



Susana Martinez
Governor

Tom Church
Cabinet Secretary

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Press Release

WWII Munitions Train Explosion Commemorated with Historic Marker

Fort Sumner – The seventieth anniversary of a World War II freight train explosion that leveled the eastern New Mexico town of Tolar will be commemorated with a roadside historic marker, the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) District Two and the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division, Department of Cultural Affairs announced today

The Official Scenic Historic Marker will be dedicated at 2 p.m., November 21, at mile marker 344 on U.S. 60. Representatives of the community, NMDOT District Two, HPD and the Cultural Properties Review Committee will attend the dedication and ribbon cutting.

“The placement of the highway marker near Tolar is significant because it will serve as a reminder that the devastation and loss of life occasioned by the Second World War were also experienced here at home in New Mexico,” said Rick Hendricks, New Mexico State Historian and CPRC chairman.

Retired railroader Randy Dunson initiated the marker to commemorate the November 30, 1944, explosion. An expert on the incident, he has written articles about the explosion, which resulted when the train caught fire and the bombs it carried exploded. The blast collapsed roofs and buildings, sent large sections of freight cars flying through the air and into buildings, and took the life of one resident.

“It is vital that we not forget our past,” said Randy Dunson of Roosevelt County. “The historical marker will provide awareness in the community of our fascinating history that took place here.”

The marker text was developed by Dunson, HPD and the CPRC. John Eastwood, whose parents were in town during the incident, has donated a piece of wreckage that NMDOT will place alongside it.

The markers provide history vignettes of New Mexico’s significant landscapes, accomplishments, persons and events. The program originated in 1935 to highlight the state’s heritage and attract the growing number of motorists touring the Southwest to visit communities and explore their heritage.

NMDOT District Two is responsible for maintaining approximately 60 historic markers in southeastern New Mexico. With HPD, the department works with the public to facilitate nominations and handle reports of damaged markers. The NMDOT is responsible for the cost, location, installation and maintenance. HPD and the CPRC are charged with researching and writing texts and determining subjects appropriate for the markers.

“Explosion Rocks Tolar” marker text:

“At noon on November 30, 1944, a World War II supply train hauling 165 five-hundred-pound bombs headed for the Pacific Theater derailed in Tolar. The train caught fire and the bombs exploded. The blast, which leveled nearly every building in town, could be heard 60 miles away. It vaporized 500 feet of track and sent a 1,500-pound axle crashing through a store and rolling out the back. One person, Jess Brown, was killed in the explosion after a piece of iron shrapnel struck his head. Tolar is two miles east of here.”

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Manon Arnett, Public Information Officer for the New Mexico Department of Transportation District Two at (575) 637-7210 (office) or manon.arnett@state.nm.us.

Or

Tom Drake, New Mexico Historic Preservation Division Public Relations and Historic Marker Coordinator, 505-827-8320; tom.drdake@state.nm.us.