadside bungalows when Route 66 was established in the 1920s. The gas station and auto repair garage opened in 1939, and the 20-unit motel behind the bungalows was added in 1959. That was about the time the giant "Roy's Café" sign was erected.

It has since become popular on everything from T-shirts to Route 66 fan sites on the Internet. For his money, Okura got the sign, the café, the motel, the gas station, the garage, the town's church and the Amboy post office.

"This is the center of the world for people who live out here," said R. E. "Rocket" Rios, 53, who shares duties as postmaster with another of Amboy's caretakers. "We have an individual who lives in Paris, France, and has had a post office box here for 20 years," Rios said. "He comes twice a year and spends a couple of months here. He picks up his mail and his bank statements and takes care of business."

Some of that business, Rios said, was as an assistant to Buster Burris, the desert stalwart who ran Amboy in its heyday and presided over its slide nearly to ghost town status after I-40 opened in 1973.

Buster Burris hired some help, but did much of the work in Amboy himself, said Bessie Burris, who drove through town on the way to Las Vegas in the '70s, met Buster over a cup of coffee and eventually married him in 1982.

"When I married him, I didn't know how to fry an egg," she said. "I have to be honest. I was a very spoiled woman. I didn't know how to cook. Later on, I learned how to cook and he put me to work in the café.

"Life in Amboy was very interesting," she said. "There was always something."

BIKER INCIDENT

Like the time she heard a racket coming from the gas station at 3 a.m. Buster was asleep. She found some men on motorcycles sitting around drinking and joking. "I said, 'The place is closed. You can leave.'"

They didn't at first. Then one of them spotted the shotgun she was toting. They departed quickly. "It was Buster's shotgun," she said. "I grabbed it on my way out. I didn't know how to use it or anything." Roadside Attraction

Business wasn't exactly booming in the '80s and '90s, she said, but there was a steady stream of locals and occasionally large numbers of Europeans, for whom Route 66 and Amboy are authentic Americana.

They still come, as evidenced on a recent day when a dozen English tourists rolled into town on rented motorcycles inquiring about gasoline and beer, neither of which was for sale.

"To do Route 66, you have to go through here," said Sally Frost, a 45-year-old accountant from Bedfordshire, England.

She wiped perspiration from her forehead in the 105-degree morning heat. "We've been traveling Route 66 from Chicago," she said. "It's hot, but there's an amazing sky. I've never seen sky so enormous." On average these days, a visitor stops in Amboy about twice an hour. The European popularity preceded an explosion of interest in Route 66 in the United States that took root in the late 1980s, said James Conkle, founder and CEO of the Route 66 Preservation Association.

His organization promotes efforts to save what is left of the historic highway. Those efforts, and Okura's, got a boost less than a month ago when the National Trust for Historic Preservation announced its 2007 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. The list included Route 66 motels.

Such status, Conkle said, will make it easier for motel owners like Okura to qualify for federal and private preservation grants.

Okura said he already has used it in an application for a \$100,000 restoration grant from the National Park Service.

Conkle said his association wants to do more. It is creating a group called Friends of Amboy, which he expects to hold fundraisers and open a gift shop in the town to raise \$500,000 to \$600,000. Okura "is an independent businessman," Conkle said. "He is going to do this on his own, but he needs support from people like ourselves."

COMPLEX CHALLENGES

The restoration hit a snag almost before it started. Reopening the gas station triggered permit and inspection processes that are forcing Okura to bring the whole town up to construction codes.

That's something that a town built piecemeal in the remote San Bernardino County desert over the better part of a century was not familiar with at all.

The underground gasoline tanks have been made environmentally safe and the entire power system for Amboy is being replaced. But there are more roadblocks to clear.

"We thought we would have the gas station open last April. We thought we had a permit," Okura said. "Then the gas distributor said, 'You know what? You need your vapor recovery environmental something.' We had no idea. I've never run a gas station before.

I run restaurants," Okura hired historical architect Taylor Loudon, of Culver City, to help figure out what needs to be done to restore Amboy. Loudon found a septic tank made of railroad ties, the same building material used to make a wall in the repair garage. The church building's steeple is tilting almost to the point of collapse. The bungalows were stripped to the foundation.

"They have challenges because the town is of a certain vintage, which is another way of saying old," Loudon said. "As far as complexity, there is nothing near this. It was built by a variety of people over a long period of time with a differing array of material." Just how long restoration will take, neither Loudon nor Okura knows. "To me, the historical value of Amboy is that it exists at all," Loudon said. "This was a spot where you could stop and gas up and sleep if you couldn't drive anymore. That doesn't exist on the interstates.

"That's what makes Amboy special. That's history."