

# SARATOGA NEWS

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Photograph by George Sakkestad

Saratoga's John Kolstad was in the market to purchase a bell. Turns out, he bought the entire bell company. And now he's trying to replace many of the bells on El Camino Real.

## Saratogan's unusual project has a very familiar ring to it

By Kaustuv Basu

Some people collect stamps. Some collect old newspapers. John Kolstad likes to collect bells.

Kolstad's affair with bells began in 1999 when he wanted a bell for his backyard. "I couldn't find a place to buy one," said Kolstad.

Max Kurillo, an author of books on the El Camino Real and its historic bells, helped him track down the owner of the California Bell Company, located in Southern California.

But there was a catch.

The old owner would not sell him a bell. His company had been dormant for a while. He had a whole inventory of bells dating back to the 1920s. Many were historic bells made for the El Camino Real, which was built to connect the old California missions. The bells served as guideposts and told distances.

The owner didn't want to sell Kolstad a bell—he wanted to sell him the entire company.

Kolstad, who had grown up in Whittier in Southern California, had always been fascinated by bells. "I remember watching a bell on Whittier Boulevard and being fascinated by it," said Kolstad. "We had also learned about the missions in school."

Kolstad ended up buying the company.

He had bought a treasure trove of bells and bell parts. The more he researched the inventory, the more fascinated he became.

"What do you do when you have bells and bell parts that were made for the El Camino Real? You try and put them back there," said Kolstad.

Many of the original bells installed in 1906 had been stolen or removed during road reconstruction and never been replaced. Kolstad found that there had been some feeble attempts before to restore the bells on El Camino Real, a large part of which is now Highway 101.

Kolstad contacted Caltrans and proposed his idea. Keith Robinson, the principal landscape architect at Caltrans, was very receptive.

A foundry in Los Angeles was readied for manufacturing the bells, and 347 bells have been installed between the Santa Clara County line and the Santa Barbara County line, according to Kolstad. In the next few weeks, 125 more bells will be installed between Santa Barbara County and Los Angeles. Bells will also be installed between Santa Clara and South San Francisco.

Kolstad said that he would soon be contacting some of the cities along the route to talk about the same idea. He said that he now gives about three or four hours a week to his hobby, though it consumed a lot more time before.

"When you are in the bell business, you are not going to make a lot of money," he said. "At first my family found it silly; now they like the idea. When we travel to Southern California, they love to point out the bells."

Kolstad, a mortgage broker, will occasionally sell some bells on eBay. He proudly pointed out that a group of bell lovers had set up a website where photographs of the El Camino bells were posted.

"I get excited when I see the bells being put up," he said. "It is exciting to see people interested in the history of California."

Kolstad said that his neighbors in Saratoga probably did not know about his obsession with bells. "Or maybe they think I'm a bell nut."

Regardless of what anyone thinks, Kolstad is glad that he bought the company. "If I did not, all this history would probably have been thrown into a Dumpster."

Kolstad said that the torch had been handed to him and he had the responsibility of keeping it going. For more information on the El Camino Real Bells visit [www.californiabell.com](http://www.californiabell.com)

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