

Reconstructing the James Dean Crash (Part 1 of 3)



As you know, this tragic crash occurred September 30, 1955 at 5:45 pm near Cholame, California. It has been the subject of many independent investigations and research studies over the years. Recently, National Geographic decided to review it again using a different approach and new crash science.

Their researchers discovered **Visual Statement** and asked us to participate and use modern approach in a new reconstruction. We eagerly volunteered as it was a great opportunity to show the world our latest software technology. Therefore, our Mike Kennedy (CEO), and our Mike Greenfield (Director of Forensic Mapping) met the film crew from London, England at Cholame, California in April of 2005, to reconstruct the crash, in real time at the actual crash location.

BACKGROUND

James Dean was enroute to an amateur road race in Salinas, coming from Los Angeles. He was driving his brand new 1955 Porsche Spyder 550, which he had just purchased for the purpose of his amateur racing activities. He was accompanied by Rolf Weutherich, a German mechanic, sent by Porsche to support new American owners of racing Porsches. They took a route that caused them to pass through Cholame, California on Highway 46. Shortly before the crash, Dean was pulled over by a CHP officer and ticketed for speeding. At approximately 5:45 pm, Dean was westbound passing through the "Y" intersection at Highway 41, one mile east of Cholame. At that point, Donald Turnipseed, driving a 1950 Ford business coupe, turned left in front of Dean, and the collision occurred. Dean was killed almost immediately, and Weutherich was ejected from the Porsche and found beside the drivers side of the car at final rest. Dean was found slumped against the passenger door, which sparked a long standing controversy about who was driving. Turnipseed rotated counter clockwise and slid sideways from impact to rest about 38 feet east of the impact point. Dean's Porsche traveled about 45 feet from impact to rest in a northerly direction. CHP officers attended the scene and took some photographs and basic measurements.



CRASH SCIENCE OBJECTIVES

The television show producer asked us to address the following issues, based on rumors and discussion over the years since the crash:

1. Was there a vertical visibility obstruction (dip in the road) that prevented Turnipseed from seeing Dean prior to the crash?
2. Were there any other visibility issues that would explain why Turnipseed did not see Dean?
3. Did Dean brake before impact or was he trying to drive around Turnipseed?
4. What were the impact speeds?
5. Was James Dean really driving?

SUPPLIED INFORMATION

We were provided with a series of photographs of the scene taken by CHP Officers. We were also supplied with their reports and a sketch. The sketches were great for 1955 but lacked the accuracy of modern day scale diagrams which would allow precise speed analysis and vehicle positioning. As you can see in the scanned images, bits of information from all of this material had to be assembled to allow a scene reconstruction

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The supplied background information then had to be supplemented with the crash scene measurements of the overall geometry. These simply did not exist. As one can see the sketch, not only was not to scale, but was not based on any measurement protocols and was geometrically inaccurate. That meant developing the overall scene diagram as a separate task, and then integrating the evidence

