



MONUMENTS OF THE PAST BELLS OF THE EL CAMINO REAL

by Mark Bustamante

Residents of Floral Park and visitors to the Bowers Museum might both be familiar with El Camino Real bells: they can be found at Heliotrope and 19th Street and along two separate walkways leading to the Bowers Museum. While these markers may seem to pop as casually from the ground as the state flower, more than two and a half

centuries of California history resound through them. The highway for which they are named is one that evokes a history of myth, mystery, and for some, the weighty trauma of the mission period. Here we take a close look at the original Camino Real, the story and process behind the creation of the Camino Real Bells, tell the story of how the Bowers' bells joined the Museum's permanent collection, and discuss the controversy surrounding the bells today.

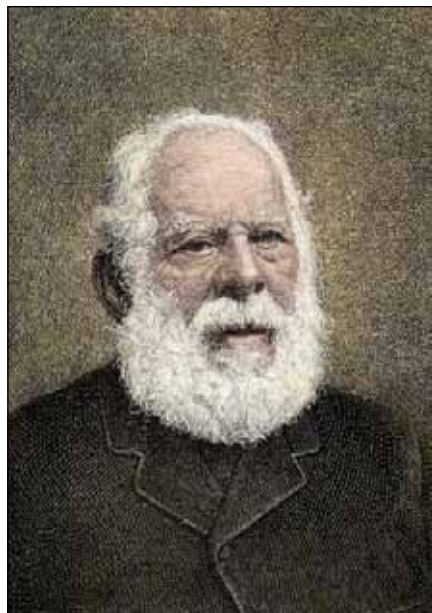
The story of the bells begins with the missions themselves. The first dedicated Spanish colonization of Alta California began in 1769 when Friar Junipero Serra and his cadre of Spanish padres were awarded land grants from the Viceroyalty of New Spain to establish missions in the territory. Over the course of the next 54 years, 21 missions were built from San Diego to Sonoma, all loosely with the goal of converting the local indigenous populace to



Father Junipero Serra Jose Miguel Serra Y Ferrer 1713 - 1784 Spanish Franciscan Friar Founder Of Mission Chain In Alta California America From The Book The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine May To October 1883

Christianity. The truth of the mission system in California is still being uncovered in its totality today, but there is strong evidence that the missions were not the benign institutions that revisionist history taught us they were. Indigenous peoples were forced into hard agrarian labor—a far cry from the hunting and gathering that the bountiful land of California had previously offered them—many died from being overworked and the poor living conditions but, as was the case everywhere in the Americas, the true apocalypse that early Europeans brought with them was plague. Some 37,000 Native Americans died at missions between 1769 and their secularization in 1834. The Indigenous population of the state was reduced by about a third during this same period.

The end of the mission period was the beginning of that same period's romanticization with only a brief interim in between. The Mexican Secularization Act of 1833 kicked off the three-year process of taking missions from the hands of friars and putting them—at least theoretically—in the hands of the Indigenous peoples whom they had been proselytizing. Very little of this effort actually took place though;



Don Pio Pico, Californio politician, ranchero, and entrepreneur, first black governor of California and last governor of Alta California under Spanish rule, from a photograph by Butterfield & Summers.

most of the missions and the vast swaths of associated lands included in their land grants were quickly acquired by landholders like Pio Pico, the last Mexican governor of Alta California. Abandoned and without regular upkeep, in the span of a few short years the missions began to crumble. Some like Mission San Juan Capistrano had already suffered severe damage as a result of earthquakes and other natural disasters.

They were largely ignored all the way through to California statehood in the 1850s. In the years that followed, wave after wave of American and European settlers to California stumbled across the hollowed-out structures and arcades of missions as if they were the skeletal remains of giants from some long-forgotten war. California was a plentiful frontier with a hauntingly beautiful, negligibly recent past that seemed to be the realization of romanticism, an intellectual and artistic movement that had dominated the late 18th and early to mid 19th centuries. Around the 1880s it dawned on boosters and real estate developers that the missions were utile tools in drawing dreamers westward. They flooded the East Coast with journals, newspaper illustrations, and pamphlets featuring the missions and, successful in their efforts, even more settlers came out to California.

Around the turn of the 20th century, the first movements to renovate and revitalize the missions began to form in symbiosis with Western myths surrounding the history of the missions. West Coast architects developed an entirely new style called Mission Revival that used stucco to simulate the adobe walls of early mission buildings and the same red ceramic roof tiles as had been used to cover their roofs. The same style is employed to this day, and it is



Inner Court, Mission San Juan Capistrano, c. 1890 (6699); Terry E. Stephenson Collection.



Orange County: A Historical Map, 1929, Jean Goodwin Ames (39916); printed at Santa Ana High School Print Shop, collection of Marc LaFont.

worth noting that not only is the Bowers Museum's courtyard and original building built in this style, but its 1991 renovation was also designed to be consistent, essentially adding a nave so as to be the complete mission package. One of the big proponents of the style, Arthur Bennett Burton, was employed to repair much of Mission San Juan Capistrano by Father John O'Sullivan after his arrival in California in 1910. It joined other missions in becoming a tourist destination where visitors could expect to encounter lively fiestas, fortune telling, and more. In the secularized husks of missions, Anglo Californians forged a fundamental part of California's burgeoning identity.

The movement to preserve the story of California's missions did not end with the structures themselves. They had been connected by hundreds of miles of roads that were collectively called El Camino Real, or the King's



Top - The designation of the El Camino Real coincided with the emergence of car culture in America. (El Camino Real Bell on Casitas Pass - Research Library at The Museum of Ventura County) LEFT - Automobile map of the El Camino Real by the Automobile Club of Southern California.



Highway, and many felt that a route between the missions should also be memorialized. The Women's Club of California came up with a plan to recreate the roads as El Camino Real, a streamlined historic highway that would mostly use preexisting roads to cover the distance between San Diego and Sonoma. The proposal coincided with the emergence of car culture in America as well as California's rapid urbanization, promoting the much-needed expansion of the state's highway system. The decision was made to plan the El Camino Real in the spirit of the padres rather than copying their exact route. It included stops that were historic but not actually missions, like Plaza Church in downtown Los Angeles, and excluded some out-of-the-way missions, like San Fernando and Carmel, to provide a more direct route for automobilists. El Camino Real has changed its course several times over the past century, as recently as 2001, but the current legal definition of the historic road is as follows: "State highway routes embracing portions of Routes 280, 82, 238, 101, 5, 72, 12, 37, 121, 87, 162, 185, 92, and 123 and connecting city streets and county roads thereto, and extending in a continuous route from Sonoma southerly to the international border and near the route historically known as El Camino Real shall be known and designated as 'El Camino Real.'"

Needing a marker for the road and the important landmarks it connected, the noted historian and author of California Missions and Landmarks, El Camino Real (1903), Harrye Forbes—perhaps better known as Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes—proposed the bell, an obvious icon of California's mission history. In 1906, the first Mission Bell guidepost was placed on Olvera Street in Los Angeles. After her initial work in designing El Camino Real's markers, Forbes became more involved. She purchased a foundry in Los Angeles becoming the only woman in the world to publicly



Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes founder of the California Bell Company in Los Angeles becoming the only woman in the world to publicly own and run a foundry for much of the early 20th century.



On August 15, 1906 the first El Camino Real Bell was installed at the Pueblo De Los Angeles, near Olvera Street in Los Angeles which still stands today!

own and run a foundry for much of the early 20th century. In 1914, she founded the California Bell Company which produced the 85-pound, cast-iron bells that were used as markers along El Camino Real, as well as smaller bells made from bronze and other metals to be sold as souvenirs. All her early bells bore “El Camino Real” and “1769 & 1906” on their front and “Copyright 1906 by Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes” on their back rim. She used a traditional casting process that dates back thousands of years. Some evidence indicates that

the model used for the markers was a bell from the Santa Barbara mission. The pole also held significance as it was designed to look like a shepherd’s crook, a nod to California’s padres.

The markers, placed in ever increasing numbers at regular distances throughout the state, became perfect signposts to guide automobilists, especially once the American Automobile Association (AAA) got involved in turning El Camino Real bells into distance markers. Hotels and service stations popped up along El Camino

Real in increasing number and entire cities were born at logical resting places along the coastal route. By the end of World War II, an estimated 550 bells were in place across California. The popularity of traveling along El Camino Real gave California a distinct historical identity and made the missions prominent landmarks in the California landscape.

Unfortunately, many of the original El Camino Real bells were lost during highway construction in the 1920s and 1930s, and many more fell victim to thieves and vandals. In 1959, Los Angeles County could only locate 17 of its 110 original bells and by the 1970s as few as 70 remained in their original locations across the state. El Camino Real bells ended up in private homes and scrap piles across California and are still turning up through private donations to museums today. The Bowers Museum’s bells are a part that larger story. All three of the bells were originally installed along Main Street: two in Santa Ana—the first at the corner of 1st Street and the second at the corner of what is now Memory Lane—and the final bell in the city of Orange. Fearing that the markers would be stolen as they had been elsewhere, Warren K. Hillyard, a county surveyor, pushed for them to be moved from their respective cities to the Bowers Museum’s Key



The Bowers and El Camino Real Marker at Sunset, 2011, used with permission from the Bowers Museum,



Floral Park’s El Camino Bell marker at the corner of 19th Street and Heliotrope Drive, one of three bells in the city of Santa Ana.



To watch the El Camino Real Bells episode of California’s Gold with host Huell Howser, go to FloralPark.com/history.



On June 1, 2019, Floral Park neighbors (L to R) Randy Hamilton, Marc LaFont and Steve Geel raise the El Camino Real bell on the corner of 19th Street and Heliotrope Drive. In Santa Ana, Main Street is officially the El Camino Real, but historically, the route was fluid and would change locally depending on, among other things, the best crossing of the creek.

Courtyard in 1955. In 1983, two were again moved in front of the Bowers' bell tower and the third was moved to the pathway leading to the museum's original entrance off 20th Street where they, long ago painted black to protect them from rusting, still reside today.

El Camino Real bells are still being made by the California Bell Company for sale to historical sites, private homes and to line the highways of the old King's Highway. However it is the context of the missions, within the larger scope of California's history, that is now being reevaluated. Many contemporary Indigenous groups feel that the bells celebrate the problematic legacy of the missions, and are perhaps more egregious in that they cut an unavoidable vertical path across California. This new movement has been gaining momentum. In 2021, the City of Santa Cruz unanimously voted to remove three El Camino Real bells at the request of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. As important pieces of the state's identity throughout the 20th century, it would be shortsighted to relegate the markers to storage or melt them down, but it is time to consider them, and other aspects born of a romanticization of the Mission Era, within a more holistic historical context.

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