

LOCAL NEWS

Mission bells return to El Camino Real

BY SARA GAISER
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

California mission bells will once again guide Peninsula drivers along the route of the historic El Camino Real with the restoration this month of dozens of its road markers.

New 500

The installation of more than 500 bells on tall curved staffs this month along the old route of El Camino Real, California's first road linking missions from Mexico to Sonoma, is the work of a Saratoga mortgage broker who stumbled into a second career as a bell-maker.

Around 68 examples of his handiwork are being installed in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties as part of the effort.

Happenstance

John Kolstad said he found himself the owner of the company that made the original cast iron bells marking the historic El Camino Real route in 2000 after he tried to purchase a bell for his backyard, only to find the owner eager to sell everything.

After realizing he had the original molds and historic materials for the bells that have marked the old Spanish Highway since 1906, he began working with the state Highway Department to replace

'I felt like the torch was handed to me, and I didn't really want it at the time, but I knew if I didn't take it it would probably have gone to the recycling bin.'

Bell-maker John Kolstad

the hundreds of bells lost to theft, vandalism and road expansion over the years.

"I felt like the torch was handed to me, and I didn't really want it at the time, but I knew if I didn't take it it would probably have gone to the recycling bin," Kolstad said of his conversion to bell merchant.

The first bell

The bell idea was discussed by several groups in the late 1800s, according to published histories, but it was the California Federation of Women's Clubs and the El Camino Real Association they formed that are generally given credit for kicking off the drive to line El Camino Real with bells at a time when the historic route was in danger of being lost and obscured due to development.

The first bell, designed and made by Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes, founder of Kolstad's company, was installed in Los Angeles on Aug. 15, 1906.

Kolstad said the bells were some of the first real road markers in the state, and helped drivers gauge distances and figure out where they were. Over the years, more bells were installed but many others were lost and the numbers dwindled despite efforts by several groups.

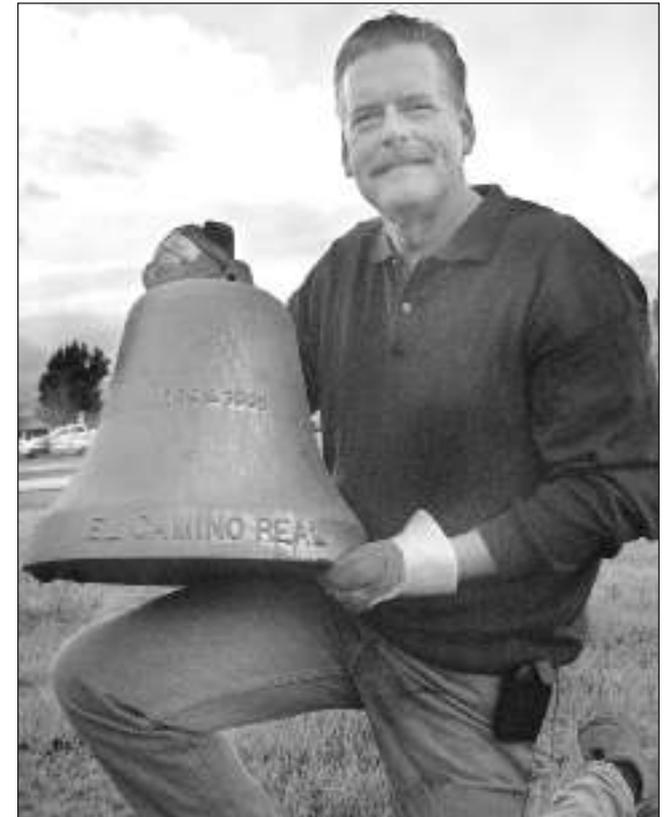
Confidence

As recently as 1996, the California Federation of Women's Clubs sponsored a restoration drive under an "adopt a bell" program.

Despite the state's poor record for maintaining the bells, Kolstad said he felt confident that the new markers would last longer.

In addition to being strategically placed to avoid falling victim to road widening projects, the bells have added historic significance today.

"In 2006 they're going to be 100 years old, so there's going to be more value," Kolstad said.



FOR WHOM IT TOLLS — John Kolstad replaces the missing and old bells that have historically marked the path along El Camino Real. Daily News photo by Victor Maccharoli.