

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 22, 1965

Christmas Bells

Of all the outward symbols of Christmas, the most joyous is the ringing of bells from church steeples and belfries, down through the ages from Medieval times. Bronze bells have been unearthed in Assyrian tombs and bells of both bronze and pure copper have been found among the remains of the Inca civilization. In China, 2,000 years before Christ, large and small bells were used in religious ceremonies.

Once heard, and never to be forgotten are the tones of Big Ben, the thirteen and one-half ton bell in the parliament clock tower in London, or the bells of Notre Dame in Paris. The bell that hangs in King's Chapel, Boston, is, according to its inscription, "The sweetest bell we ever made. Paul Revere & Son, 1817."

To name a few of the better known bells, or perhaps the ones used most in the snow country are the flaring sleigh bells, mounted on harness leather. Another is the crotal sleigh bells, which are rounded in shape in a cluster of about forty to a string. It is interesting to note that the change-ringing bell, one of a set of bells known as a peal, always rests upside down.

The highway along the coast of California is now marked by four hundred bell guide-posts. The bell was adopted by the executive board of Los Angeles section of the El Camino Real Association to mark the route of the Old Missions by a distinctive, emblematic and appropriate guide-post. The design that was approved was drawn by Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes.

In selecting the bell as an appropriate marker for the road of the missions the fact was taken into consideration that it might call attention to the work of reconstructing El Camino Real, where the padres first hung bells. Iron was selected for the material from which to construct the bells for the reason that the entire proposition to reconstruct El Camino Real is one of emblematic sentiment and the iron is intended to represent the iron will of the men who made the first roads in California. Mrs. Forbes writes in her book, "California Mission and Landmarks" published in 1915: The bell guide-post is a plain, severe design to represent the simple, austere life led by these men of God. Bronze or tinkling metal was intentionally not used, as the bell

is intended as a memorial tribute to the work and lives of the Franciscan friars."

The bells proved to be an inspiration. After the fifty-four had been erected south of Santa Barbara, the work was extended north, and twenty-five were placed. Two hundred and fifty bells have been added since. The bells along Camino Real have two dates upon them. The first date is 1769, the founding of the first mission, and the second, 1906, is the date when the first guide bell was erected, and therefore marks the time when the reconstruction of the old road began. Each bell weighs over 100 pounds and is raised eleven feet from the ground, on a substantial standard of iron tubing set in a concrete base. A small brass plate with the donor's name upon it is attached to the standard if it is wished. There was also a sign which directed the traveler to the missions, where, "Those bells of the past, whose long forgotten music still fills the wide expanse, still tingeing the sober twilight of the present and the color of romance."

"El Camino Real" is the Spanish name for the historic road that joined the twenty-one Franciscan Missions, the Pueblos and Presidios in the early days of California. Many of the missions have been restored and the King's Highway fast became a modern road leading from San Diego, via Rose Canyon to Oceanside, then inland to Mission San Juan Capistrano. It goes through Monterey, then north to San Rafael and Mission Dolores, San Francisco and Solano in Sonoma.

The greater portion of El Camino Real is Route No. 2. It is a continuous road over seven hundred miles in length and is marked by these unique and picturesque Mission Bell guide-posts giving the distances between towns and directions to the Missions. The bells were placed along the road not merely as landmarks and guides to travelers but as testimonials to the work of the Franciscan padres who were the pioneers that settled California in 1769.

At the present time, so I have been told, title to the Mission Bell markers are vested in the various Board of Supervisors in the Mission Trail area, although it seems that very few supervisors know that they are custodians of the bells except in a few isolated cases where some historical society will see that one remains where it is and kept painted. With the widening and rerouting of the highways, vandalism and other causes the bells have gradually disappeared.