

Tourism ploy breeds alienation in windswept town



DAVE YODER/The Orange County Register

CULTURE: The newly christened Extraterrestrial Highway is drawing otherworldly types, unsettling Rachel, Nev.

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RACHEL, Nev. - A lot of folks in this dot-on-a-map town say it used to be a pretty nice place to live-until the aliens came.

HIGHWAY 375: Area known for UFO 'sightings.'

Not that life in this tiny high-desert community of about 100 people was ever exactly luxurious. A dusty, windblown collection of mobile homes and old pickups and tumbleweeds whistling across dirt yards, Rachel is 50 sun-baked, desolate miles away from the nearest school, the nearest cop or the nearest anything else.

But if the people in Rachel were far from the rest of the world, they were always close to one another.

The aliens changed all that. Now some folks in this town 110 miles northwest of Las Vegas are looking at each other with anger and resentment and even a little fear.

Rachel, you see, is the unofficial capital city of Nevada's newly designated Extraterrestrial Highway, a promotional scheme hatched by state officials to lure tourists to this tourist-poor area by hyping Highway 375's reputation for frequent space-alien sightings.

But while some people in Rachel are busily counting up the tourist dollars, others worry that their quiet little town is being overwhelmed by what they call "kooks" - people who want to see spaceships, people who think they've been abducted by aliens, and even people who want to be.

"We have a lot of people who come here looking to be abducted," says La Rae Fletcher, 63, a waitress at the town's only cafe. "They want to be taken up in a spaceship."

As far as Fletcher is concerned, if somebody thinks they can come to Rachel and book a warp-speed trip to Venus or Alpha Centauri or wherever, well that's their business. After all she herself has seen some strange things in the sky-including an oblong-shaped thing with little portholes that she says she spotted just a few months ago.

But it's all just a little too much for some Rachel residents.

"I think we're getting a lot of lowlifes around here," says Rita Potter, 67, a 10-year resident and a firm nonbeliever in aliens and UFOs and all that stuff. "Everybody locks their doors now that's something we never had to do before."

"The alien thing has really divided the town," laments Harold Singer, 34, a truck mechanic and long-time Rachel resident who recently came back to town after a long absence-and who, to his amazement, found himself in the middle

of an internecine battle over aliens. "Now when I go see friends I haven't seen for a few years I never know if I'm gonna get a handshake or a shotgun pointed in my face."

Boiled down to its essence, it's that same old battle of development vs. the status quo that so often racks communities as they battle over. proposed housing projects or shopping malls or theme parks.

Except here the struggle is over aliens from outer space- and aliens from places like California.

Now, because of the aliens people here are worrying about traffic, strangers, the potential for crime-in short, everything people came way out here to get away from in the first place.



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PHONE HOME: Little A'Le'Inn caters to many a UFO attracted by the area's reputation for strange sightings. An Air Force base is nearby.

Rachel landed in this alien controversy by virtue of being the only cluster of human existence on the entire 98-mile length of Highway 375, which skirts Nellis Air Force Base and the mysterious, heavily guarded Area 51, the US. government's top-secret aircraft test site.

It's a place where strange lights from secret aircraft are an almost every-night thing.

The test site has been here since the late 1940s, but Rachel is a more recent arrival. Founded in the 1970s by D.C. Day, who came out from Tennessee to start an alfalfa farm, it was named after little Rachel Jones who in 197X became the first baby born in the town-and who, residents say, later died of respiratory complications after her family moved to Washington state and she breathed volcanic dust from the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption.

There was a time when about 200 people lived in Rachel, back when Union Carbide was still operating a tungsten mine a few miles north. But the mine closed and the town started to wither.

Then came the rumors about aliens.

It started in earnest in 1989 when a man who claimed to be a former Government Physicist announced that he had been hired to work on extraterrestrial spacecraft the U.S. government was keeping at a site near Area 51. That, along with regular news reports about strange goings-on in the desert skies, was enough to bring a steady stream of hardcore UFO buffs to Highway 375.

The idea to rename the highway started, strangely enough, in Orange County. A couple years back, a North Las Vegas electrician and state assemblyman named Bob Price was visiting his daughter in Newport Beach when he saw a Larry King TV show about Area 51 and the aliens who supposedly infested Highway 375.

"A light came on in my head," says Price, 59 - a light that Price cheerfully admits spelled out "Tourism!" "

Price went home and introduced a bill in the legislature to rename the road the Extraterrestrial Highway. It sailed through the Assembly, but cooler -or crankier-heads in the Senate scotched the idea, calling it "frivolous."

Then Gov. Bob Miller and the Nevada Commission on Tourism got into the act, and the highway was renamed without legislative action. This month, amid howling 40 mph winds, the governor and various other dignitaries and movie stars-the stars, including actor Jeff Goldblum, were there to promote an upcoming Twentieth Century Fox movie about aliens-rode out to Rachel on buses to formally dedicate the new road signs. The green and white signs say "Extraterrestrial Highway" and bear drawings of flying saucers.

Unfortunately for Rachel residents, most locals were excluded from the dedication ceremony, which has left a lot of people sore at the governor.

All that aside, if tourism is the goal, it's working.

"I can remember when if we had two cars a day pass by here we figured we were seeing a lot of traffic," says Fletcher, who has lived here since 1976-which is to say, since two years before the town had electricity or telephones or even a name. "Now we're seeing 50 or 75 a day."

By Rachel standards, that's darn near a traffic jam.

The primary economic beneficiaries of the whole alien thing are Joe and Pat Travis, owners of the Little A'Le'Inn - pronounced "alien"-bar-cafe-motel. The Travises moved to Rachel in 1988 and bought the town's only cafe, the Rachel Bar & Grill, which already had gone through 10 owners? none of whom was able to make a living with it. Then the Travises had an idea.

"This UFO thing had come up, and I told my wife that every business needs a gimmick," recalls Joe, a bearded 57-year-old former carpenter who claims to have had a seemingly extraterrestrial experience in the bar-a strange light that penetrated a steel door. "So we kicked some names around and came up with the Little A'Le'Inn."

The Little A'Le'Inn is ground zero for the Rachel alien craze.

Outside the cafe, signs proclaim "Earthlings Welcome"; inside, visitors are offered a mixture of customary bar decor - for example, a sign that says "WE DON'T HAVE A TOWN DRUNK - WE ALL TAKE TURNS" - coupled with alleged alien photographs and tourist gimcracks of every description: yellow and black "Alien Crossing" road signs, "I Traveled the Extraterrestrial Highway and Landed at the Little A 'Le' Inn" bumper stickers, and so on.

And through the bar's doors come an increasingly steady stream of tourists and UFO buffs and would-be alien abductees from all over the nation and the world.

Jan and Glenn Kolleda are two of them. They'd just hit town looking for aliens.

Until a few years ago, Glenn, 42, operated an art and miniature-figures store in Orange; now he and Jan, 46, spend most of their time traveling around in their '86 Chevy van, attending psychic fairs and UFO shows across the country. Glenn, a big guy with a silvery beard, sells artwork and crystal jewelry; Jan is a raven-haired psychic who says she has "regressed" more than 200 people who were abducted by aliens.

"If they get you, remain calm and try to talk to them," Jan advises. "If you fight them, they're just going to hold you down."

Both Jan and Glenn note that most abductions are committed by "grays," the small, big-eyed, human-like aliens of popular conception. But they've never seen one.

"We've seen things we can't explain," Jan says. "But we want to see something concrete."

So one night last week Glenn and Jan drove about 20 miles south of Rachel to a lonely stretch of Highway 375-actually, every stretch of 375 is lonely -in the hopes of seeing aliens. There they ran into another UFO buff, a 39-year-old underwater photographer from Concord named Bill Whiffen, a self-described "flying through the air freak." ("I've made 220 parachute jumps, four of them naked.")

"Seen anything?" Glenn asks.

"I can't be sure," Bill says, then he points out in the desert. "But right over there? I think I may have seen a gray."

"Wow," says Glenn.

For the next several hours, they will stand in the desert in the light of a rustler's moon, necks craned skyward, watching as jet aircraft from the Air Force base go booming and zooming and illuminating the skies with missile decoy flares and practice bombs.

But, to their bitter disappointment, they did not see an alien.

The Kolledas are happy, friendly and seemingly sincere people who merely march to a far different drummer than most. But to many of the retirees and Air Force base workers and others who call Rachel home, they are simply two more of the weird or the lost or the emotionally challenged people who are changing the nature of the town.

A couple hundred yards from the Little A'Le'Inn, at the Rachel senior citizen's center, questions about aliens and alien-seekers prompt some serious eye-rolling.

"We're a lot more leery than we used to be," says Edith Grover, 76, a silver-haired, graceful woman who has lived here for 16 years.

"Have I seen an alien?" says Lois Messier, 60, who until she moved here with her late husband 14 years ago was an apartment manager in Garden Grove. "Sure! I was married to one!"

The ladies all laugh.

The senior citizen's center folks are reluctant to specifically criticize their neighbors to an outsider. But Glenn Campbell is less circumspect.

Campbell, 36, is a Boston-born computer programmer and former friend of the Travis' who had a falling out with them a few years back. Now he runs the Area 51 Research Center out of a trailer on the other side of town from the bar. Campbell partisans avoid Little A'Le'Inn partisans, and vice versa; it's sort of a dueling UFO-ology thing.

Campbell doesn't believe in visitations by aliens, although he does believe some strange, government-sponsored things are going on at Area 51. He also thinks the Extraterrestrial Highway promotion is bringing in a bad element. When the governor came out for the highway renaming ceremony, Campbell organized a small group of protesters.

"Some of these (alien-seekers) are frightening," he says. "They look like street people."

Campbell also worries that ordinary tourists from Las Vegas will be drawn here by the publicity and wind up in trouble-either from the desert elements or from the security guards at the test site.



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AWAY FROM IT ALL: Lois Messier, formerly of O.C., stands by the town cemetery. She knows all about aliens: 'I was married to one!' she jokes.

"The state is saying, 'Come and see the UFOs!' " Campbell says. "They're bringing uninformed people into a hostile physical and political environment."

Some folks think the alien craze is only going to get bigger - especially after the aliens make a fully public appearance, as some people expect.

"I think something earthshaking is about to happen," says Joe Travis.

And as for the naysayers in Rachel, well, Travis says they'll just have to get used to the idea that aliens are here to stay.

"Some people don't like it," he says. "But there's always going to be people who are anti-progress."

Register news researcher Scott Wilson contributed to this report.

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