

April 27, 1962

Oldest Christian Dated Bell

The oldest known dated bell in Christendom is or was at the Mission Inn, Riverside, Calif., and the date is AD 1247!

The legend of the Bells of St. Joseph, 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 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 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—according to the tiny leaflet we picked up in the beautiful church in that charming New Mexico town.

"In 1356, so the legend runs, the Spaniards were fighting the Moors, battle after battle was fought and lost by the Christians, until the people vowed a bell to St. Joseph as a gauge of their confidence in his assistance. They brought their 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 the sweetness of sacrifice. It sounded the defeat of Islam 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 sweetest tones over the City of the Holy Faith."

On Aug. 15, 1906 the First Mission Bell Guide Post installed in the Los Angeles Plaza was one of the original El Camino Real Bells. The bell was made by Mrs. Armithee S.C. Forbes of Los Angeles, a former resident of Pennsylvania and of Quaker faith. Mrs. Forbes was a bell caster. Her husband installed the first few bells in the Los Angeles area. The funds for the purchase of the bells was obtained from such organizations as the Native Sons and Daughters, various individuals, and the automobile clubs of California.

One of the early bells was installed in front of Mission San Diego de Alcalá and bear the following inscription:

"Erected by Mr. and Mrs. A.S. Forbes in memory of Fray Luis Jayme the first martyr of California. Fray Jayme was massacred by the Indians on Nov. 4, 1775." The bell was blessed and christened "Jayme" by Rev. J.B. Mesny.

To M. Claude Faw of Carmel we are indebted for this information: "The minutes of the California Highway Commission of their meeting on Jan. 19, 1914, have the following reference to the installation of the bells. The El Camino Real Assn. of California appeared before the commission and asked that they be allowed to erect Mission Bell Guide Posts on the California State Highway approximately one mile apart. This was to begin Station O on U.S. Highway 101 at a point 14 miles from Los Angeles Plaza and ending at the Ventura County Line. The precise locations of the bells were to be fixed by the Division Engineer."

In 1947, the California Division of Highways assumed the maintenance of all signs on state highways, including the Mission Bells. Today the state is without the legal authority to replace or maintain such bell markers but they had no objections to the bells being placed under permit at designated locations that will not effect traffic flow.

In 1949, a bill was introduced in the State Legislature to transfer title to all existing bells to the department of public works and appropriated \$30,000 for the acquisition of additional bells, maintenance and repairs. The California Mission Trails Assn. and other organizations backed this bill endorsing the program of preserving the historical sites of the missions of California. But the bill died in the committee.

In 1959 the placement of all but one of the Mission Bells along Highway 101 in Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties was completed. The new bells are exactly like the originals. The Native Daughters of California have the mold from which the first set of bells was cast. The new bells are painted dark green and are hung from staff 10 feet long similar to shepherd's crooks.

In Monterey County a bell is located one mile south of Arroyo Seco road interchange, south of Salinas River bridge at Soledad. Another was placed one half mile north of south Soledad freeway interchange. There also is one on the highway near Castroville. There may be others that we have not discovered.