

Crusader for Desert Phones Dies Before Lifeline Arrives

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SAN BERNARDINO—For 30 years cattle rancher Bob Ausmus fought to bring basic telephone service to his hometown of Cima (pop. 20) and neighboring outposts in the distant eastern corner of San Bernardino County.

Living without a phone, Ausmus argued, was not only inconvenient but dangerous, leaving the widely scattered residents of the eastern Mojave Desert without a way to summon help in the event of a rattlesnake bite, car accident or other emergency.

Last week, Ausmus proved his point with chilling clarity. The descendant of Mojave Desert homesteaders died of a heart attack at his general store, alone and 30 miles from the nearest telephone. He was 69.

"If he had had a phone, I can't help but think he might be alive today," said J. Clayton Brown, a lifelong friend of Ausmus who owns a ranch in nearby Pinto Valley. "At least he would have had a fighting chance."

Carolyn Jacobson, another friend and co-editor of

a newspaper in Baker that ran a twice-monthly column by Ausmus, agreed.

"It's really ironic, isn't it?" Jacobson said. "For years Bob has tried to get the politicians to understand that we people in the desert live in the U.S. and we deserve services too. Then he gets in trouble and has no way to call for help."

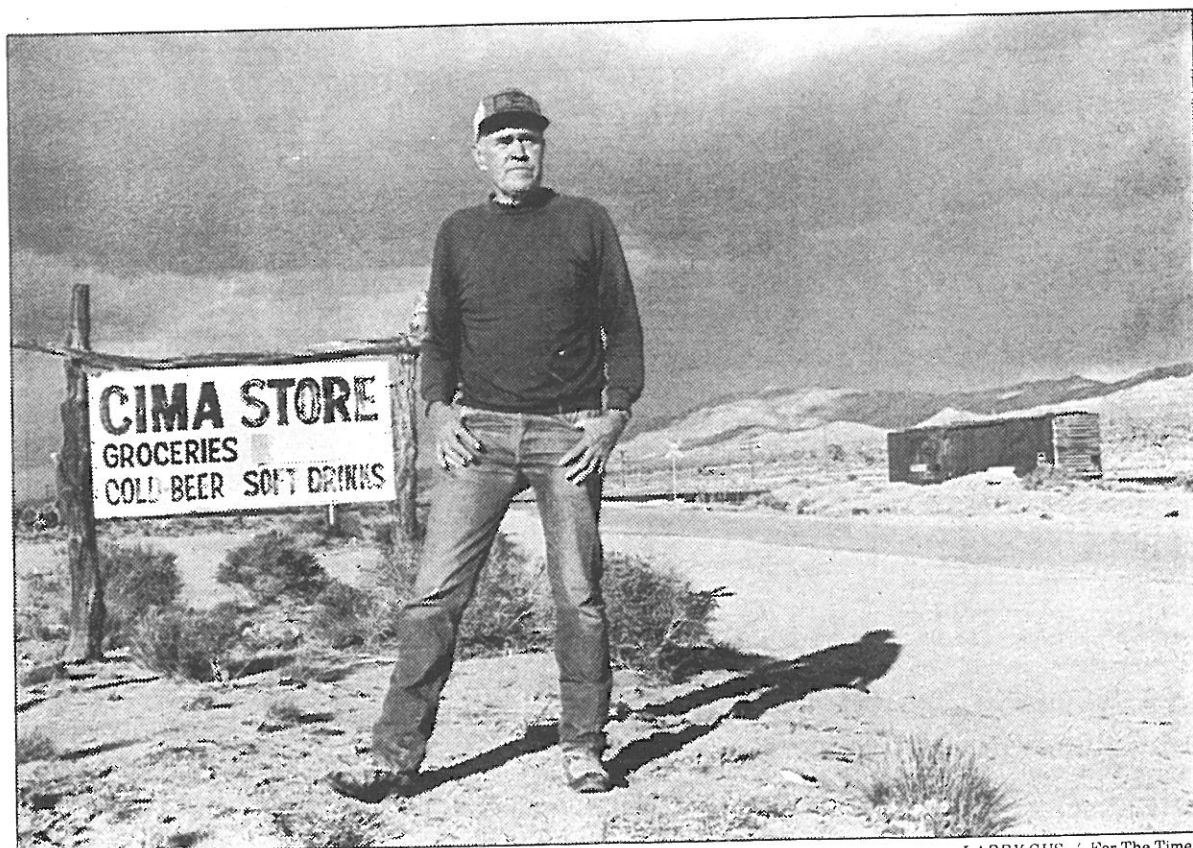
Described by one friend as "the heart and soul of the East Mojave," Ausmus grew up on a cattle ranch not far from the Cima store, located 30 miles south of Interstate 15 not far from the Nevada state line.

Aside from studying journalism at San Bernardino Valley College and serving a stint in the Merchant Marines, Ausmus spent all his life in the eastern Mojave, and it showed.

"Bob was the unofficial spokesman for this country," said Dennis Casebier, a friend of 30 years who lives southeast of Cima in Goffs. "He had an abiding interest in the history of this region, and he chronicled the stories of his time."

For years Ausmus was content to share such stories with tourists and other customers who stopped at the store or adjacent post office, where his wife, Irene, serves as postmaster. In 1983, he began

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writing a column, titled "Desert Diary" for the Baker Valley News, and also penned features on the region for the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

Six months ago, Ausmus published his first book, "East Mojave Diary," a lively collection of biographies and often amusing anecdotes. In a preface, the author called the work an effort to preserve desert history "before it is lost forever."

Although never lacking a forceful opinion on any subject, Ausmus was particularly steamed in recent years about his inability to persuade a utility to link his corner of the world up with Ma Bell.

"If you can send a man to the moon," he said in an interview with The Times in April, "you ought to be able to put phones on the East Mojave."

Pacific Bell officials told Ausmus that providing service to the remote region would be too costly and too complicated, but the feisty cattleman didn't give up. Last year, he found a savior in Ponderosa Telephone Co., a small, Fresno County utility.

Planning to use new technology that sends communications via transmission towers erected on mountaintops, Ponderosa pledged to provide the 400 desert dwellers with basic telephone service for \$17.85 a month.

Pacific Bell has formally protested the plan, but Ponderosa's general manager said Thursday that he expects the state Public Utilities Commission to approve the smaller utility's proposal as early as November.

If that happens, residents of the East Mojave will no longer have to drive through miles of Joshua trees just to find a working telephone. Their relief, however, will be muted by knowing that the man who made it happen didn't get the chance to taste victory.

"After all that work, it's just not fair that he's not going to be here to see the outcome," said Brown, his voice cracking. "It's just not fair."

In addition to his wife, Ausmus is survived by a daughter, Linda Steilen, a school bus driver in Baker, and a son, Robert, of Bakersfield.
