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Empty Spot in the Road--and the Heart: A historic lodge along a lonely stretch of highway at the opening into the Owens Valley was a longtime haven for motorists until fire shut it down in July.

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LITTLE LAKE, Calif. — Over the years, travelers motoring on a desolate strip of U.S. 395 toward the Sierra Nevada were cheered a bit to round a bend and see the brightly lit Little Lake Lodge, a historic way station where they could stop for a cup of coffee or a room for the night if they were too tired to go on.

But since a fire gutted much of the two-story lodge's interior on July 20, that lonely stretch of road up into Inyo County, toward the skiing center of Mammoth, is now a little lonelier.

The site where the burned-out lodge stands, at the southern opening into the Owens Valley and next to a spring-fed lake, has actually been a haven for travelers since the region was first settled in the 1860s.

According to one historical account, a lone horseman hid from a party of Paiutes at Little Lake in 1865, and the general store there evolved into stops for stagecoaches and later for trains on the route across the valley floor.

The Little Lake Lodge was built here in 1923 by automobile road racer Bill Bramlette because its location was then about a long day's motorcar ride from Los Angeles. Bramlette built the lodge out of reinforced concrete, noting that an earlier hotel on the remote site was destroyed in a fire. Local legend has it that the building materials were mostly appropriated from the construction of the nearby Los Angeles Aqueduct.

Although the July fire caused more than \$300,000 in damage, the building's concrete structure did save parts of the lodge from burning. Several rooms are still intact, and Little Lake's U.S. Post Office, established in 1909 and housed inside the lodge, also survived. While the town consists of nothing more than the lodge and a nearby private duck-hunting club, it has its own ZIP code, 93542.

"This was the cafe," Charlie Rabel said stoically as he led a visitor through a burned-out concrete hulk on one side of the 69-year-old lodge.

Rabel, 47, had seen enough potential here to move up from San Diego last year to manage the lodge, and was about to assume ownership when the fire hit. The previous owners had reportedly sunk more than \$100,000 into improvements in the building recently, and Rabel said he had plans to renovate part of the lodge in a 1920s motif.

"In the nine months we were in operation, we were not lucrative, but we were real viable as a business," he said.

Since he arrived last fall, Rabel has been very civic-minded, joining the local county fair board and offering the lodge as a community center for the 75 or so people who live along a 25-mile stretch of U.S. 395. Locals flocked to the lodge in the past year for birthday parties, a wedding and Thanksgiving dinner, and Rabel said he played Santa Claus for children there last Christmas.

Now, area residents might have to find someplace else to gather, and travelers might have to whiz right by along the highway.

"It's up in the air," Rabel said of the future of Little Lake Lodge. Since the fire, he has closed escrow and taken legal possession of the property. But plans for rebuilding may hinge on a county requirement that the lodge meet modern earthquake codes.

"I don't want to spend a lot of money until I get through those hoops," Rabel said. A week after the fire, Rabel started a local ruckus when he asked the Inyo County grand jury to look into what he declared was an inadequate firefighting response in the southern end of the county. He didn't learn until after the fire that the lodge sits outside the boundaries of any fire district, leaving it with no official fire department.



Although state, federal and Kern County firefighters--as well as those from the nearby town of Olancha--all responded to the July fire, Rabel said confusion reigned over who was in charge. He also said that some firefighters were poorly trained. One firefighter, he said, actually caused the cafe area to burn when he opened a door and created a back-draft.

Olancha Fire Chief Steve Davis denied most of Rabel's assertions, and added that his department only responded out of a sense of moral obligation.

"We've taken a lot of heat over this, but we did the best we could with what we had to work with," Davis said. "If I'd known the accusations that were going to be made, I would have thought twice about responding."

Inyo County officials also defended firefighters on the scene, and explained that it is out of the question financially for the county to maintain its own fire department. Inyo County Emergency Services Coordinator Paul Morrisson said, "I'm not trying to shirk a responsibility--it was the county's responsibility, but the county doesn't have a fire department. Therefore, we don't provide that service to buildings like that out in the rural parts.

"Rabel happened to be caught in an area that's unprotected."

Said Rabel: "This is the most significant building in the southern end of the county. We're within 30 miles of Ridgecrest, a town of 40,000 people, and we're on a major U.S. highway.

"I just think the county should at least let people know who is responsible for fighting fires in the area, and there should be some caveat that Inyo County is responsible, but they're not responsible. Really, they just say, 'You're on your own, tiger.' "

