

James Dean

By Helen Marketti



We sometimes come across people in our lives that make an impression that we find difficult to shake. We are either impacted by a parent, relative, teacher, friend or yes—even a Hollywood legend whom we may have never

met. Yet their life has somehow merged with ours and created a bond that influences how we live.

James Dean is one of those lasting legends who still fascinates, impresses and generates fans around the world. While there are hundreds of Hollywood legends each with millions of fans there is something extra special about James Dean that follows his name.

James Byron Dean was born on February 8, 1931 to Mildred and Winton Dean in Marion, Indiana. Mildred worked in a drug store and Winton worked as a Dental Technician at a VA hospital. Winton's job transfer soon followed and the young family moved to California.

Mildred would be in her son's life for a short time

as she became ill with cancer and passed away when he was nine years old. Winton Dean did his best to raise his son and still try to pay the medical bills. He was at risk of losing his job as he spent many days to care for and spend time with Mildred before she passed away. In "those days" there was no paid leave of absence or health insurance so Winton was trying to handle things on his own even selling Mildred's car to help pay some of the bills.



James Dean as a child

Realizing that more assistance was needed he agreed to let his son come to live with his aunt and uncle (Ortense and Marcus Winslow) on their farm in Fairmount, Indiana.

Traveling on the same train that carried his mother's casket, James Dean sat with Grandma Dean on his way to Fairmount. This would be the beginning of a strong foundation as he would be with a close family who loved him.

"Being in Fairmount were the formative years for his life. I believe he adjusted well here," said Marcus Winslow, Jr. who is a cousin to James Dean. "Many neighbors and friends knew that Jimmy had lost his mother at an early age. I remember my mom telling me that a neighbor once brought over a pony and left it in the yard for Jimmy."

Referring to his famous cousin as "Jimmy" reminds us that everyone has family; has roots where they've come from and stories of what they've been through with joys and sorrows.

"Jimmy came here to live with my parents in 1940 when he was nine and I was born in 1943. To me he was like an older brother," remembers Marcus. "We lived on a farm and I remember my dad having Jimmy help him bail hay. Jimmy would get some of his friends to come over and help too. He

also worked a seasonal job for awhile at a tomato canning factory."

Learning more about a Hollywood legend as a "regular person" is very enlightening as most of us only get to see and hear what the media provides. It is refreshing to be exposed to a family perspective.

"I can remember Jimmy liking motorcycles. He had a 1947 Czech bike that he would ride when he was in high school. He got that at Carter's Motors which was just down the road from here," Marcus remembers. "Sometimes I would get on the bike with him and we would go to the Dutchmill for ice cream."

He continues, "Jimmy was always active in sports, too. He ran track and also played varsity basketball in high school. He was also interested in the arts. He liked to draw, paint, sculpt and act."

Adeline Nall who was James Dean's high school drama teacher saw the gifts and talents of her young student. She encouraged him to keep moving forward with his interests. He was a natural for the stage and eventually for the silver screen.

"Jimmy left for California to live with his dad a few weeks after graduating from high school," Marcus recalls. "Winton wanted Jimmy to become an attorney but Jimmy had other ideas for himself. He first went to Santa Monica Junior College and then to UCLA. At both colleges he was involved with acting in plays and also helping with painting scenery and so forth."

He continues, "Jimmy was starting to get attention. Things were beginning for him. He was in a Pepsi commercial. James Whitmore (actor) had encouraged Jimmy to go to New York because most of the work for actors was there."

"Jimmy would write to my mom and dad and wanted me to send him pictures. One time I drew a castle and sent it to him. Well, Jimmy thought I had drawn a prison," Marcus softly chuckles. "So he sent a letter to me saying that I should not be drawing things of confinement...that I should be drawing things of beauty and freedom like mountains, flowers or animals."

James Dean kept in touch with his family as often as possible as his career began to move forward and his popularity was rising.

He only made three movies: "East of Eden", "Rebel Without A Cause" and "Giant." These three movies made the mark for a man who would be forever young.

"The character that he played in "East of Eden" was the role closest to his own life," said Marcus. "Although the circumstances were different."

"His movies are still strong and stand up today," said David Loehr who is the Archivist/Curator for the James Dean Gallery in Fairmount. "I became a collector after reading, James Dean: The Mutant King. It changed my life. There were similarities with my own life to his. I lost my father when I was nine and went to live with my grandmother. I also grew up on a farm. When I read the book I hadn't seen any of his movies yet but his story intrigued me. Then I saw his movies and had never seen anything like it."

"In March of 1955 I went to see East of Eden. I had never seen anyone act like that before. He was so powerful," said Phil Zeigler who is a close friend to Marcus Winslow and also volunteers at the Fairmount Historical Museum. "James Dean had charisma and he still has it to

this day. Each time I watch his movies I always see something that I had missed before. He was magnificent."

On September 30, 1955 James Dean was killed in a car accident while driving his 1955 Porsche 550 Spyder in Salinas, California. He was 24 years old and thus began a continuous curiosity about his life that has brought fans from all over the world to visit Fairmount, Indiana year after year. James Dean lived there and now he rests there.



Grave site

Fairmount, Indiana still maintains the quiet and simple atmosphere now as it did then.

"Fairmount is a special place," said David Loehr. "The town is diligent about keeping it as old fashioned as possible. Things pretty much look the same."

"After I retired in 1996 I decided to move here," said Phil Zeigler. "I had been coming here every year since 1983 with antique cars for the James Dean Run event so I just decided that I would live here. It's a great place. It's quiet and peaceful." People are warmly greeted in Fairmount as most visitors are looking to see where James Dean grew up, where he walked and where he is buried. What can be explained about such a fascination?

"He passed away in 1955 and he was still written



James Dean Gallery

about in movie magazines until at least 1960," recalls Phil Zeigler. "I remember my wife and I going to see "Giant" and the line for the movie

theater stretched for over two blocks. Each time James Dean came on the screen everyone applauded. I saw some people with tears in their eyes as we left the theater...we all knew that this was his last movie and we would never see him again."

Marcus remembers, "When I was younger I didn't understand why people were coming to our house and wanting to visit. My mom and dad used to invite people in. They were so good to his fans after Jimmy passed away. They felt they owed it to his fans to keep his memory alive. They would take the time to show them Jimmy's room and share the scrapbooks."

He continues, "But I do understand now why people want to visit Fairmount. Its made me realize how Jimmy has touched so many people's lives in a positive way. People come here so they can see for themselves where he lived, where he went to school and spent his time. They want to be closer to Jimmy and this is their way."

Some of the most lasting memories for Marcus was the last time his famous cousin came home to visit. It was February 1955 and Life Magazine photographer, Dennis Stock had accompanied James Dean on his trip back home.

"Everyone knew he was going places," said Marcus. "When people around here would see his movies they would call the house. It was so exciting to see him up on the screen. I remember the movie theater in Marion, Indiana giving a special showing of "East of Eden"



Candid photo

just for our family and friends in the afternoon. To me he was still Jimmy...but when you looked at his photos—they were like magic."

Marcus finally says, "He will never be older than 24. He was very fortunate that the three movies he made were successful in that he worked with great costars and had directors who let him do what he knew how. Jimmy is the one who made those movies what they are. You've got to give Jimmy all of the credit for his own lasting popularity."

For more cool information about James Dean and events in Fairmount, Indiana check out: www.jamesdeangallery.com and www.jamesdean.com

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