

Route 66 town from 'Easy Rider' now biker haven

By: ANANDA SHOREY - Associated Press

BELLEMONT, Ariz. --- When Captain America and Billy try to rent a room at the Pine Breeze Inn in the movie "Easy Rider," the outlaw bikers are turned away.

A man cracks the door, sees the men on their motorcycles and then a glowing "NO" starts blinking in front of "VACANCY" on the sign. Captain America and Billy -- played by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper -- ride down Route 66 and sleep in the woods. When the movie came out in 1969, bikers were disrespected and feared. They represented trouble, rebellion and drugs. Not anymore. This tiny town west of Flagstaff even caters to bikers now.

The Pine Breeze Inn is boarded up, white paint peeling and grass creeping up its sides. A rusted gas tank stands in front. And just feet away, what's left of this portion of Route 66 -- the fabled Mother Road now largely bypassed by Interstate 40 -- is cracked and overgrown with weeds. But instead of sending bikers away, the inn now invites them to camp on the 2.5-acre property surrounding the fading building. And just down the road there is a Harley Davidson shop and a Route 66 Roadhouse Bar and Grill, a tribute to everything Harley. The table tops are glass-covered motorcycle wheels. There is a Harley Davidson jukebox. A motorcycle from World War II stands in a museum-like room with a "Harley Parking Only" sign. The "No Vacancy" sign from "Easy Rider" hangs from the ceiling.

Bikers wearing leather chaps, skull bandanas, and Harley tank-tops and jackets periodically saunter in for drinks. About eight years ago, Felix Mansene and his wife, Lori, built the roadhouse. Now it's frequently used for biker parties and charity events. About 20,000 riders passed by the roadhouse in August while on the Harley-Davidson 100th Anniversary Ride Home, Mansene said. They partied in a circus tent filled with bands, American Indian dancers, and vendors selling corn on the cob and beer. A Harley was raffled in December at the roadhouse to raise money for local charities. Some years, the roadhouse hosts the Arizona Hog Rally. Mansene, who recently shaved off his waist-length ponytail and now has a bald head and dark-rimmed glasses, has been a biker for 40 years. He said bikers are perceived much better now than they were in the 1960s and 1970s, the period when Captain America and Billy tried to stay in Bellemont while traveling from Los Angeles to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. "Before, when you rode, you weren't really looked at that nicely," Mansene said.

When he owned a restaurant in Flagstaff, he parked his bike in the alley so customers wouldn't be frightened away. "Nobody else wanted to go in if there were bikers," Mansene said. John Whipp Jr. owns one of the few other establishments in Bellemont -- a bar named Junior's, where bikers still gather. Whipp's dad bought the bar in 1945. Whipp took over the establishment in 1956 and has been living in a back room of the bar ever since. The decor hasn't changed much over the years. The walls are plastered with posters of women posing by motorcycles. A motorcycle calendar hangs on the wall too, stuck on the year 1977. The countertop is lined with antique stools. Whipp, who used to buy gas from the tank that still sits in front of the Pine Breeze Inn, said he hasn't had many problems with bikers.

"The only bad bikers are gang members," Whipp said referring to a melee in Laughlin, Nev., west of here in April 2002. Two Hells Angels and one Mongols motorcycle gang member were killed and at least 12 were hurt in a brawl inside a casino 170 miles due west of here. Although certain gangs still have fairly grisly reputations, Joel Gabbard, who owns the Pine Breeze Inn, said bikers, in general, have lost some of their bad-boy image. The softening started a decade ago when riding became less about transportation and more about recreation, he said. Now, most people who own bikes are middle-aged businessmen and women who have money to spare. Purchasing a Harley runs from about \$9,000 to \$35,000.

A biker since high school, Gabbard is covered with Harley gear -- belt buckle, shirt, jacket. His wife's name is painted on his motorcycle's gas tank. He said he rides to relax, unwind and free his mind of worries. "A Harley Davidson will relieve all stress," said Gabbard. Captain America and Billy wanted to taste freedom too. But because of their biker stigma, they faced continuous opposition as they journeyed across America. "Easy Rider" changed the pop culture landscape. In the movie, the motorcycles represented rebellion, independence and the popularity of psychedelic drugs. But it also was about resistance to hippie communes and living off the land.

At the end of "Easy Rider," while riding along the Mississippi River, a shotgun-wielding bigot shoots Billy and Captain America. Gabbard said some people still disapprove of his pastime, but not as much as years ago. Today, bikers can focus on the ride. "You can just kind of kick back -- you and the machine," Mansene said. "It's relaxing. It's comforting. It's uninterrupted."

If You Go...

BELLEMONT, Ariz: Bellemont is about 12 miles west of Flagstaff. The Route 66 Roadhouse Bar & Grill (928-774-5080) and the Grand Canyon Harley Davidson shop (928-774-3896) are both on West Route 66. The boarded-up Pine Breeze Inn is just east of the Harley Davidson shop and the Route 66 Roadhouse Bar and Grill.

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