

PICTURE PERFECT

Monterey County Film Commission Brings Hollywood to Town

BY MICHAEL CHATFIELD

Monterey County is comprised of 5,280 square miles of some of the most diverse topography in the Golden State. That's a fact Hollywood moviemakers have been taking advantage of for many, many years, and more than 200 films have been shot here. The oldest are said to be two silent movies, "Hotel Del Monte" and "Surf at Monterey," shot on October 25, 1897, by film pioneer James H. White and the newest is the HBO series "Big Little Lies," starring Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman.

White probably traveled light. He was working for Thomas Edison's movie company, making promotional films about tourist stops along the Southern Pacific's West Coast rail line. His hand-cranked camera was a one-man operation, and he merely had to set it up and start filming.

In contrast, the HBO cast and crew numbered around 150, and involved several different locations around the Peninsula when they were here in January. Getting the permits required for disrupting public places such as Monterey's Wharf #2 and Asilomar State Beach, finding accom-



Photo: David Royal/Monterey Herald

Many productions filmed on the Peninsula are low-key, but some, like HBO's "Big Little Lies," feature crowd-drawing celebrities such as Nicole Kidman, seen here waving to fans. The crew returns in May. "We can't wait," says Executive Producer Gregg Fienberg.



Photos: Courtesy of Monterey County Film Commission



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(Clockwise from top left) The Monterey Peninsula starred in Clint Eastwood's 1971 "Play Misty for Me;" Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in Big Sur for "The Sandpiper;" "Basic Instinct" locations included Carmel Highlands; "Big Sur" used several locations in that area.

modations for production staff, providing security and traffic control are all major logistical challenges. For help with that, producers turn to the Monterey County Film Commission.

"We are liaisons between the public and the production team," says Karen Nordstrand, the Commission's director of marketing and film production.

"Big Little Lies" is a television adaptation of the bestselling book by Australian author Liane Moriarty. The book is set in Sydney, but the location was changed to Monterey for this production, making it a no-brainer to shoot here.

"Nothing looks like Monterey," says Executive Producer Gregg Fienberg, "and that's a good thing." Predictably, it's not that difficult to convince film-industry professionals to spend a few days or weeks working

in Monterey County. The crew is returning in May.

"We're all happy to shoot in LA," Fienberg says. "But to tell you the truth? We can't wait to get back there. It was a great experience for everyone, including the community I think, even though a film crew with all its vehicles and equipment can be pretty disruptive—especially with big stars like Reese and Nicole—to people's daily lives."

The Commission was formed in 1989 for the purpose of bringing awareness to the diverse topography found in Monterey County and to smooth the way for production teams while they're here. It's a win-win: crews get superb scenery, world-class service and friendly hospitable natives, and the local economy gets a major shot in the arm. After all, all those people need hotel rooms, they need to eat and they might just do

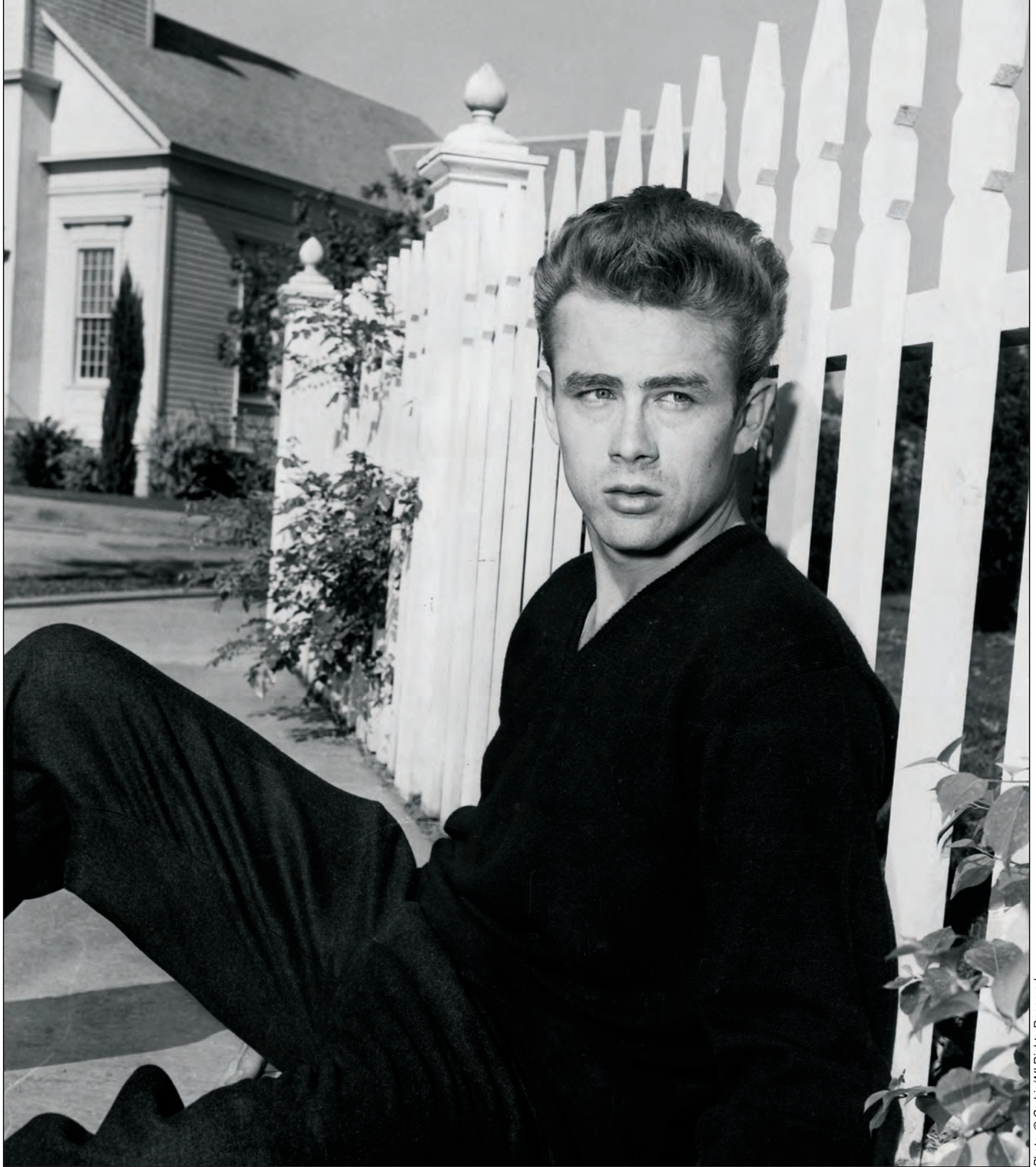


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Hollywood came to Steinbeck Country in 1955 to film the author's "East of Eden." Movie star James Dean is pictured at a Spreckels-area home used in the production. Other locations included the former Spreckels sugar factory and nearby farm fields.

a little shopping while they're in town. Add to that the fact that many producers hire local people to work on their crews and some even hire residents as movie extras and you have an industry that, as they say, "takes only pictures and leaves only footprints."

"This is a clean kind of business," Nordstrand says. "It's a crazy economic engine that comes to town, takes their pictures and goes home. A crew the size of the one for "Big Little Lies" will pump \$75,000 to \$100,000 into local coffers." It also gives a boost to tourism by showcasing the county to

a world-wide audience. "We get calls all the time from people who saw Monterey, Carmel or Big Sur in a film or on television and say 'I want to go there on vacation.' It's spin-off tourism."

Nordstrand explains that the group is a nonprofit that applies for County funds each year. By all accounts, the Commission is a good use of tax dollars.

"We estimate that \$92 million has come into Monterey County communities from the film industry over the years," she says. "That's a 24 to 1

return on investment to the County.’

The State of California has made it even easier for production companies to utilize Monterey County and other locations statewide with a \$300 million Film Tax Credit program.

As noted, filmmakers have been attracted to the area for nearly as long as motion pictures have been made. The Film Commission has published a Monterey County Movie Map brochure that lists all feature films known to have filmed at least in part in these environs. Some of the area’s most recognizable star turns are in the 1989 Tom Hanks movie “Turner and Hooch,” partly shot in Pacific Grove; “Julie,” a 1956 Doris Day/Louis Jordan thriller that features a fascinating time-capsule of mid-20th cen-



Photo: Kelli Urdahl

Karen Nordstrand is director of marketing and film production for Monterey County Film Commission.

tury Pebble Beach; and Clint Eastwood’s breakthrough “Play Misty For Me” that was filmed at the Carmel Highlands, the Sardine Factory and Windjammer (now Sandbar and Grill) restaurants in Monterey, Carmel-by-the-Sea and the Monterey County Fairgrounds.

Sharp-eyed locals get as chuckle out of a scene in which Eastwood’s character hurries to his girlfriend’s home on Spindrift Road in the Highlands from Carmel Rancho—by driving north on the Bixby Creek Bridge, which is several miles south of his destination. And it’s not just the Peninsula that’s been utilized. Fort Hunter Liggett stood in for Vietnam in 2002’s “We Were Soldiers,” fields near Spreckels were used in the James Dean adaptation of John



Photos: Courtesy of Monterey County Film Commission

Parts of the Academy Award winning MGM film “National Velvet,” starring Mickey Rooney and a 12-year-old Elizabeth Taylor, were filmed on Pebble Beach Golf Links’ 9th and 10th fairways. Pebble Beach has appeared in several movies, including “Julie” and “The Parent Trap.”



Modern filmmaking is highly technical. Production companies bring large crews, pouring revenue into Monterey County coffers.

Steinbeck's "East of Eden" and several scenes for the Michael Douglas/Sharon Stone movie "Basic Instinct" were shot in Carmel Valley and Carmel Highlands.

And it's not just movies: scores of commercials hawking everything from automobiles to clothing to credit cards have been shot here. In fact, it's safe to say that while sitting through an evening of network television, at least one Monterey County image will appear on the screen. Television has long been aware of the visual appeal of Monterey County. The opening sequence of the late 1960s motorcycle adventure show "Then Came Bronson" featured helicopter footage of star Michael Parks riding his Harley Davidson Sportster down Highway 1 and over the Bixby Creek Bridge. More recently, the final episode of "Mad Men" was shot in a Big Sur meadow that stood in for Esalen Institute.

"We want residents to be happy and embrace future filming and the proceeds those productions bring," Nordstrand says.

And it seems as if those involved in filmmaking here are content to come here as well.

"If I could produce a show that filmed here every day," says Fienberg, "I'd love it."

For more information on the Monterey County Film Commission and/or to download the Monterey County Movie Map, visit www.FilmMonterey.org.



"Bixby Creek Bridge on Highway 1 is the most photographed site in our county," says Karen Nordstrand. In addition to feature films, countless commercials—such as this one being shot here for Corona beer—have used the bridge as a backdrop.