

Stand By Me (film)

By Jim Schepcke

Stand By Me, a classic of 1980s American cinema, was filmed mostly in and around Brownsville, Oregon, in the summer of 1985. The film, which was nominated for an Academy Award, was adapted from Stephen King's novella, *The Body*, which recalls many incidents and experiences from the author's childhood in Maine. In the film, Brownsville becomes the fictional town of Castle Rock, Oregon, where four young boys from difficult family circumstances take an unusual and transformative journey together. The film's effective dramatization of childhood nostalgia, friendship, loyalty, and empathy has helped extend its popularity well beyond its initial release.

Most of *Stand By Me* takes place in the late summer of 1959, when the four boys hear that a boy has been struck by a train about thirty miles from town. The police have not yet found the body, but the boys overhear their older brothers describing the location. They make a plan to follow the railroad tracks to locate the body and become hometown heroes. The boys' older brothers belong to a gang of teenagers who also want to claim the body, setting up a conflict. At the climax of the film, the dead boy is found and the two groups clash in a violent confrontation. As the boys face the challenges of their journey, they are compelled to confide in each other, bringing them closer together and deepening their friendship. The movie begins and ends with the reminiscence of one of the boys—now an adult, played by actor Richard Dreyfus.

The director of the film was Rob Reiner, who stepped in when the British director selected for the job bailed on the producers. It was Reiner's third directing assignment, following a successful television career in *All in the Family* during the 1970s. He personally cast the four leads: Wil Wheaton (age twelve), Corey Feldman (age twelve), Jerry O'Connell (age eleven), and River Phoenix (age fourteen), who was born in Madras. Kiefer Sutherland, a British actor in his first American film appearance, played the menacing leader of the older teen gang. The cast and crew were based in Eugene, where Reiner spent two weeks with the young performers improving their acting skills and creating a connection among them with activities such as rafting on the McKenzie River.

In June 1985, three weeks before filming was scheduled to begin, Embassy Pictures, the production company, was sold to Columbia Pictures, whose executives were not interested in making a movie they believed had little box office potential. Columbia ordered that the production be shut down. Norman Lear, the producer of *All in the Family*, stepped in with \$7.5 million of his own money to finance the film so production could begin.

Locations in Brownsville figure prominently in the film, including the downtown, two homes, the Baptist cemetery, the Brownsville Saloon, an old oak tree where the boys had a treehouse, and Pioneer Park, where a hundred local extras were hired for the famous "barf-o-rama" pie-eating contest scene. Most of the scenes when the boys are trekking along railroad tracks were filmed on the old Oregon, Pacific and Eastern Railway line east of Cottage Grove, where Buster Keaton's *The General* was filmed in 1926. The exception was the scene where the boys encounter an oncoming train on a trestle, which was filmed near Burney, California. Other Oregon locations included a salvage yard in Veneta and a gas station near Junction City. Filming was concluded at the end of August.

Stand By Me opened in theaters a year later and was a critical and box office success. It cost \$8 million to make and earned over \$52 million at the box office. The film was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Screenplay adaptation and a Golden Globe Award for Best Picture and Best Director. All of the young stars would have long careers in movies and television, except River Phoenix, who died at age twenty-three of a drug overdose. Rob Reiner, who directed many successful movies, including *The Princess Bride* and *When Harry Met Sally*, told fans in 2017 that *Stand By Me* was his favorite of all his films.

In Brownsville, July 23 is Stand By Me Day, which attracts fans from all over the world. Recent celebrations included guided walking tours, fan forums, a 1950s sock hop, and, of course, a pie-eating contest. The Linn County Historical Museum maintains a permanent exhibit on the making of the film.

Sources

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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