

A legend lost on an Arizona desert highway

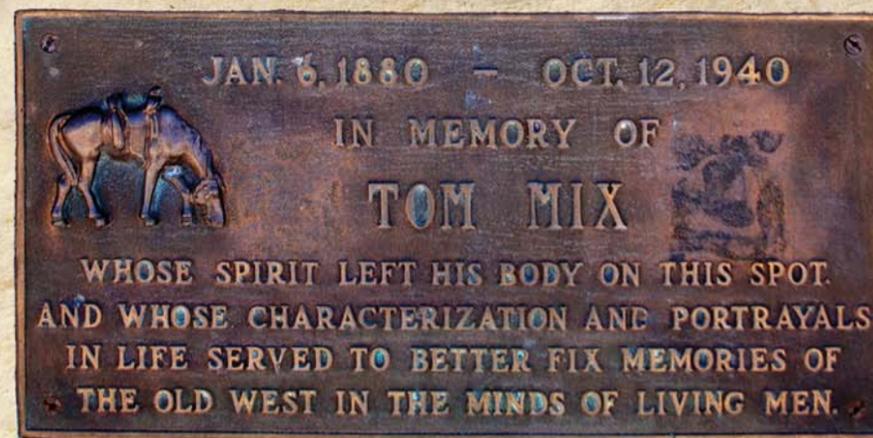
STORY AND PHOTOS BY RANDALL BOHL

During a motorcycle ride through southeast Arizona with his uncle, your correspondent happened upon a roadside shrine of great Western significance.

In 1940, Tom Mix was the hero of more than 300 Hollywood Westerns—the King of the Cowboys a couple of decades before Roy Rogers would inherit that title. Mix was born in Pennsylvania, but Hollywood wrote him a new biography—born in old El Paso, served alongside Teddy Roosevelt as a Rough Rider in the Spanish American War, fought in the Boxer Rebellion in China, then the Boer War in South Africa. The official press release bio then had him serving as a US Marshal and a Texas Ranger.

While most of that was a stretch, the tall man in a white Stetson was known for commanding a crowd, or an individual, or a lady—he was married five times. Tom Mix's dad was a stable master and had taught him horsemanship early. Tom was a rodeo cowboy in his younger years, right up till the start of his movie career in his late 20s. Mix reportedly loved to gamble and to drink. One tale has him breaking up a cowboy barroom brawl with a bullet in his leg hardly slowing him down.

A piece in the old *Tucson Citizen*, writ-



ten by John Jennings a few decades ago, sums up his silver screen persona: "In the movies, Mix's blaze-faced wonder horse, Tony, would prance his way through bad guys' bullets, leap huge chasms and gallop to a maiden's rescue time after time. Then, when Tom and the rancher's beautiful daughter would lean in for a film-ending kiss, Tony would either nudge Tom toward the girl, or swipe his white hat and spoil the moment. Tony was the first horse to be a real movie star. He was the ultimate hero's steed when Champion and Trigger were still in ponytails."

That was all during the silent movie era, and by 1940, Mix was done with movies. He did not make the transition to "talkies," leaving this path to the likes of John Wayne and Ronald Reagan.

Rather, Mix next pursued his childhood dream of joining the circus. (As a child, his parents had caught him practicing to be a circus performer, working on his knife-throwing tricks against the barn wall, with his sister as his foil.) Now 60, he actually took to promoting the circus.

On October 12, 1940, after stopping to visit Pima County Sheriff Ed Nichols in Tucson, Mix headed north toward Phoenix, driving his 1937 Cord 812 Phaeton. He stopped at the Oracle Junction Inn, a popular gambling and drinking establishment, to call his agent, and then continued north on US Highway 80 (now Arizona Highway 79). About eighteen miles south of Florence, enjoying the beautiful Arizona autumn day at a reported 80 mph, Mix came upon barriers where a bridge had been washed out by a flash flood. He was unable to stop in time. The car swerved twice, then rolled into a gully, pinning the Western hero underneath. As the lanky cowboy started to

emerge from the wreckage, a large rawhide trunk full of silver dollars and jewelry, loaded behind him, toppled over and broke his neck, killing him instantly.

Mix had been headed to his grandson's christening in Phoenix, but instead was interred at Forest Lawn Memorial Park Cemetery in Glendale, California.

A small stone memorial marks the site of his death on Arizona 79, where a nearby arroyo is named Tom Mix Wash. Included are photos, newspaper clippings—including the *Tucson Citizen* quoted above—and a plaque reading: "In memory of Tom Mix, whose spirit left his body on this spot and whose characterization and portrayals in life served to better fix memories of the Old West in the minds of living men." It's a humble memorial to a larger than life man, and worth a visit. ■

A legendary car, restored

The 1937 Cord 812 Phaeton shown below—completely repaired and restored—is the very car in which silent-screen Western film star Tom Mix suffered his fatal crash on October 12, 1940, near Florence, Arizona. The Cord—an important piece of early Hollywood and Arizona history, festooned with flags, badges and other Western regalia, as Mix had decorated the car when he owned it—was displayed at the inaugural Arizona Concours d'Elegance in January 2014, by owners Bob, Pat and Chris White of Scottsdale. (Car photos: Joe Sage)

