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TELEVISION REVIEW

What 'Giant' Did to Texas

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

An intriguing Texas curio surfaces tomorrow at midnight on Channel 21 in the form of a documentary called "Return to Giant." The giant in question is the mid-1950's blockbuster movie called "Giant," directed by George Stevens and starring Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor and an up-and-coming dynamo named James Dean. The documentary notes that "'Giant' did for Texas what 'Gone With the Wind' did for Atlanta." Let's not argue whether that's a plus or a minus.

Kirby F. Warnock, the writer and producer and Texan to the bone, got hooked on the "Giant" story when, at age 5 in 1957, his father took him to the original site of the filming, a place called Marfa, still dominated by the fake mansion facade that masked what the actor Chill Wills called "wall to wall dirt." With cooperation from Warner Brothers, Mr. Warnock has skillfully stitched together period clips and outtakes from the filming with interviews of the participants, then and now and in between.

The result is a surprisingly haunting slice of Americana. Here is Marfa in 1955, described by one resident as a "no what to do" burg, suddenly invaded by Hollywood bigwigs who could just as well have been from Mars. The area was having a drought at the time, and "Giant" was a salvation. And Mr. Stevens was an unusual director, not only welcoming the town folk to watch what was happening on the set but also hiring many of them as extras in crowd scenes.

"Giant" was based on an Edna Ferber novel that many Texans found less than thrilling because of what they considered offensive stereotypes. Mr. Stevens, focusing on the sweeping vistas and larger-than-life aspects of the state, didn't make that mistake. As far as Marfa was concerned, one observer recalls, "the people were just thrilled to death." One woman, daughter of the Mayor at the time, recounts with understandable relish how, when offered a date with one of the stars, sassily asked, "Who's James Dean?" You can eat out forever on these kinds of stories.

Mr. Warnock had access to some fascinating material. Mr. Hudson appears in a 1982 interview recorded but never released by George Stevens Jr., son of the director. Looking a bit drawn even then, Mr. Hudson is thoughtful about the film and working with Mr. Stevens Sr., noting with admiration that "you just make yourself a piece of putty and put yourself in his hands."

One surprise is that Mr. Dean, who was notorious for being difficult, was easily the local favorite during filming, becoming a good ol' boy who fit in perfectly. When he was finished with the work, Mr. Dean left Marfa and died shortly thereafter in a car crash. Recalling the crash 40 years ago, Bob Hinkle, his dialogue coach, breaks up on camera, apologizing with the comment, "I thought I was over that."

But as Don Henley, the narrator, says, there was "only one Elvis, one Jimmy and one 'Giant.'" The movie and, in its unassuming way, this documentary remain touchstones to the past.

RETURN TO GIANT Produced by Kirby F. Warnock; directed by Jim Brennan; Randall Bird, director of photography; Sandy Schwartz, editor; Don Henley, narrator. A production of Trans-Pecos Productions.