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Schoolgirl's history report brings Upland new bell

EL CAMINO REAL: The company that makes the markers replaces the city's 1906 original.

12:26 AM PST on Friday, March 3, 2006

By DARRELL R. SANTACHI / The Press-Enterprise

As the city of Upland celebrates its 100th anniversary, it finally has a replacement for the cast-iron El Camino Real Bell erected in the year of its birth and swiped from the corner of Arrow Highway and Euclid Avenue almost 20 years ago.

And it has an 11-year-old Chino Hills girl to thank for it.

City fathers turned out recently to do just that: honor Breeanna Schmidt and unveil the 85-pound replacement bell cast from the same mold that produced the original.

"The timing on this couldn't be better," Upland Mayor John V. Pomierski said. "This is our 100th anniversary, which coincides with 1906, when they started putting the bells up. We're excited that the bell company, California Bell Co., would make such a generous donation. And, of course, we're grateful to Breeanna."

Like other elementary-school students, Breeanna studied California history and the Spanish missions that stretch from San Diego to Sonoma in Northern California.

Her assignment was to write a report and make a model. She focused on Mission San Juan Capistrano in Orange County and the El Camino Real bells, which were put up in 1906 along the roads that connect the missions and at such mission outposts as the San Bernardino Asistencia in Redlands.

"I was going to make a model of the mission, but that was too hard," she said. "So I made a bell out of clay. It wasn't really hard because my mom helped me. It took about two days."

She decided to include the bells in her report. It was about that time that she passed by Upland City Hall on her way to a doctor's appointment in the vicinity.

"There it was, this big bell," she said.

What she was looking at, the city's mayor said, was a 90-pound concrete replica put up at the urging of Upland resident Isabel Whitney in 1991 as a replacement for the original.

Just how the 1906 bell vanished is tied up in local folklore, Assistant City Manager Rod Foster said. "The way I heard it, back in the late 1980s, there was a traffic accident at the corner, and somebody took the bell," he said.

The mayor said City Hall was built in 1978 on the lot where the original bell stood. The concrete replica that replaced the bell also was installed there.

John Kolstad, who owns California Bell Co., said the first bell was posted in front of the Plaza Church in Los Angeles on Aug. 15, 1906.

"A lot of people think the bells were originally put up by the mission fathers," he said. "But they were actually put up to mark the El Camino Real, which was being lost to development."

As many as 450 bells were placed about a mile apart along what is now Highway 101 and connecting roads by the El Camino Real Association, he said. A sign was attached to each bell denoting the distance to the nearest missions.

The Upland bell was erected along an offshoot of the road connecting the San Gabriel mission with the San Bernardino Asistencia.

According to a California Highways Web site, the bells had fallen into disrepair by 1926, and some had been stolen. By 1949, only 286 remained.

Kolstad, who grew up in Whittier, was 8 years old when he first saw a bell on Whittier Boulevard.

"I thought it was beautiful," he said. "When I was finally landscaping my backyard (in Saratoga), I thought I would love to get hold of a bell to put up in my yard. I couldn't find one to buy and searched around for two or three years.

"I found the owner of the California Bell Company. He was 84 years old. I tried to get him to sell me a bell, but he wouldn't sell one. But he *would* sell me the whole company."



Stan Lim / The Press-Enterprise

A bell is unveiled to replace the original El Camino Real Bell at Euclid Avenue and Arrow Highway that disappeared nearly 20 years ago. The new bell, cast from the same mold as the 1906 one, took the place of a concrete replica put up in 1991.

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