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Project replaces historic mission bells

By Sylvia Moore, smoore@VenturaCountyStar.com
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Driving along Highway 101, you spot them out of the corner of your eye -- those mission bell markers that once served as landmarks between towns along historic El Camino Real.

Most of the more than 400 original bells were lost or stolen. Enter John Kolstad. The Saratoga mortgage broker owns California Bell Co., the company that made the original mission bells starting in 1906.

Kolstad and Caltrans are finishing a two-month-long project to install 559 replicas of the mission bells along the old El Camino Real route from San Francisco to Los Angeles. The 70 or so original bells already in place were either reinforced or replaced. The \$1.24 million project was financed primarily through a federal grant.

Caltrans contracted Westlake firm TDS Engineering to install the bells, including 56 in Ventura County. The last of 59 bells in Los Angeles County will be installed by Friday.

Each bell is just over 15 feet tall and weighs 85 pounds. They are welded in place to discourage vandals. Kolstad said they should last for decades.

"Most people have seen the bells but did not know their original purpose," said Kolstad. "What I'm hoping to accomplish is for people to have a greater understanding of the purpose of the bells -- that the bells are really a tribute to early transportation."

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The mission bells closely follow the original route of the El Camino Real, much of which is now Highway 101. The bells originally pointed travelers to missions and major towns along the route.

Kolstad stumbled into the bell-making business while on a mission to find an original bell to put in his back yard. He had loved the mission bells ever since he was a child growing up in Whittier, where he saw his first bell at Colima Road and Whittier Boulevard.

"It just intrigued me. I couldn't understand how something so old could be standing in an area so new," he said.

In 2000, after nearly two years of searching, Kolstad found the California Bell Co.'s original owner, a man in his 80s. But the man wouldn't just sell Kolstad a bell. Instead, he wanted to unload what was left of his entire inventory -- a collection of bells, molds and patterns.

Kolstad said he didn't really want to buy the business but thought the tradition might be lost otherwise. After an hour talking with the man, Kolstad agreed to buy the company. Later, he poured himself into learning all about the foundry business.

Kolstad now makes replicas of the bells for the general public. He is reserving a small inventory of original bells for museums and serious collectors.

"There's just so much to do to carry on the tradition," said Kolstad. "It's something that you carry because it's your passion."

For more information about the El Camino Real mission bells, call the California Bell Co. at 1-408-741-1549 or visit www.californiabell.com

On the Net:

<http://www.californiabell.com>

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