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Santa Clarita now famous as home for special effects.

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Aug. 6--CANYON COUNTRY -- Mark Byers makes a living planting explosions big and small all around town.

"We've blown up houses and cars all over Santa Clarita over the last five years," said Byers, 40, owner of Mark Byers Special Effects in Castaic. He is part of a cadre of local special-effects houses responsible for much of Hollywood's on-screen mayhem.

The expansive canyons and movie ranches on the outskirts of the Santa Clarita Valley have provided exteriors for action movies since the late 1910s only the props have changed. As most things in Hollywood, it's all about size.

"The cowboys and Indians had horses and six-shooters," said Matt Kutcher, owner of Santa Clarita-based Spectrum Effects. "Now we have cars and automatic pistols. Nothing has changed, but in some respects, everything has."

Earlier this year, director Steven Spielberg's crews converged at Cruzan Mesa known in the industry as "Mystery Mesa" to rig a huge blast for his sci-fi epic "War of the Worlds." And, just last week, Byers prepared a fiery car crash for the CBS hit "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" at the Soledad Trailer Lodge in Canyon Country.

"We were asked to prepare a mobile home for a stunt person to drive a car through," he said. "He proceeds to go through the mobile home, comes out the other side about 30 feet, and then it explodes fun."

"It's probably on screen for five seconds. But to prep the car and the mobile home for the explosion took two weeks."

Film production continues to be a key industry in Santa Clarita a growing suburb tucked in arid canyons within an hour's drive from the studios, where numerous hardware stores keep crews supplied. Last year, Hollywood contributed a record \$17.1 million to local businesses, according to the city's film office.

"You get the look of other states out here that you can't get in the (San Fernando) Valley or Hollywood," said Byers, who has worked on "CSI" since it premiered five years ago. "There's still wide-open space out here where we can do the kinds of things we do."

And despite ongoing anxieties about runaway production studios off-shoring shoots to Canada or Australia Kutcher believes studios can't easily pass up the region.

"Santa Clarita tends to hold its own," said Kutcher, 38, who has staged his share of car chases and firefights over the last two decades. "It's within the zone. It's within 60 miles of the studios, and that's not going to change. As long as it stays where it does, by virtue of location alone, it will continue to have work."

Byers concurred. Though "CSI" recently moved production from a local soundstage to the Universal lot, they couldn't take the canyons with them.

"We're supposed to take place in Las Vegas," Byers said. "Van Nuys doesn't look too much like that."

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