

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California's Old Bells

The recent news story concerning the Mission Bells along the El Camino Real sent us in search of more material on bells in California and the West, of historic significance. There are several of these old Mission Bells in Monterey which probably go unnoticed day after day. There is one on the lawn in front of Colton Hall very near the sidewalk on Pacific street Another is at the corner of Alvarado, Polk, and Munras. There was one at San Carlos Church and another at the intersection of the Salinas highway and Fremont. Many of the bells throughout the state have been either destroyed by vandals or stolen for garden ornaments in private gardens.

We are happy to learn that the State Division of Highways has taken an interest in these bell markers which give the distance to and from missions whether north or south of the one being observed.

It was many years ago that the Southern California Automobile Association placed several hundred bells along El Camino Real to mark the original trail of the padres from San Diego to San Francisco. The newly installed bells are exactly like the original for the important reason that the Native Daughters of the Golden West have preserved the original mold which was made by Mrs. Armithee S. F. Forbes. She was a bell caster and to her is due the credit for the design which is still being used. Mr. and Mrs. Forbes placed the first bell marker in the Los Angeles Plaza on August 15, 1906 in memory of Fray Luis Jayne who was massacred by the Indians on Nov. 4. 1775."

During a visit to Santa Fe. New Mexico, a couple of years ago. we saw in the San Miguel Mission chapel a bell which is claimed to be the oldest Mission bell in America. It was cast in Spain in 1356 and brought to Santa Fe about the year 1712 by Nicholas Ortiz Nino Ladron de Guevara. It was first used in the Ortiz chapel and when that chapel was destroyed the bell was stored and later brought to the mission and used in 1848. Mr. Simon Delgado, who then owned the old San Miguel ranch, secured possession of both bell and some paintings as heir of the Ortiz and Sandoval families, and had them taken to the old church, where they have since remained.

The legend of the Bell of St Joseph as given by Rev. W. J. Howlett in his "Life of Bishop Machebeuf" is as follows:

"In a little room at the base of the tower of San Miguel is the sweetest-toned bell in America, and perhaps the richest. It too, has its history, filled with poetry and romance of the ages of the faith.

"In 1356, so the legend runs, the Spaniards were fighting the Moore. Battle after battle was fought and lost by the Christians, until the people vowed a bell to St Joseph as a gauge of the confidence in his assistance. They brought gold and silver plate, their rings and their bracelets, their brooches, and earrings, and cast them into the melting-pot with other metal. The bell was cast and in its tone was the richness of gold and sweetness of sacrifice. It sounded the defeat of Moslemism in Spain, and then came to ring in the birth of Christianity in Mexico, and with the padres it found its way up the Rio Grande to rest and ring out its sweet notes over the City of the Holy Faith."

We have also read that the oldest known bell in Christendom was in the Mission Inn at Riverside, California, and the date is 1247. We remember seeing this bell in days gone by, but we cannot vouch for its whereabouts at this time.