

OPINION Extra

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Ghosts of Route 1

Boston's road to the golden era of autos deserves to be preserved

By David M. Shribman

YAZ LIFTED weights there. Stan Getz recorded a live album there. Mentioning Woo Woo Ginsburg's name got you a two-for-one deal at the Adventure Car Hop there. A leaning tower of pizza still stands there. A bunch of cattle graze there, and of course a ship is docked there. My parents had their first date there.

This can only be Route 1 north of Boston. It is, of course, a horrifying landscape of neon and nothing, and yet there is — there always has been — a palpable there there.

Almost all of us who grew up in Greater Boston in the benighted but beautiful period after World War II have a Route 1 memory. A memory entirely Boston, even if we recall being ushered grandly into a Hilltop Steak House dining room called Carson City or Kansas City. A memory entirely American, because of course it revolved around the automobile, preferably one going 60 miles an hour, with the windows open and WMEX playing full blast to a show called "Night Train."

Route 1. It's the highway equivalent of a face that only a mother could love. But it's ours, especially today, when, like many of us who love it, it has seen better days.

Weylu's is now shuttered, though some dreamer, apparently unaware of the irony apparent to everyone but him, is thinking about making it the National Comedians Hall of Fame. Who among us did not note, with sadness, the death last month of Arthur Castraberti, who owned the Prince Pizzeria and planted on Route 1 the iconic leaning structure that defies gravity and belief, especially the latter? There was a day when Hilltop's salad, a celebration of iceberg lettuce, was the town's best, but that day is not today.

Then again, there was a day when some genius thought that a huge orange dinosaur was the logical symbol of an establishment that offered miniature golf, a batting cage, and soft-serve ice cream.

Route 1 is not the woods-on-a-snowy-evening New England of easy wind and downy flakes. It's a different New England — no Robert Frost "tree at my window, window tree" outside the Bel-Aire diner or near the Golden Banana, which has more to do with Fruit of the Loom than the fruit of the earth. In some ways this New England is more horrifying than anything conjured up by Frost's New England literary brother, Stephen King.

But there is a beauty there on Route 1, and it is not only in our memories.

Route 1 offers Polynesian food — and possibility. It offers an orange dinosaur — and optimism. Other New England attractions are deeply serious (the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is rarely described as a house of mirth) or seriously deep (Lake Winnepesaukee reaches down 212 feet), but Route 1 is neither serious nor deep, which is why a charmless piece of road is in some ways one of the most charming parts of New England. Can the word "fun" be applied to any other highway in the region?

The modern era has brought several exceedingly welcome additions to Route 1. Liberating Kelly's Roast Beef from its Revere roots has not ruined the place; it's fabulous to have a place for a lobster roll while you're rolling toward Newburyport. The grafting of Santarpio's, that East Boston palace of pizza, onto Route 1, is a grace note for our times, especially since it isn't everywhere you can get a garlic pizza and a lamb skewer (with a hot cherry pepper) served along with a skewer of blinding profanity. And if you think the cult of kitsch is in danger of extinction on our boulevard of bad taste, take comfort in the new sign outside the Fat Cactus Restaurant. Get me the Harvard Graduate School of Design on the line right this minute. Isn't that cactus a brilliant play on the 80-foot Hilltop sign?

Not that Route 1 — our fried-clam version of Route 66, with Karl's Sausage Kitchen thrown in to give it a cosmopolitan elan — is perfect in every way. For some time I have wondered how the old Green Ridge Turkey Farm, which I am fairly certain is the last place I ordered turkey chop suey, ended up in Nashua, and not on Route 1, right there by Kowloon.

And you are wrong, by the way, if you think that there is nothing humbling about Route 1. Go back to 1966, when the Red Sox finished in ninth place and Carl Yastrzemski batted .278. All of Boston thought that Yaz was on the trading block, or at best was a fading blockhead. He was living in Lynnfield then and was introduced to Gene Berde, a former Hungarian Olympic boxing coach, at the Colonial Inn. Berde took one look at him and, according to Yaz's autobiography, said: "You no athlete. In my country you are nothing, because in this shape you are not even a third-class athlete." Yastrzemski started working out on Route 1 — this was a revolutionary idea then — and the result was a Triple Crown and the summer that changed Boston, prompting a generation of New Englanders to acquire the devout conviction that Mitch Leigh wrote the "Impossible Dream" song for an LP record produced by WHDH and not for the show "Man of La Mancha."

I grew up ordering a Ginsburger at the Adventure Car Hop (and getting a free Roy Orbison album, which my father threw out when we got home rather than take a chance that my brother Jeff and I might listen to it). Once in awhile my parents took us to the Steak Pit, where we got in line with a tray for a gristle-laced slab of meat and a baked potato. For big occasions my grandfather inevitably was drawn to the Towne Lyne House, where the entrees always were delivered under a silvery metal cover, or the Red Coach Grill, now sadly departed.

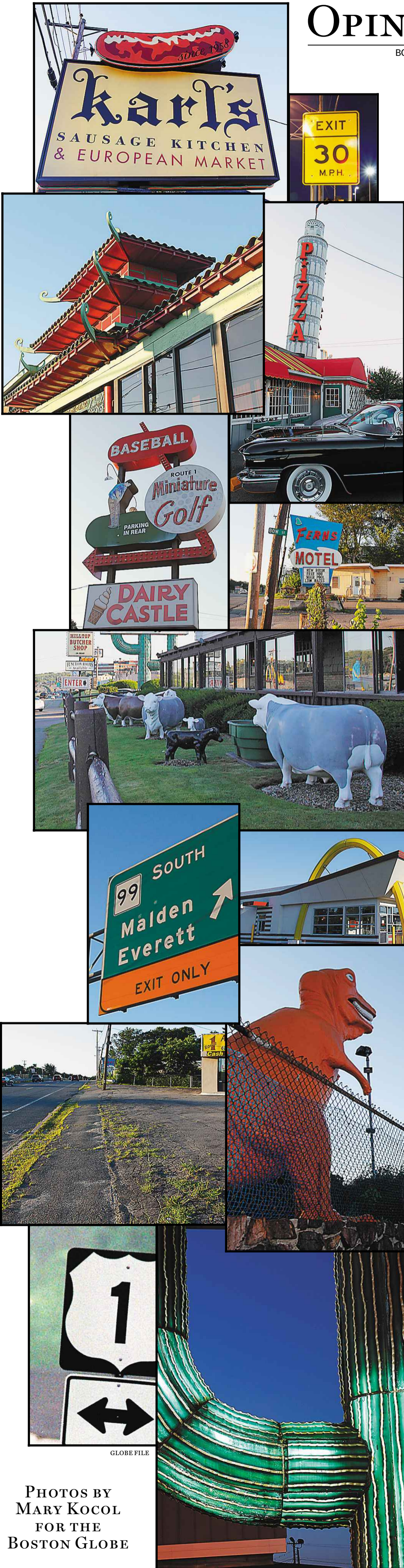
As a 17-year-old cub reporter for the Salem Evening News in August 1971, I interviewed Tiny Tim at the Holiday Inn there. He was in a shabby madras coat, a sky blue tie and short brown socks that were curled up 3 or 4 times, and I was probably dressed worse than that. He giggled, winked, waved sheepishly, and described himself as "just a singer of serious songs," probably not the only fib he told that day.

I could go on, because in a way Route 1 never ends. It may not be the highway to heaven. But for so many of us, it will always be very heaven.

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A closer look

For a more in-depth photo gallery of Route 1 landmarks, go to www.boston.com.



GLOBE FILE

PHOTOS BY MARY KOCOL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

