

Rose Garden Resident

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Photograph by Vicki Thompson

Roadside Ringer: Two new versions of old landmarks have appeared along The Alameda as two mission bells commemorating the original El Camino Real have been erected, one between Pershing and Schiele avenues, with the other is across The Alameda between Singletary Avenue and Fremont Street.

Markers of the old King's Highway have reappeared on The Alameda

By Mary Gottschalk

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The latest landmarks along The Alameda are two California Mission Bell Markers.

The cast iron bells are hanging from graceful curved hooks atop 151 2-foot tall posts. One is located in front the Garden Alameda complex, between Pershing and Schiele avenues. The other is across The Alameda between Singletary Avenue and Fremont Street. Each bell weighs 85 pounds and stands 11 feet above the ground.

Installed in November, the bells are two of 555 that Caltrans is placing along the historic 700-mile El Camino Real route from San Diego to Sonoma. The \$1.4 million project is coming primarily out of federal highway beautification funds.

Mission Bell Markers were once a familiar sight to California motorists, particularly along Highway 101. In recent years they have become increasingly rare as disrepair, theft and vandalism took their toll.

The first Mission Bell Marker was installed in 1906 in front of the Old Plaza Church in downtown Los Angeles. The location was a tribute to the bells of the Church, which reportedly served as the model for the markers.

Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes was one of three women instrumental in starting the project, and her name remains on the bells. Forbes and fellow enthusiasts in the California Federation of Women's Club and the Native Daughters of the Golden West wanted to mark the original route of El Camino Real, which translates to The King's Highway.

By 1915, approximately 158 bells had been installed.

Over the years, various groups attempted to maintain and replace bells. Under the sponsorship of the California State Automobile Association and the Automobile Club of Southern California, the number grew to 286 by 1949. However, by 1960 only 75 were estimated to be left.

In 1996 Caltrans added the Adopt-A-Bell program to its already existing Adopt-A-Highway program. That helped bring the number of bells up to 380.

Interestingly, the bells along The Alameda have a direct Silicon Valley connection.

Saratogan John Kolstad is the owner of the California Bell Company, which is manufacturing the 555 new bells Caltrans is installing.

Kolstad didn't plan to become a bell manufacturer. He sought out the owner of California Bell because he wanted to buy one of the Mission Bell Markers for his yard.

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Owner Joe Rice suggested he buy the business and Kolstad agreed when he realized it was the only way he was going to get a bell of his own.

Now the new bells are being made with the original 1906 molds in a Southern California foundry.

Unlike Rice, new owner Kolstad understands the desire for a bell of one's own.

On the www.californiabell.com website, there is information on ordering your own Mission Bell Marker. For \$1,795 you can have your own bell in a choice of Traditional Verde Green, Caltrans Dark Green or Charcoal Grey. Less expensive are the 1963-style bells, which were more prevalent in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties and are priced at \$1,395.

Kolstad can be reached via email at sales@californiabell.com or calling 408.741.1549.

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