

Property Number:
LA Numbers(s): N/A
HCPI Number(s):

**APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION
NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES**

Historic Preservation Division
Bataan Building
407 Galisteo Street, Suite 236
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501
(505) 827-6320

-
1. **Name of Property:** Charley's Automotive Service
Other Name(s) for Property: Charlie's Radiator Service; Star Café; Star Café Drive-In
2. **Location of Property:**
County: Cibola
Municipality: Grants
Address or Rural Location: 1308-1310 W. Santa Fe Avenue
Congressional District: 2
Vicinity of: N/A
Not for Publication: Zip: 87020
3. **Ownership of Property:** (Check one or more as appropriate)
Private: State: Federal: Multiple:
Name: Joseph Diaz
Address: P.O. Box 2168, Albuquerque
Occupant, Tenant, Manager, or Contact:
Name: N/A
Address:
Zip: 87103
Zip:
4. **Accessibility of Property:**
Open to the Public: Not Open to the Public:
Visible from a Public Thoroughfare:
5. **Location of Legal Description for Property:**
Courthouse, Deed Registry, etc.: Cibola County Courthouse
Street and Number: 515 W. High Street
City, Town, Zip Code: Grants, NM 87020.
6. **Category of Property:**
District: Buildings: Structure: Site:
Object: Collection: Other (Specify):
Historic District:
7. **Present Use of Property:** (Check one or more as appropriate)
Agricultural: Commercial: Educational: Entertainment:
Governmental: Grazing: Industrial: Military:
Museum: Park: Residential: Religious:
Scientific: Transportation: Work in Progress: Other (Specify): Vacant

8. **Present Condition of Property:** (Check one or more as appropriate)

Excellent: Deteriorated: Altered: Moved:
Good: Ruins: Unaltered: Date Moved:
Fair: XX Unexposed: Vandalized:

9. **Present and Original Physical Appearance of Property:** Provide a detailed description of the archaeological and/or architectural features present, include construction dates, dates of significant alterations, extent of any vandalism, etc. **Use one or more continuation sheets.**

10. **Summary of Property Data:**

Period of Significance: c.1943-1985
Significant Dates: c.1943; c.1949
Culture/Period/Phase: N/A
Architect/Builder: Joseph Capelli, service garage and house

11. **Thematic Classification** (Check one or more as appropriate)

Archaeology- Prehistoric: <input type="checkbox"/>	Economics: <input type="checkbox"/>	Philosophy: <input type="checkbox"/>
Archaeology- Historic: <input type="checkbox"/>	Education: <input type="checkbox"/>	Politics/ Government: <input type="checkbox"/>
Agriculture: <input type="checkbox"/>	Engineering: <input type="checkbox"/>	Religion: <input type="checkbox"/>
Architecture: <input type="checkbox"/>	Exploration: <input type="checkbox"/>	Science: <input type="checkbox"/>
Art: <input type="checkbox"/>	Industry: <input type="checkbox"/>	Sculpture: <input type="checkbox"/>
Commerce: <input type="checkbox"/>	Invention: <input type="checkbox"/>	Settlement: <input type="checkbox"/>
Communications: <input type="checkbox"/>	Landscape- Architecture: <input type="checkbox"/>	Social/ Humanitarianism: <input type="checkbox"/>
Community- Planning: <input type="checkbox"/>	Law: <input type="checkbox"/>	Theater: <input type="checkbox"/>
Conservation: <input type="checkbox"/>	Literature: <input type="checkbox"/>	Transportation: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Military: <input type="checkbox"/>	Other (Specify): U.S. (Route) 66
	Music: <input type="checkbox"/>	

12. **Significance of Property:** Trace significant archaeological or historical trends, developments, events, or historically significant persons associated with property, reference documentary sources, etc. **Use one or more continuation sheets.**

13. **Bibliographical References:** Use a continuation sheet.

14. **Geographical Information:**

Map Reference: (USGS 7.5' Quad)
Legal Description: (Describe to the nearest 1/4 1/4 1/4 Section (10 acres))
Lots 10 and Block 11 of Bernalillo Mercantile Company Addition to the town of Grants, Cibola County, New Mexico, designated on plat thereof filed in the office of the County Clerk of Valencia County, New Mexico on the 19th day of July, 1935.

Acreage of Property: app. 2

UTM Coordinates:
A. 13 0239129E, 3894025N

15. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description: (Describe the boundaries of the property) Lots 10 and block 11 of Bernalillo Mercantile Company Addition to the town of Grants, Cibola County, New Mexico, designated on plat thereof filed in the office of the County Clerk of Valencia County, New Mexico on the 19th day of July, 1935.

Verbal Boundary Justification: (Explain why the boundaries were selected) The boundary includes all the property historically with the nominated buildings.

16. Photographs: (Provide a log of archival B&W photographs submitted with nomination)

17. Future Research Questions: (If applicable, develop a list of questions that could be pursued by future researchers)

18. Application Submitted By:

Name: Joseph Diaz

Date: January 19, 2010

Organization: N/A

Address: P.O. Box 2168, Albuquerque

Zip: 87103

Phone:

Inventory Data By: John W. Murphey, consulting historian, Cultural Resources Specialist,

National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program and volunteer.

Date: November 12, 2009

19. National Register Eligibility:

Yes: No:

Criteria A: B: C: D:

Area of Significance:

This Space for Cultural Properties Review Committee Use Only

Date Application Received: Complete: Incomplete:

Committee Action:

State Register:

Tabled:

Date:

National Register Recommendation:

Rejected:

Approved:

Committee Chairman: Alan "Mac" Watson

Date: February 19, 2010

Comments:

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Property: Charley's Automotive Service
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Present and Original Physical Appearance of Property

Charley's Automotive Service is a complex of five pumice block buildings, representing the commercial ambitions and domestic life of Charley Diaz, a Grants-U.S. Highway 66 entrepreneur. Fronting West Santa Fe Avenue, former U.S. 66, are the two commercial properties—the former automotive and radiator service and the Star Café. Each is simple in its design and rough in its appearance, but represents the-then emerging technology of pumice block construction. A large, un-landscaped area separates the commercial buildings from Diaz's residence, an L-plan dwelling made also of pumice. In between are a few pumice block sheds once used for storage and a stranded 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air, a gift Diaz gave to his wife three months before she died of a stroke. Together, the five buildings communicate in their form and simplicity a localized expression of the independent roadside business on U.S. 66.

Setting

To say something is missing at the west end of town is fair. What was once a strip of gas stations, motels and bars is now a cleared landscape of weedy lots and the occasional store or restaurant. The only remnant left of the earlier roadside cluster is Charlie's Radiator Service¹ and the adjacent boarded up Star café. To the west sat the Blea family enterprises: Los Alamitos Motel, a gas station and a cab service, marked now only by an isolated neon sign; to the east stood Eppie's Bar, now a clean swath of land. Much photographed, but little understood, Charley's Automotive Service and its companion buildings are important texts for reading the history of Grants and Route 66.

Charley's Automotive Service

Charlie's Automotive Service building is a rectangular cube of pumice block with an addition to the rear. A utilitarian building, its ornamentation is spare aside from a stepped parapet and corbelled chimney. Facing West Santa Fe Avenue are two corrugated sliding steel doors painted barn red (Image 2). The business name is above in block letters. Centered between the doors is plywood covering a window made of glass and horizontal and vertical steel bars. Looking like a raw cut between the "E" and "R" of the hand-painted "AIR CON. SERVICE" on the east door is a mail slot.

A door, window, chimney and ghost lettering distinguish the original east elevation. Above the door—a heavy steel frame with a non-original plywood panel—are the words "CHARLIE'S SERVICE" and faint letters and various paint schemes revealing the evolution of the building (Image 2). A partially exposed brick chimney stack, expressed by its corbelling, starts midway up the wall. The stack shelters a pipe leading to an old potbelly stove in the garage. This feature is a faint trace of the background of the garage's builder: Joseph Capelli, an Italian immigrant stone mason, who constructed a number of buildings in the area.

¹ The business has alternately been named "Charley's" and "Charlie's." Because the former was used historically, the nomination is named after the first business on the site: Charley's Automotive Service.

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At this point starts a small bump-out, once containing bathrooms for the garage. Situated at a lower level, the space holds vandalized bathroom fixtures and is entered through a door to the south. Original multi-light wood windows cover the east and north elevations of the room.

The original north elevation displayed a large multi-light window which now serves as a passage to the addition. West of the addition, across the original building, are two identical multi-light, wood windows stuccoed over on the outside. The west elevation is punctuated by two multi-light wood windows that are also stuccoed over. The condition of all the original wood windows is fair, with many of the glazings broken or missing and some of the muntins damaged. Surprisingly, all the original windows remain behind the stucco.

Attached to the back of the building is a rectangular pumice block addition, giving the structure a T-like plan (Image 3). Constructed after 1954, the un-stuccoed addition signifies Diaz's change from a full automotive service operation to a business providing primarily radiator repairs. As such the addition holds equipment for cleaning and re-coring radiators. A large, three-part steel hopper window dominates its east elevation (Image 4). The long span of glass provided light and fresh air to the shop. North of the window is a steel frame holding a non-original, wood-panel door. A large corrugated sliding door is situated across the north elevation; the west side is simply a wall with one blocked-in entry.

Interior

Inside the garage is a large open space creating two repair bays. Spanning the interior in an east-west orientation is a huge wood joist supporting the roof and once used to hoist engines. The joist is made of three parallel 2"x16" boards resting at the center on a solid wood post. Scattered across the concrete floor are a number of tools and effects of the original business, including a cash register and a homemade settling torch (Images 5 & 6). Lining the north wall, from west to east, is a tool bench heaped with old parts and period radiator caps; a separate framed office space; and a smaller framed records storage area. A 1958 pinup calendar with a blonde nude posed at the beach and a late 1940s Blue Streak ignition parts chart lend authenticity. Stepping up through the original rear window frame is the addition used to repair radiators. Here are a number of steel testing vats employed during the re-coring process (Image 7). An old cast-iron stove sits in a dark corner.

Star Café

Approximately ten feet to the east is the former Star Café, later Star Drive-In, another simple pumice block building (Image 8). Built in c.1949 by Diaz's great uncle, Salome Saiz, it originally consisted of a tiny rectangular space holding a kitchen and counter. After 1954, an addition was added to the west and the rear, signaling its increased use during the uranium boom period and Route 66's high mark of travel.

The façade is perfect in its simplicity—a symmetrical arrangement of a centered door framed by two windows with a slight false-front parapet above. Now covered with plywood, the openings are two wood-frame, fixed-glass windows and a non-original aluminum stile door, which replaced an earlier wood panel-and-glass opening. A small block bump-out addition to the west held bathrooms.

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To the rear, at a higher elevation, is the post-1954 pumice-block addition. Stuccoed in a mustard yellow, it has low-pitched gabled roof with eave overhangs, similar to the original (Image 9). A non-original steel-framed door provides entry from the west. Next to the door is a large fixed-light wood window. The back is punctuated by a small multi-light wood window covered with plywood.

The interior is a flow of small spaces making up the former dining area, separated by a pass-through window and door to the kitchen and a storage area to the rear. The roof has deteriorated in a few areas over the years, losing its asphalt overlay and exposing the interior to moisture.

Diaz Residence

At the northeast corner of the property, approximately 70 feet from the café, sits the former Diaz house, perched at a slightly higher grade than the commercial buildings. Constructed of pumice block, the one-story house is L in plan and stuccoed but unpainted (Image 10). The front end of the house features a similar stepped parapet as the garage. It contains in linear arrangement the bedrooms of the house. Centered below the parapet is an original steel casement window. A multi-light wood door and original wood-frame window appear across the west face of the ell.

Two concrete steps lead to the main entry of the house on its south side. The door—appearing handmade—is a multi-panel wood unit with a fanlight design. To the west is a large original window spanning the south elevation. Except for a small window at the northwest corner, the west side is devoid of openings. The rear or north elevation, facing Peel Street, is a shallow, shed-roof addition. It is punctuated by a few windows and an original door with a half side-light. Unlike the main part of the house, the shed roof is deteriorated, allowing moisture into the back rooms. The east elevation, like its western counterpart, is without openings except a small original wood-frame window at the northeast corner.

The house includes a small fenced-in yard, which has a specimen juniper tree and a rock and cacti garden. To the west is an un-stuccoed pumice block shed used for storage; another simple pumice block shed behind the garage is also considered contributing.

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Significance of Property

Constructed soon after the realignment of U.S. Highway 66 and near a booming vegetable packing plant area, Charley's Automotive Service represents a response to a developing local economy and the impact of a national highway. Adapting to changes in automotive service, its owner, Charley Diaz, became focused on radiator repair, and the shop became the preeminent business of its type in the region. The adjacent Star Café, built just before the first uranium boom, reflects the small, roadside restaurant, selling fast food of its day to both locals and travelers. While modest in design, the buildings represent emerging vernacular building trends. With much of Grants' west end stripped of its automobile legacy, Charley's Automotive Service is a rare survivor. Taken together, the complex is eligible for listing in the State Register of Cultural Properties in the area of Transportation and for its association with U.S. 66.

Context

Charles Diaz was born in 1914 in the hardscrabble coal mining town of Gamerco, McKinley County. His father, Domingo, soon moved the family to a logging camp at Kettner in the Zuni Mountains.² By 1930, Charley, as he would be called for the rest of his life, was living with his six siblings at San Rafael, (then in Valencia County), in the ancestral home of his mother, Maria. His father continued to work at a lumber camp at a distance from the home, while the children mixed with their extended family.³ In San Rafael, Charley met his future wife, Dorela Cordova. Mechanically inclined, he began working on cars young, starting at a Grants Chevrolet dealership in the 1930s. During WW II, he moved a few miles west, being employed as a "heavy duty" mechanic at Fort Wingate.

He moved with wife to Gallup where his only child, Joseph Diaz, was born. He saved enough money from his government job to start his own business. Diaz purchased land in the Bernalillo Mercantile Co. Addition, part of the Seligman family empire, at the booming west end of Grants (Figure 1).

In the late 1930s, Arizona vegetable farmers discovered that the rich lava fields in the Bluewater area just west of Grants provided key nutrients for truck-farm crops: beans, peas, tomatoes, cabbage, lettuce and—most dominantly—carrots. Quickly the west end of Grants, especially an area that would briefly be known as Breece Town, hummed with box factories, packing and distributing plants⁴ and the terminus of the Zuni Mountain Railroad (evidence of an earlier boom: the logging of the Zuni Mountains⁵).

The 5,000-acre Bluewater Vegetable Project attracted hundreds of migrants who either worked in the fields or in the box factories and packing plants. One of them, 17-year-old Ernest Miera, came to Breece Town

² 1920; Census Place: Kettner, Valencia, New Mexico; Roll T625_1080; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 194; Image: 1151.

³ 1930; Census Place: Precinct 17, Valencia, New Mexico; Roll 1400; Page: 1B; Enumeration District: 21; Image: 1056.0.

⁴ Prominent growers and distributors included Dean Stanley and A.R. Card and Church & Harden.

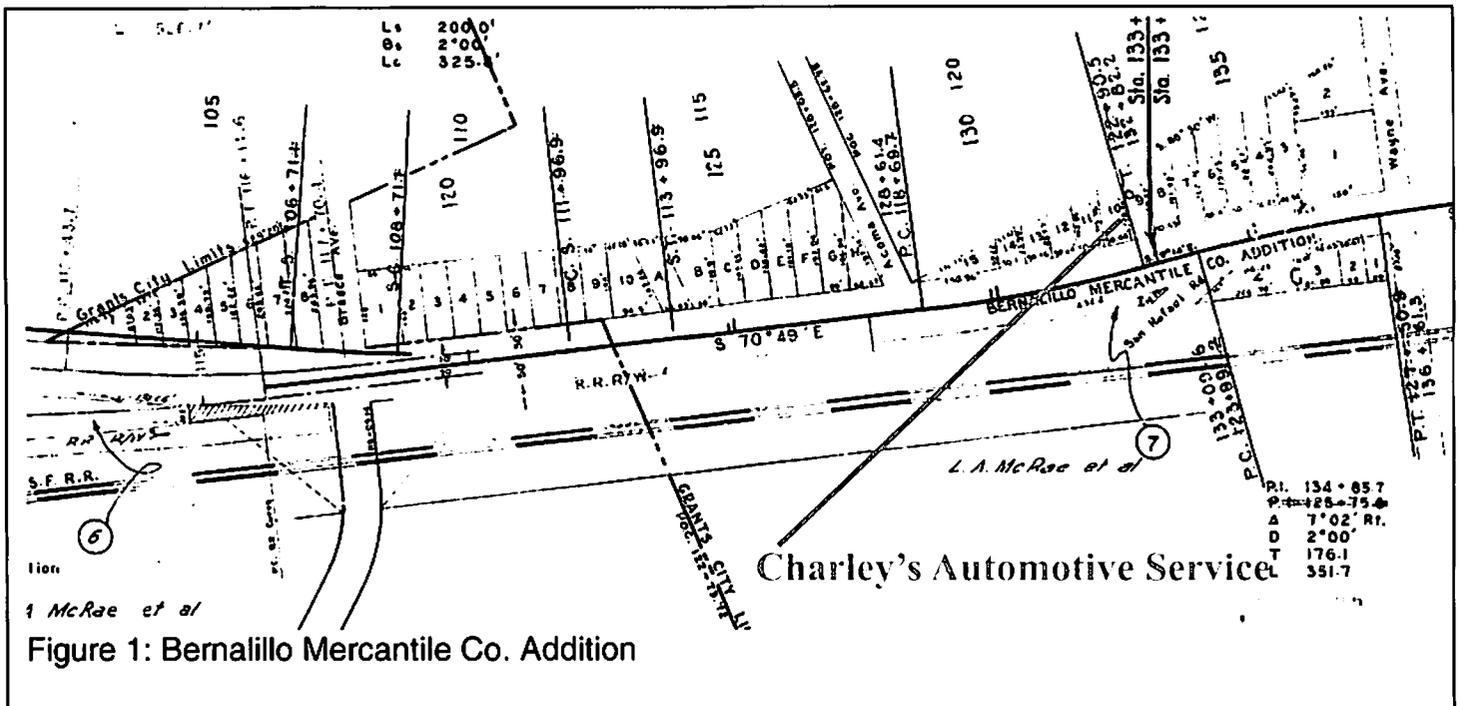
⁵ Grants additionally prospered during this time as a mining center and a shipping point for sheep and cattle.

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in 1942 from Arizona along with his father to work in a box factory. Paid a dollar an hour, Miera helped crank out hundreds of long, rectangular boxes that were taken into the fields to be packed with lettuce.⁶ It was estimated the carrot boom alone boosted Grant's population by 270 percent between 1940 and 1950.⁷

Charley Diaz's choice of location for his business coincided with the improvement and realignment of U.S. 66, Grants' primary artery, in the late 1930s. Before its improvement, the highway entered town from the west on Santa Jose Drive, a narrow road south of the river of the same name that wended its way through the early Hispanic community of Alamitos. Moving the roadbed to a bench high above the river created a wider, dwelling-free footprint. As it did for many towns in New Mexico, the highway's realignment brought new business for Grants.



In this boomtown atmosphere Diaz built his shop and home with the assistance of his maternal grandfather, Joseph (Joe) Capelli, an Italian-born stone mason. Capelli (c.1880-c.1973) immigrated to the United States in 1904⁸, having first worked building coke ovens in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Upon entering the states, he lived near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania constructing coke ovens, and later working on a mining tunnel in Pueblo, Colorado. While working in Albuquerque on the Alvarado Hotel, he was discovered by Sylvester Mirabal, a wealthy rancher from San Rafael, which was then the trade center for western Valencia County. For

⁶ Ernest Miera, November 24, 2009.

⁷ Wayne Winters, March 1951: 15.

⁸ 1920; Census Place: San Rafael, Valencia, New Mexico; Roll T625_1080; Page: 6A; Enumeration District: 192; Image: 1131.

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Mirabal, Capelli built a large, two-story stone house and a stone warehouse in San Rafael, both extant. Joseph Diaz claims his grandfather built many of the earliest houses in Grants and worked on John Gaw Meem's Santa Maria mission, a stone church perched above U.S. 66 at McCarty's.⁹

In erecting the buildings, Capelli did not use stone, adobe or wood; instead he chose a novel construction material—pumice block. Though it has been employed as a building material since the Romans, pumice—a solidified, porous lava honeycombed with elongated, parallel cavities¹⁰—didn't come into popularity for construction until after World War II. Its use by the Navy during the war to build landing craft, pontoon bridges and military housing proved it to have sufficient compressive strength while being lighter and with better insulating qualities than concrete block.¹¹ While concrete weighs on average 150 pounds per cubic foot, pumice weighs considerably less at 70 pounds per cubic foot.¹²



Figure 2: 1951 Pumice Block Advertisement

New Mexico, blanketed with volcanic fields, became a center of pumice block fabrication, with at least 60 block-making plants opening after the war, including the Valencia Pumice company in Grants. Pumice construction, with its standard 8"x8"x16" dull-gray blocks, soon supplanted adobe in New Mexico, and became the dominant building material in developing countries where volcanoes are found (Figure 2).

Full Service

Twenty-nine years old, Diaz opened Charley's Automotive Service in 1943 (Figure 3). Dressed in overalls and wearing a train engineer's cap to cover his bald spot, Diaz offered locals and travelers alike full-service—two gas pumps, a garage and body repair.

He employed a few mechanics, and family members always helped out, including his uncle, Raymond Diaz; his wife, Dorela, who did the books for the gas pumps; and his son Joseph, who assisted his father after school. One of his longest employees came by accident. As his son, Joseph, recalls:

One night near Christmas, as father and son worked on the radiator of a pumice mine truck, they heard a knock on the door. They found a man shivering in the doorframe; he had the distinct smell of liquor on his breath. The man said his car broke

⁹ Joseph Diaz, October 3, 2009.

¹⁰ Architectural Record, 1954: 88.

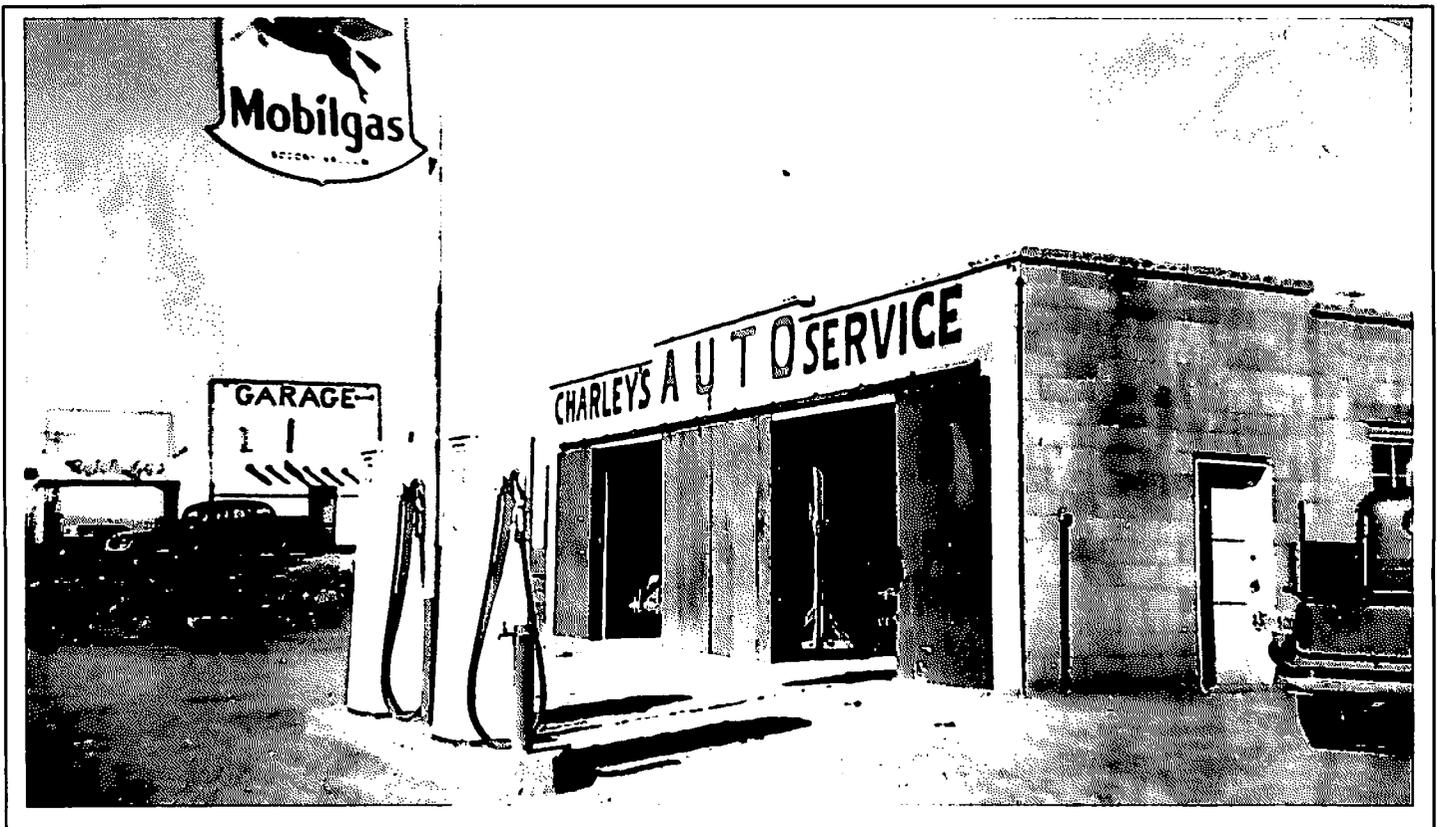
¹¹ Fremont Kutnewsky, 1949:13.

¹² Ibid.

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down several miles down the highway and he needed help. The stranger said he didn't have money to pay for the repair, but said he could repay Diaz if he gave him a job. Charley said didn't need anybody at the moment, but instructed the stranger to get a sandwich at a café down the highway. I'll talk to you the next morning about potential jobs, he told him, and offered the stranger a place to sleep in the garage. Charley's son was incredulous at his father's generosity, guessing the stranger had only parked his car a couple blocks away and would later steal their tools. His father reminded his agitated son that it was Christmas. The next day, Charley tried him out, and the stranger, Joe Bounds, worked for him the next 33 years as a



trustworthy mechanic.¹³

Figure 3: Charley's Automotive Service, c.1949, courtesy Joseph Diaz.

His son tells this parable-like story to illustrate his father's character as someone who was fair and generous in his business and his judgment of human character.¹⁴ Other stories show Diaz's fairness to American Indians, who were often discriminated against at the time. "To us, it didn't matter any difference what race or religion you were," recalls Joseph.¹⁵

¹³ Paraphrased from a story Joseph Diaz told John Murphey. Joseph Diaz, December 1, 2009.

¹⁴ Charley Diaz's character expressed itself in his Catholic faith; he and his wife served several times as church mayordomos. Charley was an instrumental volunteer in the Catholic men's association that built the stone community center in the 1940s, laboring after work to complete the project. A Democrat, he also served on city council.

¹⁵ Joseph Diaz, December 1, 2009.

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Uranium Boom Town

"Coming into Grants we saw on every side the evidence of great activity. Everything was in a state of becoming. Buildings were being erected, pavement laid, and the Santa Fe had spread out switch tracks like new tendrils on a plant, to take care of the increasing tempo of arriving freight. Uranium had done all this."
Merle Armitage, 1959¹⁶

In 1955, planes equipped with uranium-detecting scintillators flew grid-like patterns over Grants. Jeeps and sedans filled with professional geologists and modern-day prospectors crawled the Jurassic-Age hills around the city searching for the next uranium jackpot.

While uranium had been located in the Grants Mining District as early as 1949, it was not until a Navajo named Paddy Martinez discovered a big cache at Haystack Mountain in 1950 that the boom took off. With this discovery and others, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission came in, setting up an office in Grants and generating widespread exploration. "[J]ust about every major mining and oil company sent their young Turks in there to pursue this large development," remembers Irving Rapaport, who headed the Grants Atomic Energy Commission office.

On December 15, 1951, the *Grants Beacon* exclaimed "Uranium Ore is Here to Stay," and dozens of claims started to fill the pages where the usual "Local Brevities" column would run. These Haiku-like entries were often followed by advertisements for hand-held Geiger counters ("Discover Uranium") and other devices.

By 1951, a mill had been established near Grants to treat the ore; and by 1955, Anaconda Corporation, the largest of the 80 mining operations¹⁷ in the area, had "blocked out" five hundred million dollars worth of ore.¹⁸ The boom had arrived, and so had geologists and engineers from around the globe: the mix of languages from Germany, Sweden, Africa, Indonesia and British Guinea rang through Grants like the Tower of Babel, as Irving Rapaport would recall years later.

At the west end of town, Charley's Automotive Service was ideally situated to serve prospectors and miners heading northwest on then State Highway 334 toward claims in the Haystack Mountain and Ambrosia Lake areas. And one frequent customer, a Missouri-born oil wildcatter named Stella Dysart, would enter the pantheon of uranium boom legends.

Dysart had spent nearly 30 years unsuccessfully trying to find oil in the Grants backcountry, never making a big strike. But because of her firsthand experience she knew every inch of Section 21, a 640-acre

¹⁶ Merle Armitage, 1959: 6.

¹⁷ Other major companies working the Grants Mining District included American Metals, Climax, United Western Miners, Four Corners Exploration, Kerr-McGee, Lea Exploration, Mid-Continent Uranium, Rio de Ore Uranium, Santa Fe Railroad, Pacific Uranium, Pinon Sabre Uranium and Yucca Uranium.

¹⁸ R.R. Spurrier, 1955: 11.

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parcel of land she purchased in the mid-1920s for oil exploration. Then, in 1955 she came in contact with Louis B. Lothmann, an ambitious Texan with training in geology and a fat \$10,000 grubstake.¹⁹ Using her old drilling logs, they selected a spot on her land and drilled down 360 feet, hitting a 17-foot-thick bed of uranium. The Rio de Oro Dysart Mine No. 1 made the once-failed wildcatter famous and rich—and readied Ambrosia Lake for a new land rush of exploration. Before her big discovery, Stella would pay Charley visits, asking for his burned oil to drip into her jeep. Several times she stayed overnight in the garage, stoking the potbelly stove to keep warm.²⁰

As in almost every extractive boom, another economy must retreat. To power uranium exploration, mining companies bought water rights from Bluewater farmers, and in Louise Rapaport's memory, "finished the carrot crop." What had delivered so much growth to Grants just a few years earlier was now gone, and the Lava City of the 1940s stepped aside to make way for the Uranium City of 1950s.

"Come as You Are"

Around 1949, Diaz's great uncle, Salome Saiz, arrived in Grants seeking help. Saiz, an Albuquerque resident, had recently lost his wife in childbirth; several weeks later his young son drowned in an irrigation ditch. Saiz was left with a teenage daughter and the newborn, and he was desperate. The family came together to help.



Charley offered his great uncle space on the property to run a business. With assistance from Joseph Capelli, Saiz built a small café, paying Diaz a discounted rent.

Star Café consisted of a small counter with 5-6 stools and tables up front and a kitchen in back (Figure 4). It served a basic fare of hamburgers, chile and beans, and soup, but Saiz "could serve you anything," including steak, recalls Joseph Diaz.²¹

¹⁹ *Time Magazine*: 1959, no page.

²⁰ Joseph Diaz, October 3, 2009.

²¹ Joseph Diaz, October 3, 2009.

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Figure 4: Star Café, c.1949, courtesy Joseph Diaz

As a result of the mining and truck-farm boom, Grants was filled with tiny cafes. Andrea (Blea) Miera, who grew up in Grants and worked in a similar café, remembers dozens of these small restaurants fronting U.S. 66, catering to “workers in the field and mine workers,” with clientele equally Indian and Hispanic.²²

The Star Cafe was later taken over by a Mr. Moon, an Anglo with restaurant experience. Moon did good business during the uranium boom, as the café sat near a bus stop where miners assembled for a 5:00 am pickup. Moon “worked out a deal with the busses,” so the men could purchase pre-packed sandwiches to take to the mines.²³ Around this time the café expanded into a drive-in, open for business 24 hours a day.

A 1954 advertisement for the drive-in said it specialized in steaks and chops and short orders—the food of workers and travelers—and encouraged customers to “Come as You Are.” Moon, who slept in the kitchen, was beat up and robbed in bed one night; after that, he wanted out of the business. He sold the cafe to a local man who ran it for a number of years. It closed in c.1985.

Just as the vegetable and uranium booms brought change and new opportunities to the community, the expansion of U.S. 66 in the mid-1950s would alter Grants forever, in both positive and negative ways.

“Four-lane, divided and lighted”

Even before the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 that ushered in the era of the concrete, super-slab interstates, the New Mexico State Highway Department set an ambitious goal of “four-laning” its principal arteries. U.S. 66 alone was to receive 60 miles of four-lane construction, widening some 16% of the road into a “super highway.”²⁴

This not only affected Route 66, but stretches of U.S. highways coursing through the centers of Deming, Santa Fe, Espanola, Albuquerque and other communities. In 1955, the department set an aggressive goal of opening 194 miles of super highway. Slung along U.S. 66, Grants was in the path of progress.

As the so-called “longest city along Route 66,” the majority of Grant’s businesses fronted the road and could be in the path of the widening. The 1954 project plans showed the widened highway slicing off frontage of dozens of building lining the highway. If not impacting them directly, the proposed right of way expanded south, forming a neat line running through the center of the majority of the south-side businesses (Figure 5).

In total the project required 20 feet of new right-of-way to create the desired 100-foot wide corridor. Trees were removed, signs taken down, gas pumps moved, buildings sometimes demolished or set back from the new highway. Louise Rapaport, who operated a tourist trading post in nearby Bluewater, was affected by the

²² Andrea Miera, November 24, 2009.

²³ Joseph Diaz, December 1, 2009.

²⁴ “Plan 94 Miles of 4-lane Highways,” 1955: 31.

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widening. As she recalled later, "the trading post was torn down and a quonocet [sic.] was put up further back. ...To me [with the new building] there was no more ambience as a trading post."²⁵

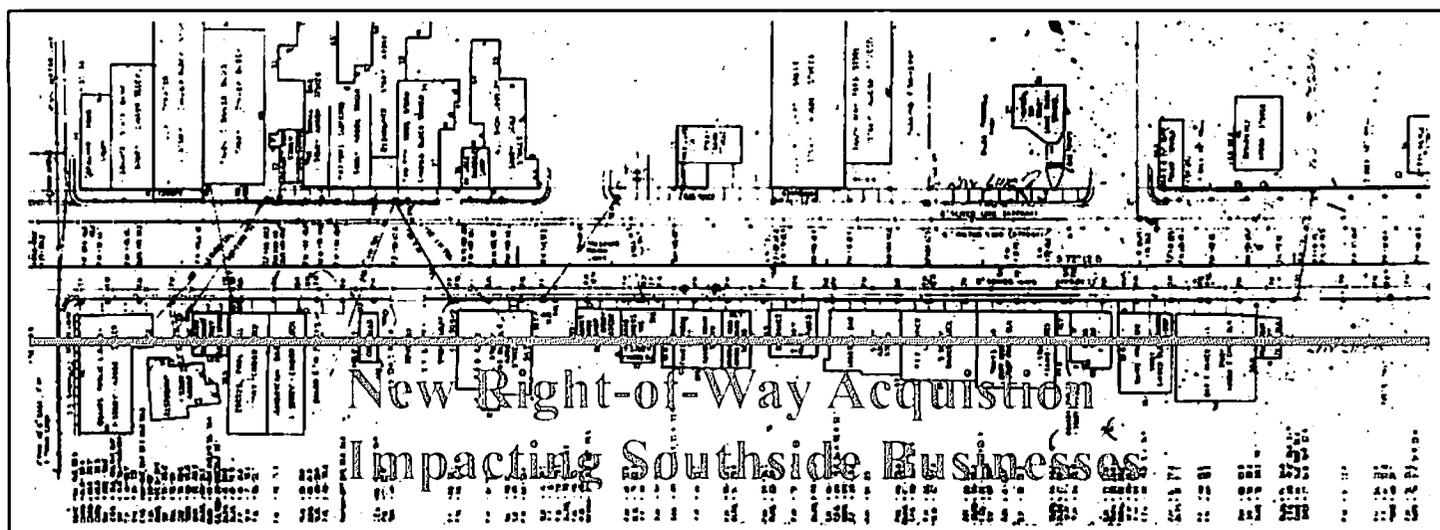


Figure 5: State Highway Department Right-of-Way Map.

To purchase the needed right-of-way, the state provided \$100,000, later increasing the amount to \$250,000.²⁶ In early fall of 1954, property owners were warned that they must clear their land of encroachments by January 1, 1955. Concerned about their future, south-side business owners met at Sunshine Dance Hall to discuss how to respond to the change. In November 1954, there were still nineteen property owners that had not reached an agreement with the highway department over a purchase price for their property. As a result, the Valencia County Commission signed a condemnation suit against the non-cooperative property owners.

The project was completed in 1956, resulting in a four-lane highway highlighted by landscaped medians dotted with street lights. *New Mexico* magazine claimed it "a pleasure to drive."²⁷ While it did provide an efficient thoroughfare, some Grants merchants, today, point out that cars speed too fast down former U.S. 66, and miss their businesses.

While he did lose considerable frontage, Charley Diaz was not directly affected by the widening. He had already removed his gas pumps several years prior, realizing he couldn't compete with the other service stations that had popped up at the west end of town. But the improvement of U.S. 66 coincided with a new direction his business would take.

²⁵ Louise Rapaport, January 20-21, 2009.

²⁶ *Grants Beacon*, September 2, 1954: 1.

²⁷ "Modern Grants," 1956: 42.

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The Business of Radiators

Before the modern era of plastic radiators, electrical fans and full-season antifreeze, car cooling systems were delicate machinery, circulating water up and down narrow tubes to cool the engine. When clogged by hard water and scale, the radiators could be flushed at home with a washing-soda solution. But if a tube fell into deeper deterioration, the whole unit, including top and bottom tanks, brackets, fan belts and assembly and temperature indicator, would have to be yanked from the engine and disassembled.

Seeing an opportunity, Diaz began to move out of full service and to specialize in radiator repair, and could claim at one time to have the only radiator shop between Gallup and Albuquerque.²⁸ His clients included the pumice mine at Mount Taylor, which required him to do work at night so the trucks could be used during the day. He also did most of the radiator work for the local service stations. He offered them a 25% discount if they pulled the radiators and brought them to his shop. The service stations would make their money by charging a fee for taking off and putting back on the radiators. Repairing radiators, as his son recalls, "became very lucrative for him."²⁹ Another major component of his business was repairing radiators for the summer tourists whose automobiles had overheated on U.S. 66.

Instead of simply cutting and stuffing a tube, as many shops did, and thus decreasing circulation, Diaz reconstructed a tube by repairing it with solder. He did not purchase radiator repair equipment, preferring to make his own. A hoist used by bigger city radiator repair shops was too expensive; Diaz did his lifting by hand. And instead of buying a prefabricated tank, he built one out of steel.

"Rodding the radiator," another common procedure, involved taking the top tank off and poking a rod through each tube to push out obstructions. Filled with clean water, the repaired radiator was put on a platform and dunked into a tank. Diaz would stare intently into the water, looking for bubbles. And if any appeared the radiator was reworked until no bubbles floated to the surface.

Diaz's switch to the more specialized radiator servicing represented a change in Grant's increasing range of automotive services. Prior to World War II, the options for automotive servicing consisted mainly of a few independent garages, or repairs offered from a service station or one of two automobile dealerships.³⁰ After the uranium boom, a number of new automobile dealerships opened, offering full-service repairs in their modern buildings. Smartly, Diaz worked out a deal with most of the dealerships to do their radiator work.

²⁸ Joseph Diaz, December 1, 2009.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Listings from the 1942-43 New Mexico State Business Directory for Grants that include the words "auto service" are: Allen, Fred, camp, grocery and auto service; Calame, O.B., gas station with auto service; Deluxe Auto Service Station; Hawkinson, O.H., Garage; Jaramillo, Elias, auto repairs; Lee, Robert E., gas station with auto service; Morrow, John A., gas station with auto service; Red Ball Garage; and Zamora, S.G., gas station with auto service.

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During the last ten years of the shop's operation, Charley "was doing everything," by himself: radiator repairs and mechanical work for his steady "old timers."³¹ An individual approached him with an offer to lease the business. His son endorsed the proposition, encouraging his father to retire. The lessee picked up contracts from the mines, but after awhile "wasn't keeping up with business."³² Charley threw him out and started his business again. He worked several more years, until he died of a heart attack in 1995. A tire shop used the old café for awhile, then moved out; the buildings attracted vandalism and started to show their age.

A Need to Preserve

At an August 25, 2009 City of Grants council meeting, the council issued 14 nuisance abatement resolutions, including one for Charlie's Radiator Service. The resolution for all properties stated that they were "so ruined and damaged and dilapidated as to be a menace to public comfort, health, peace or safety..."³³ It gave the property ten days to respond. If no response was given, the city would "proceed to remove the building..."

Learning of this, Grants MainStreet organization sought assistance from the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division and the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program. In a collaborative manner, the three organizations assisted Joseph Diaz in assessing the property. Diaz, understanding the site's historical importance, is looking into ways to preserve and restore the two commercial buildings. "If you want a picture of what 66 looked like in Grants, it would be my dad's shop," says Diaz. Diaz and Grants MainStreet hope State Register designation will spark the process of restoring his father's legacy.

³¹ Joseph Diaz, December 1, 2009..

³² Ibid.

³³ As quoted in Donald Jaramillo, 2009: 1.

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1920; Census Place: San Rafael, Valencia, New Mexico; Roll T625_1080; Page: 6A; Enumeration District: 192; Image: 1131.

1930; Census Place: Precinct 17, Valencia, New Mexico; Roll 1400; Page: 1B; Enumeration District: 21; Image: 1056.0.

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Photographs

The following information pertains to all photographs unless otherwise noted:

Name of Property: Charley's Automotive Service

Location: Grants, Cibola County

Photographer: John Murphey

Date taken: November 12, 2009, except where noted

Location of Negatives: New Mexico Historic Preservation Division, Santa Fe

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Image 1: Star Café and Charley's Automotive Service, September 9, 2009; facing northeast.



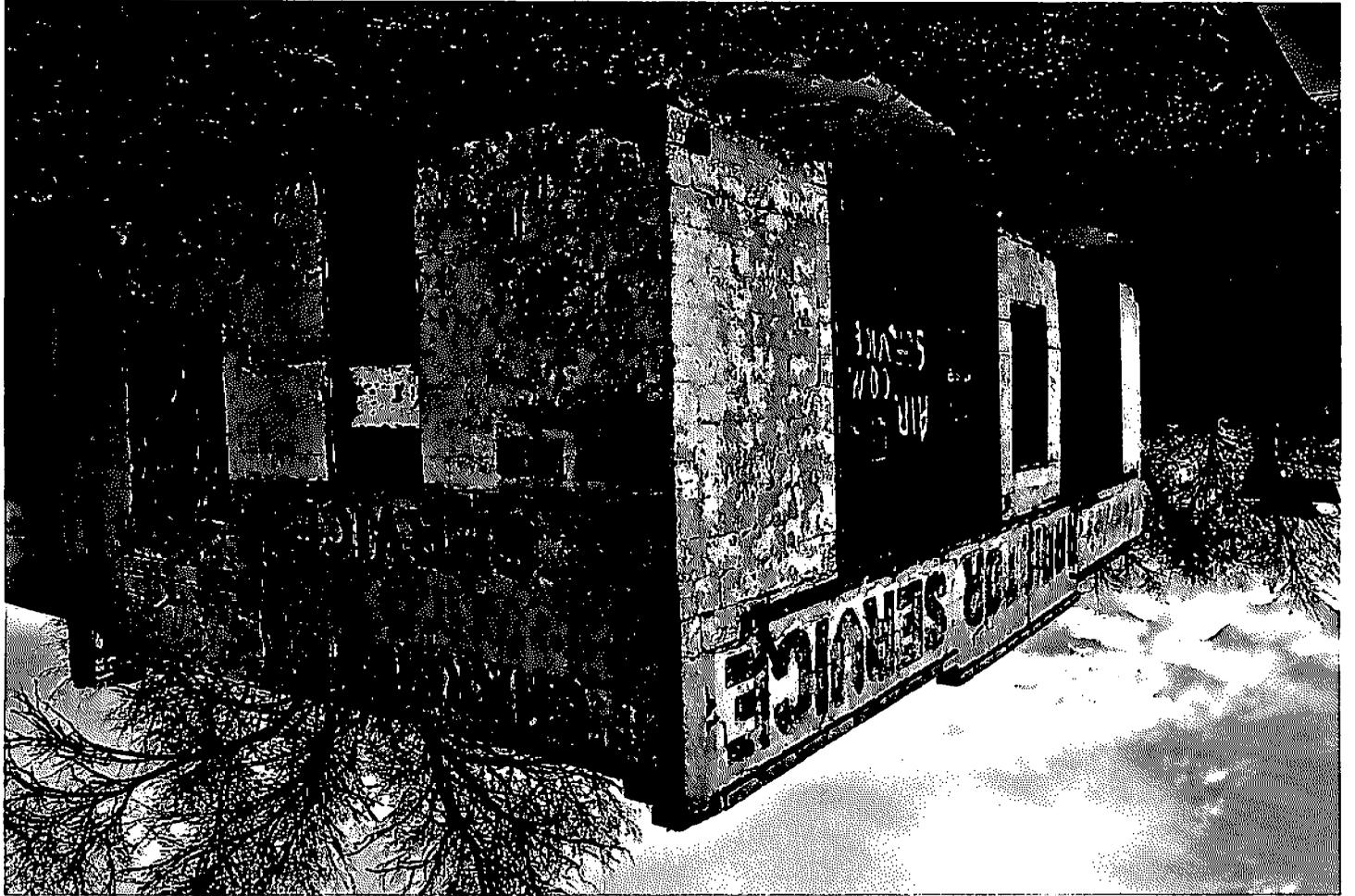


Image 2: Charley's Automotive Service; facing northwest.

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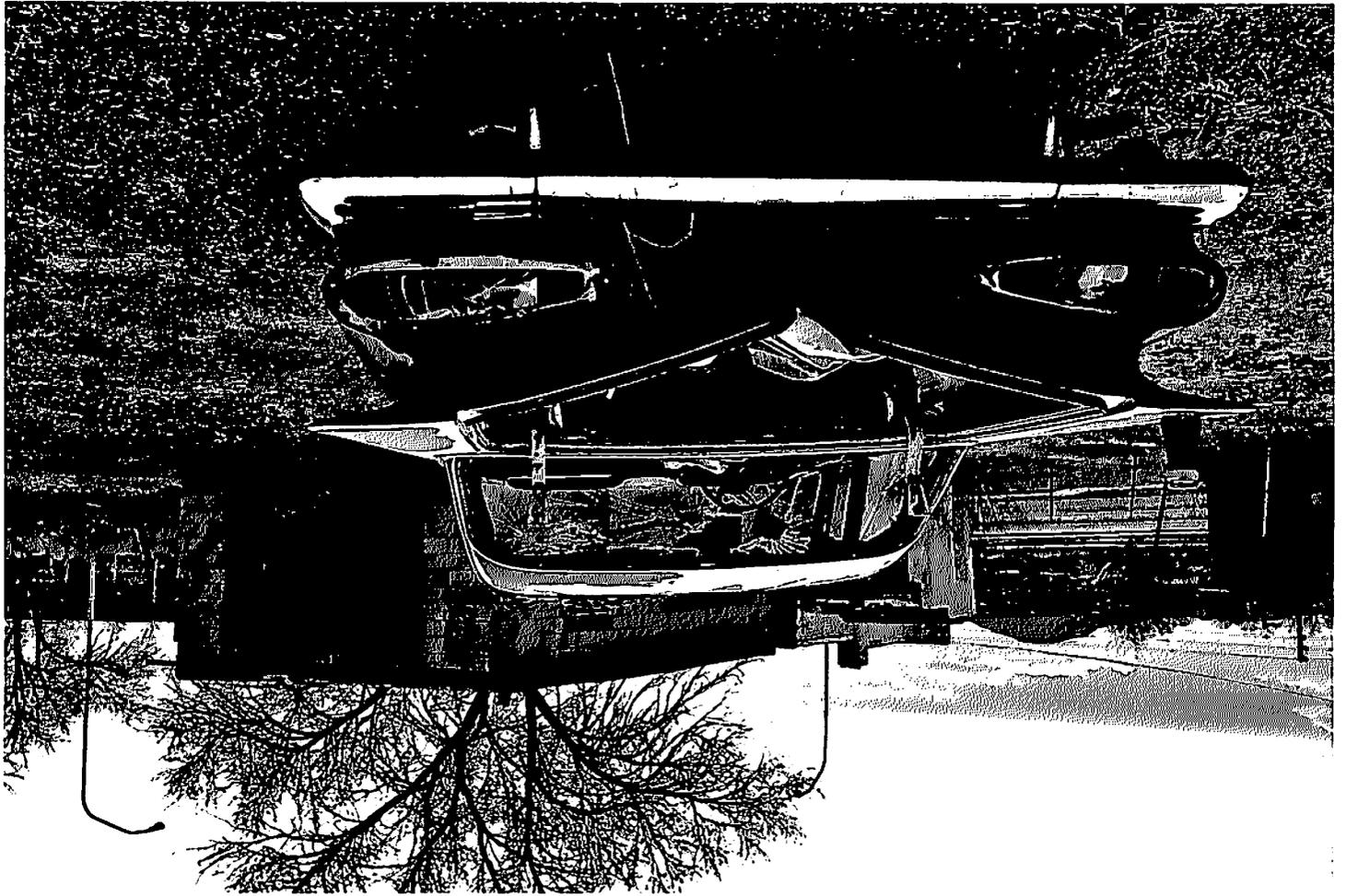


Image 3: Dorela's 1959 Chevrolet (foreground) and block addition to garage (background); facing southwest.

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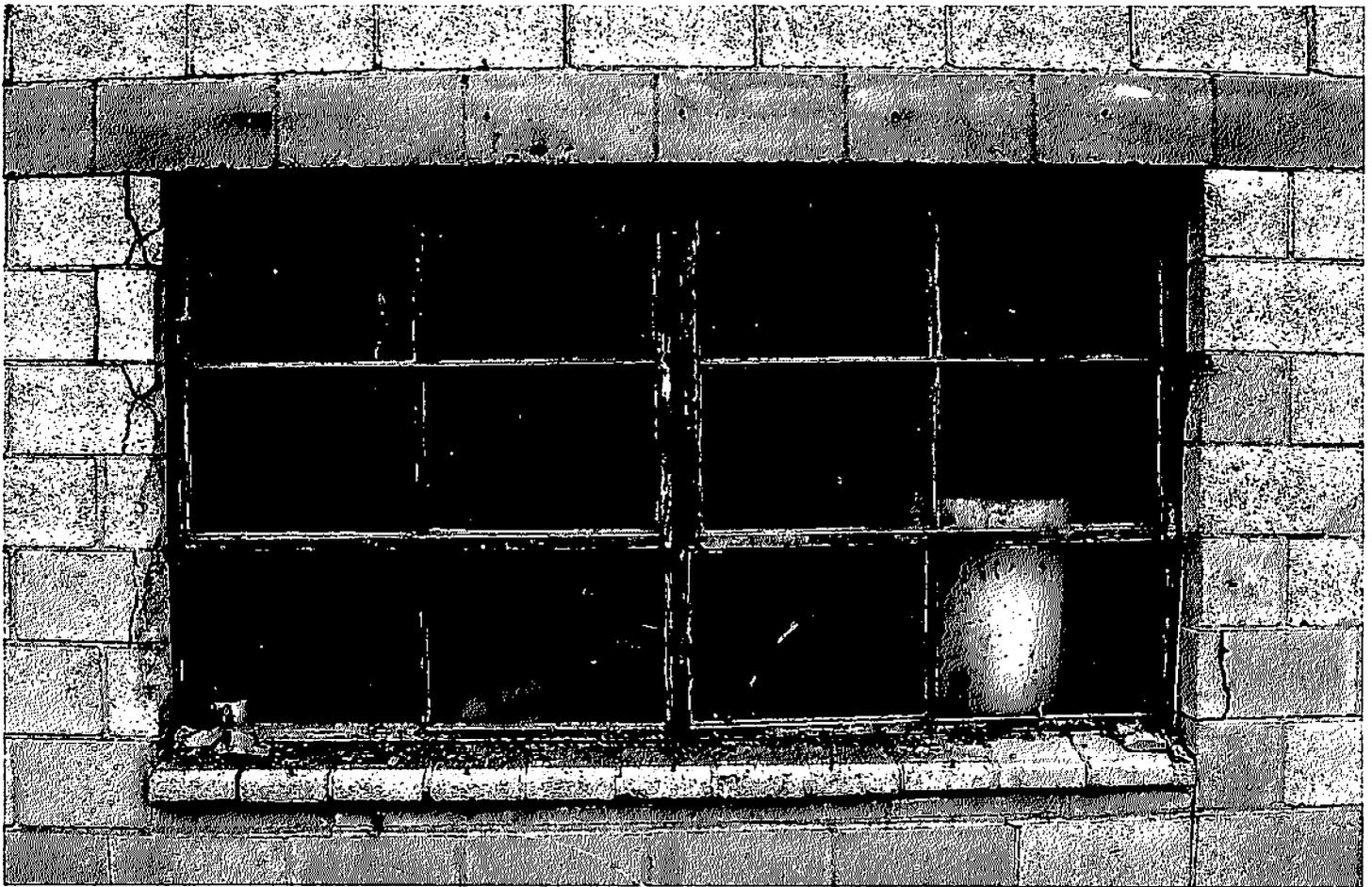
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Image 4: Three-part steel hopper window of garage addition; facing west.



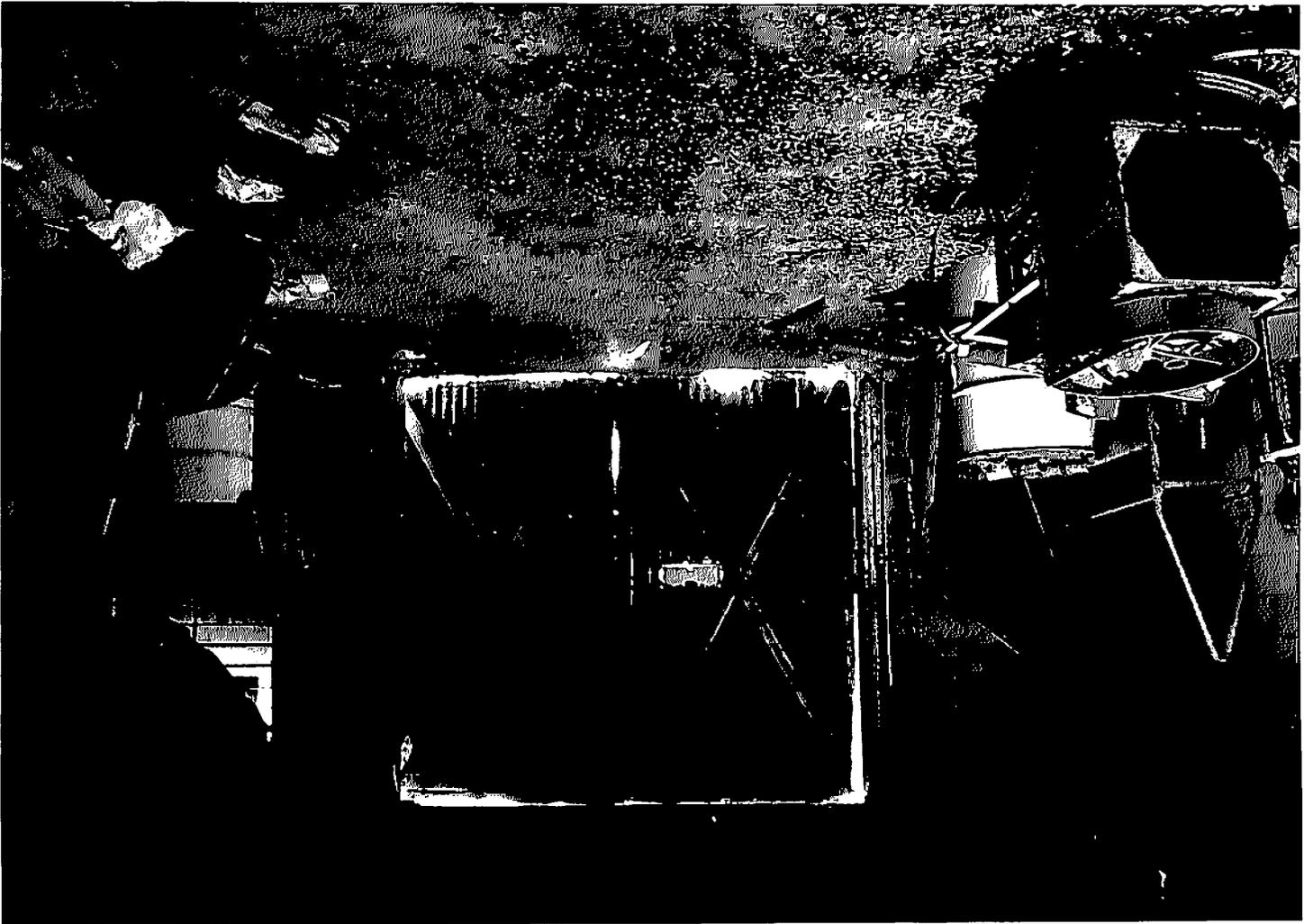


Image 5: Interior of garage; facing south.

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Image 6: Cash Register.



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Image 7: Radiator testing vats in garage addition; facing south.



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Image 8: Star Café; facing northeast.



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Image 9: Addition to Star Café; facing southeast.



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Image 10: Diaz Residence; facing northeast.

