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Mission Bells line historic route through Gilroy

Friday, November 12, 2004

By Lori Stuenkel

Gilroy - Within the week, residents will see a little piece of California history every time they drive in or out of Gilroy.

A project to install roadside mission bells along the original El Camino Real - which linked the 21 California missions and follows much of U.S. Highway 101 - has reached Gilroy, on its span from San Diego to Sonoma.

Hundreds of the bells and signs reading "Historic El Camino Real" are already in place, mostly between here and Santa Barbara. The bells have lined U.S. 101 between Gilroy and San Benito County for two weeks. Weather permitting, crews will continue erecting the question-mark shaped cast iron bells near Gilroy this week and will finish with the total 567 bells by Thanksgiving.

The original bells first went up starting in 1906, to guide travelers and to preserve the old highway Father Junipero Serra traveled while establishing the California missions.

The group installing the bells did little to maintain them, however, and many fell into disrepair or were stolen. For a while, AAA was replacing and maintaining the bells, but in 1974 Caltrans took over the program.

The bell replacement project was set into motion four years ago, when John Kolstad of Saratoga purchased the company that originally made the El Camino Real bells. Kolstad "reluctantly" took the torch, he said, even though all he had really wanted was a bell like the one near his childhood home in Whittier.

"I had loved the bells since I was in the third grade, and we studied them in the fourth grade when we studied California



Eric Mason hangs an 85-pound bell along historic El Camino Real, now U.S. 101 in Morgan Hill.

Photo by: [James M. Mohs/Chief Photographer](#)



The signs designating the historic route will be placed with the bells.

Photo by: [James M. Mohs/Chief Photographer](#)

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history," Kolstad said.

In 1998, he approached the elderly owner of the California Bell Co., to buy one for his backyard. The man wouldn't sell one bell, but he would sell the whole company, including the parts and molds that could be used to make new bells.

"I felt badly, because if I didn't buy it and something happened to him, all the stuff and all the history would have gone to the dumpster," Kolstad said.

After making the purchase, Kolstad approached Caltrans with his idea.

"I wanted to get them back up, and I contacted the right person at Caltrans - Keith Robinson - and he had always wanted to get them back up too," Kolstad said.

Robinson arranged for a \$1.4 million federal grant to fund the project, and now Kolstad loosely oversees the installation.

South of Los Angeles, El Camino Real departs from Caltrans freeways, but Kolstad is working with individual cities to put bells along the entire historic route, from the San Francisco de Solano Mission in Sonoma County to the San Diego de Alcalá Mission in San Diego County.

Over the years, Kolstad has put up numerous bells on his own and sells them through his company's Web site. And, yes, a 1906 mission bell marker now stands in his own backyard.

For more information, call the California Bell Co. at (408) 741-1549 or visit www.californiabell.com.



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