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PHOTO SYNTHESIS [By Colin Westerbeck]



Queen of the Prom, the Range Nightclub, Slab City, California

Photograph by Joel Sternfeld

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When the military base near Niland, east of the Salton Sea, was dismantled after World War II, squatters began pitching tents and parking trailers on the concrete slabs that were left. A community has been there ever since. Its amenities now include a Christian church, a library, a country club with gravel “greens” and an outdoor nightclub called the Range, named for the aerial gunnery range in the nearby Chocolate Mountains.

Sitting in one of the nightclub’s scavenged rows of movie theater and airline seats, inside a fence made from old chrome automobile bumpers, a young woman named Moira strikes a forlorn, Cinderella-like figure. She’s all dressed up with no place to go; or, at least, she

didn’t go to her high school prom, so they made her Queen of the Prom at the Range. If that’s not community spirit, what is?

Joel Sternfeld has traveled America photographing its landscapes and people for more than 25 years. His 1987 book, “American Prospects,” is considered a classic. He’s always found our prospects a bit mixed, however—a combination of affluence and tackiness, hope and malaise. His visits to Slab City, Zzyzx Springs and other California communities were part of his recent project photographing American utopias, which will be published this year. This picture from Slab City suggests that the possibilities Sternfeld sees in American life include dystopia as well as utopia.