

# TexasMonthly

Tuesday, June 28, 2011

## [“Giant” Rolling Roadshow Report, Part One: Two Trains Running](#)

posted by Evan McMurry at [9:50 AM](#)



Two trains ran through Marfa at the start of Saturday night’s showing of *Giant*. The first chugged across the screen in the film’s opening scene, a harbinger of commerce outracing the horses next to it. A couple minutes later, a very real freight train whooshed through the center of town, just blocks away. No longer the main muscle of American industrialism, the Union Pacific hooted anachronistically. For a moment, the train overwhelmed the tale of how Texas grew into the oil-rich juggernaut that made a relic of it.

Fifty-seven years ago, *Giant*’s production revitalized Marfa’s postwar economy, and, thanks to all the Hollywood stars sauntering about, became a permanent part of the small town’s mystique. Tonight, a couple hundred people set up their lawnchairs and coolers in the middle of Highland Street, under the shadow of the historic Paisano Hotel (famously featured in the film) to watch George Stevens’ epic.

Robert Lara, a lifelong Marfa resident, reckoned he’d seen *Giant* up to eight times. “Everybody really liked this movie,” he said of the town’s initial reaction. “And I think it captured Marfa real well.”

Next to him, Melissa Livingston remembered how her father pointed out people from town each time they watched the movie together. “It was a big deal,” she said. “Everybody was real excited to go out to the barbecue scene. Most of the townspeople were there.”

I asked Melissa how the town had changed since 1955. “Well, it used to be a ranching community,” she said, while looking around at the art galleries visible from her seat. “Now it’s much more of an artist community.”

“And thank God they don’t treat people anymore like they did in the movie,” said another resident, Linda Jurado. “I didn’t realize what this movie was about until I saw it as an adult. Our parents probably all experienced that, but to me it’s unthinkable.”

*Giant* follows Rock Hudson’s Texas rancher and Elizabeth Taylor’s outspoken heiress through three generations of Texas’ evolving oil economy, represented by James Dean as an up-by-the-bootstraps wildcatter (Dean died just before the end of filming). As a countermovement to the surging wealth, the film pointedly critiques the plight of migrant workers, recording their deplorable living conditions and institutionalized barriers. Though its last shot – white and Hispanic children smiling together before an oilfield – is a bit much, *Giant* nonetheless seriously registers the costs of upward mobility, both personal and societal.

None of this would have likely have flown without the movie’s star power. Poppy Thompson, who saw *Giant* in Cameron when it first came out in 1955, summed it up perfectly: “All the young guys wanted to see it because Elizabeth Taylor was in it, and all the girls liked James Dean. You couldn’t go wrong.”

What made her want to see it again? She pointed back at Alamo’s truck-turned-projection-booth, where her grandson Dakota was setting up the 35-millimeter reel. He was on his second tour with the Rolling Roadshow, and Poppy confided that he was a little nervous. Dakota had shown movies with eight reels before, but who knew how many it would take to show all three hours and seventeen minutes of *Giant*? And more than that, would anybody stay until its 12:45 a.m. end time?

Most did. The Paisano was barely visible when the film ended. In the Alamo truck’s sole spotlight, people stretched, gathered their empty Lone Star cans, and made for home. For many, that meant crossing back over the railroad tracks. Marfa was originally founded as a railroad stop, and while its small station now seems to be used mostly for a small Saturday morning market, like *Giant*, the tracks persist—and no matter what has happened since, when a train comes through, it still makes an epic racket.