

This Day in History... September 30, 1955

James Dean Dies in Car Crash

A rising star in Hollywood, James Dean's death on September 30, 1955 sent shockwaves across America.

Dean was a rebel who took the nation by storm during the conservative 1950s. A *New York Times* article dismissed Dean as "an honor graduate of the black leather jacket and motorcycle school of acting and living it up." Ironically, that's exactly what appealed to his youthful following. Dean symbolized the frustration of teenagers everywhere.

He was born James Byron Dean on February 8, 1931, in Marion, Indiana. Dean's family moved to Santa Monica, California, when he was six, but when his mother died, he was sent Fairmount, Indiana, to live with his aunt in a Quaker household. Dean was a bright student, popular, and an athlete. After graduating high school, he moved back to California, briefly majoring in pre-law at the University of California, Los Angeles, before changing his major to acting. After entering an acting workshop, he left school to pursue acting full time.



Dean's entire career consisted of three major films produced in just 17 months.



East of Eden was based on a 1952 novel of the same name by John Steinbeck.

Dean's first television appearance was in a Pepsi commercial. His first speaking role was as John the Apostle in *Hill Number One*, an Easter television drama about the resurrection of Jesus. Dean then had bit parts in three films before scoring his first Broadway starring role. Dean relocated to New York City where he appeared in several TV shows. His performance in *The Immortalist* generated interest from Hollywood.

Dean's big break came in *East of Eden*. He became an overnight star after its release in March of 1955. A special celebrity preview was held on Broadway with Marilyn Monroe as a guest usherette. Dean, who had begun filming *Rebel Without a Cause*, skipped the premiere. The film made *Variety's* list of top grossing films by the end of the month and would eventually reach number one. Dean received a Best Actor nomination, one of only four actors to be nominated in the category for a first film.

Dean then portrayed an emotionally confused teenager in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Although parents were disturbed by the violence in the film, teens identified with the timeless story of a teenager's struggle to become an adult. The film was released one month after his death and became synonymous with Dean.

Giant was Dean's third and final movie. Once again Dean portrayed a sullen young man, tortured by envy and unattainable love. *Giant* received ten Academy Award nominations when it was released in 1956.



Dean's final film was based on Edna Ferber's 1952 novel Giant.



All three of Dean's films are preserved by the Library of Congress's National Film Registry.

A few days after he finished filming for *Giant*, Dean drove his silver Porsche 550 Spyder roadster to a race in Salinas, California. As he was driving, a college student pulled in front of him at the intersection of Highways 41 and 46 near Cholame. Dean was unable to stop in time (it's believed he was speeding), and crashed into the other car. James Dean was dead at the age of 24.

James Dean lived fast, died young, and was idolized by many. He received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1960 and was ranked the 18th best male movie star of Hollywood's Golden Age by the American Film Institute.

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