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Friday, August 25, 2006

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NEWS



Photograph by Zach Beecher
 Boy Scout Brian Freund, with a little help from his friends, installed an El Camino Real bell at the east end of the Main Street bridge. The bell has been placed within 30 feet of where the actual section of the historic trail was located.

El Camino Real once passed through Los Gatos

By Jason Sweeney

More than two centuries ago, Spanish padres traveled through Los Gatos on a section of the old El Camino Real that once connected the mission of Santa Clara de Asis with the mission in Santa Cruz.

Brian Freund thought it would be a good idea to

remind present-day Los Gatans the old historic highway once ran through town.

Brian is a member of Boy Scout Troop 535 and was in need of a project to earn his Eagle Scout badge. His friend Laura Kolstad happens to be the daughter of John Kolstad, the owner of the California Bell Company. Kolstad suggested Brian install an El Camino Real bell in town to mark the location of the old highway.

"I wanted to do something different," Brian said. "It was an interesting idea. I just went with it."

Kolstad's company makes the iron bells that mark much of El Camino Real. Kolstad offered to donate a bell if Brian supplied the labor and the legwork to get it installed.

On Aug. 16, Brian and several friends arrived at the east end of the Main Street bridge near the trailhead of the Los Gatos Creek Trail. Fellow Boy Scouts Yale Shih and Doug Milani and friends Stephen Ridder, Eric Manela and Alec Schlemmer helped Brian dig a 36-inch hole in an unoccupied tree well. They set up an iron staff in the tree well and cemented it into place. On Aug. 17, they attached a large iron bell to the staff.

In order to become an Eagle Scout, Brian was required to finish a 100-hour project before his 18th birthday. With his 18th birthday approaching on Aug. 29, he cut the deadline pretty close. What he hadn't anticipated was the amount of time a project like this entailed.

"I easily spent 100 hours just planning the project," he said. "There's a lot of coordination with the town."

That meant working with the planning department and the public works department to get the project approved and to get all the necessary permits. Then there was a lot of driving around looking for the right location.

"It's been a learning lesson," Brian said. "I've learned that most projects are 90 percent planning and 10 percent actually doing."

Kolstad said the bell is worth about \$2,000. In 1999, Kolstad wanted to purchase a bell for his back yard like the ones he saw marking El Camino Real, but ended up purchasing the California Bell Company. He has been installing bells up and down El Camino Real ever since. He donated a bell to the town of Los Gatos to help Brian with his Eagle Scout project and because he thought it would benefit and enhance the community.

"As early as 1890, the original El Camino Real was being lost to development," Kolstad said. "It was just a dirt path in many places. In order to preserve the route, bells were set up from San Diego to Sonoma. The spot where Brian is putting one is probably within 30 feet of where the path would have been.

"People are very interested in California history. It's surprising. I think it's important that people are aware that the route existed."

The town of Los Gatos has scheduled a dedication ceremony on Aug. 22 at 4 p.m. at the bell site. "It's a nice educational reminder of our heritage," Mayor Diane McNutt said.

"The town appreciates the donation from the California Bell Company and Brian Freund of the El Camino bell marking Los Gatos' role as part of this historic route," assistant town manager Pamela Jacobs said.

"I think it will help make people more aware of historic El Camino Real and that a branch of it went from the valley to the mission at Santa Cruz," Brian said. "It's not a very well-known subject here."

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