

San Jose, California

# The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Posted on Tue, Nov. 09, 2004

## Mission bells going up to mark historic route

By Kimra McPherson

Mercury News

When John Kolstad took over the California Bell Co. four years ago, most of the bells that once marked the original route of El Camino Real had been lost or stolen.

Kolstad watched as new replica bells were installed Monday along Monterey Road in San Jose. The installation caps the Saratoga man's effort to restore the marker bell system -- and recapture a part of California's history.

"They're very noble," he said, gazing up at an 85-pound cast-iron bell newly mounted on its post near Monterey Road and Capitol Expressway.

More than 400 bells once lined the 700-mile stretch of El Camino Real from San Diego to Sonoma. They were constructed starting in 1906 to mark the path many believe Father Junipero Serra followed in the 18th century on his quest to establish California's missions.

"The mission bell marker was actually the first road sign that helped people travel along El Camino Real," Kolstad said.

Some of the bells were stolen over time, and others were lost when new roads were built. Various groups who had an interest in history replaced some, though many remain missing.

After Kolstad bought the bell company in 2000, he approached Caltrans to see if the agency was interested in restoring the bell system. Caltrans, the official guardian of the bells, agreed and sought a \$1.4 million federal grant for the project, which will put more than 560 bells from Los Angeles to San Francisco. That includes 68 that, weather permitting, will be installed this week in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

Kolstad's motivation, however, is as much personal as it is business. As a child, he often walked past one of the original mission bells, which was close to his home in Whittier, near Los Angeles.

"I used to stand underneath it and look up," he said. "It seemed so tall, and it seemed so old -- like the early padres put it up."

Kolstad's project started the same year he bought the business because he was searching for a duplicate bell to put in his back yard. When he contacted the elderly owner of the California

Bell Co., which made the original 400 bells, the man refused to sell Kolstad a bell. But he was willing to sell his company. Kolstad agreed to buy it, inheriting a garage full of old bells, patterns and parts in the deal.

`` So what do you do when you have all the parts and patterns? You make bells," said Kolstad, who also is a mortgage broker. `` And if you make bells, you've got to sell them to somebody."

Suzy Namba, the chief of the Office of Landscape Architecture Coordination and Planning for Caltrans, said officials have long wanted to get the bells back on the road in a project prompted by the principal landscape architect, Keith Robinson, who started the state's Adopt-A-Bell program.

`` It's part of the transportation history of the state," Namba said.

In March , the first bells went up -- 374 of them, from the southern Santa Clara County line through Santa Barbara. Besides the 68 being installed this week locally, an additional 125 bells will line the route from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles before Thanksgiving.

Kolstad has started to contact cities that aren't covered by the Caltrans grant, including some south of Los Angeles and north of San Francisco, to see if they would be interested in replacing their bells. He said he hopes the bells will give newcomers to the state a window into California's heritage.

`` Their kids will have a greater appreciation for the missions and El Camino Real and how the state started," he said. Contact California Bell at (408) 741-1549 or [www.californiabell.com](http://www.californiabell.com)

---

Contact Kimra McPherson at [kmcpherson@mercurynews.com](mailto:kmcpherson@mercurynews.com) or (650) 688-7557.