

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

James Dean's last, fateful ride



By Mark James Miller, April 7, 2018

When James Dean crashed his Porsche Spyder into another car at the intersection of Highways 41 and 46 in northeastern San Luis Obispo County on Sept. 30, 1955, a promising young life was cut short, and a legend was born.

James Byron Dean, born Feb. 8, 1931, was already on his way to becoming a cultural icon when he died, despite the fact that only one of his films, “East of Eden,” had been released at the time of his death. But his portrayal of tormented loner Cal Trask, trying so desperately to win the love of cold, distant father Raymond Massey, struck a chord with American audiences that has continued to vibrate for more than 60 years.

If Dean had stirred restless youth in “East of Eden,” “Rebel Without A Cause,” which came out less than a month after the fatal crash in Cholame, cemented his status as a symbol of an adolescent's struggle to find his way in a world that makes little sense to him. In spite of its age, the film is still regarded as one of the best portrayals of teenage angst ever made.

Dean was in the last stages of shooting his final film, “Giant,” in which he co-starred with Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor, when he took his last

ride. Setting off with mechanic Rolf Wuertherich on that fateful day, he was on his way to compete in a car race in Salinas.

After stopping for gas in Lost Hills — which now advertises itself as “James Dean’s Last Stop” — he hit Cholame at 5:45 p.m. As he came into the intersection of Highway 41, Cal Poly student Donald Turnupseed, driving a 1950 Ford, was turning into it. The two cars hit almost head on. While both Turnupseed and Wuertherich walked away with minor injuries, Dean died almost instantly, suffering severe trauma to the head and neck. At his funeral, held in Dean’s birthplace Indiana on Oct. 8, the coffin was closed to conceal the extent of his injuries.

Ironically, only 13 days before the crash, Dean had filmed a commercial for the National Highway Safety Committee.

“Take it easy driving,” he said. “The life you save might be mine.”

Dean’s stature has grown since his death. He was the first actor to be nominated for an academy award posthumously, and he remains the only actor to be posthumously nominated twice. He was nominated for Best Actor in 1955 for “East of Eden” and in 1956 for “Giant.” In 1999 he was named the 18th Greatest Male Actor of All Time by the American Film Institute, an especially impressive achievement for someone who made only three films in his lifetime and was competing with the likes of Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando and Laurence Olivier.

In 1977 the James Dean Memorial sculpture of concrete and stainless steel was erected around a tree in front of the Cholame Post Office, not far from the crash site. On Sept. 30, 2005, 50 years after the accident, this section of

Highway 46 was christened the James Dean Memorial Junction. Nearby, the Jack Ranch Café sports Dean memorabilia on its walls.

It seems only natural that someone like James Dean would live on after death, if only in our imaginations, and over the years drivers have reported seeing a 1955 Porsche speeding along Route 46, driven by an intense young man who appears to be in a hurry to get to wherever it is he wants to go. I know if I see him I will get out of his way, for he is driving into eternity.

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