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A Man's Quest Reverberates Up and Down State

• Seeking a yard decoration, John Kolstad ends up a bell maker, helping restore El Camino Real's markers.

By Bob Pool, Times Staff Writer

This will ring a familiar bell for motorists — at least those with *really* long memories.

Nearly 100 years after they first appeared, the El Camino Real bells are back.

An ambitious campaign to restore the highway markers along the 700 miles of California's "Royal Road" reached Los Angeles this month.

Cast-iron replicas of the mission-style bell that directed motorists in the early 1900s along California's first north-south highway have been installed on poles shaped like shepherd's crooks along the Ventura and Hollywood freeways from Westlake Village to downtown Los Angeles.

Authorities say as many as 650 bells placed at two-mile intervals may eventually mark the storied footpath. Also known as the King's Highway, the route between San Diego and Sonoma was launched in 1769 by Father Junipero Serra.

A former Whittier resident's search for one of the old bells to use as a backyard garden decoration helped trigger the highway markers' renaissance.

Fifty-three-year-old mortgage broker John Kolstad lives in the Bay Area city of Saratoga. But he has never forgotten his curiosity over an original El Camino Real bell that stood near his childhood home.

"When I was young, I lived in Whittier near the corner of Whittier Boulevard and Colima Road. I'd always see this old bell on the corner surrounded by new buildings," Kolstad said. "I couldn't figure out why it was there, until one day in the fourth grade I went to the San Gabriel Mission and found one there."

He learned the story of Spanish padres traveling the pathway as they established a string of Catholic missions. By the time the last was built in 1823 in Sonoma, the route was wide enough for horses and wagons.

In 1904 the growing popularity of the automobile prompted resurrection of the idea of a "King's Highway" between San Diego and San Francisco. At a Camino Real Convention in Los Angeles, a coalition of civic groups decided to push for a state highway "along the route, as near as practicable, of the ancient Camino Real" between the missions.

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There were no standardized highway signs at the time. So Mrs. Armitage C.E. Forbes, a coalition member, history buff and wife of a Los Angeles foundry owner, designed a mission-style bell to serve as a sturdy route marker.

Using her own molds and scrap iron from her husband's shop, she oversaw the casting of 85-pound bells inscribed with the words "El Camino Real" and the dates "1769 & 1906." The 15-foot posts with a crook at the top were equipped with signs showing the distance to the next town or mission.

The first bell was installed with great fanfare in 1906 outside Los Angeles' Plaza Church near what is now Olvera Street. Eventually, 450 bells marked the automobile route to San Francisco.

By the 1920s, however, the bells had started to disappear — victims of theft, traffic accidents and highway construction. For a time, private automobile clubs tried to maintain them. In the 1970s, state transportation officials replaced some missing bells with ones made from new metal molds and, in some cases, made of concrete.

Kolstad began hunting for his own backyard bell in 1998. His search revealed that Forbes had created a business, California Bell Co., to manufacture the El Camino Real markers.

By the time Forbes died in 1951 at age 90, she no longer owned the firm. In 2000 Kolstad traced the long-dormant company to the La Cañada Flintridge residence of 86-year-old retired bell maker Joe Rice.

An inventory of leftover El Camino Real bells, original 1906 molds and boxes of manufacturing records and vintage photographs from Forbes' day filled Rice's Oakwood Avenue garage.

But he wasn't interested in selling Kolstad a bell. He insisted instead on selling him the bell business.

"So I bought the company from Joe. I didn't want to buy it, but I knew all his stuff would go to a junkyard if something happened to him. He had so much stuff that he couldn't get the garage door open," Kolstad said of Rice, who died in 2001.

As the reluctant new owner, Kolstad realized that he had tons of history on his hands. When his personal bell was finally in place in his garden, he decided to find out if anyone else was interested in genuine El Camino Real markers.

It turned out that state transportation officials were plenty interested. Designated four decades ago by the Legislature to be responsible for El Camino Real's markers, the California Department of Transportation was looking for replacement bells.

Caltrans' principal landscape architect Keith Robinson, who had earlier established an "adopt-a-bell" program to maintain the markers, secured federal funding so new bells could be installed. Kolstad, using Forbes' original molds, was selected to make them.

Starting from the north several months ago, work crews have put up 555 of the replicas in the \$1.2-million project. The bells are about two miles apart, positioned on both sides of U.S. 101 — the highway that approximates the Royal Road's route, according to Caltrans officials.

About a fourth of the bells bear signs that proclaim the route to be that of the "Historic El Camino Real."

"We'd planned on putting that on every bell, but we decided there was too much sign pollution on the central coast," Kolstad said.

At the southern terminus of U.S. 101 in downtown Los Angeles, the original El Camino Real route veers toward Whittier Boulevard. It passes through such communities as La Habra and Fullerton, continuing southward through Santa Ana, San Juan Capistrano and Carlsbad before reaching San Diego.

Communities such as Encinitas, which last month approved a plan to allocate \$20,000 for installation of a dozen replica bells donated by local groups, anticipate extending the bell revival down to San Diego.

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Kolstad has contracted with a Huntington Park foundry to cast as many replacement bells as needed. California Bell Co. also sells full-sized replicas to individuals for \$1,795 each.

Officials hope that such availability will help thwart the theft of the replacements. In the meantime, the new bells are missing something that the originals had: clappers.

"We didn't want people climbing them and trying to ring them," Kolstad explained.

You can reach John Kolstad and California Bell Company at www.californiabell.com or call (408) 741-1549.



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