



A History of the El Camino Real Bells, the Myth of “the Royal Road,” and the Redwood City Woman’s Club

By Elaine Park

A New/Old Road and its Guideposts

In 1902, Anna Pitcher of the Pasadena Art Exhibit Association, made a presentation to the 6th Biennial of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs about her five-point plan to restore El Camino Real, which she believed was the original highway that connected the Franciscan missions between San Diego and Sonoma in the late 18th century. Her plan, which she had been working on since the early 1890s, included putting up historical markers and having the road become a memorial state-endorsed highway. Pitcher also approached the Native Daughters of the Golden West the same year.

After Pitcher became too ill to carry the project on, she asked the California Federation of Women’s Clubs (CFWC) to take it on. Caroline May Olney, a CFWC member from Oakland, Harrye Rebecca Piper Smith Forbes (Mrs. A. S. C. Forbes), the chair of California history and landmarks committee of the Los Angeles District of the CFWC, and Mrs. Albert H. Brockway, chair of the CFWC’s art committee, stepped up to assume responsibility for carrying out Pitcher’s plan.

In response to the efforts of the CFWC, the Native Daughters, and other organizations, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce called a convention in January of 1904 of interested groups to rehabilitate the “old historic road.” A long list of civic organizations participated, including women’s clubs, automobile associations, the National Good Roads Association, civic leagues, history associations, city governments, chambers of commerce, and Native Sons and Daughters clubs. The Camino Real Association was formed four months later to take on the work.

Harrye Forbes quickly assumed a leadership role as a member of the association’s executive committee. She was also chair of the location committee that was struck in 1905 to examine the historical records and determine the location of the original road. According to Forbes, they examined: “church records, diseños of ranchos, and valuable information furnished by old Spanish families and pioneers, until now there is not one mile of the old road that once joined

the twenty-one missions that has not been investigated and there is scarcely more than a rod in any one place where the road of today diverges from some path of the padres.”

Caroline Olney was elected secretary of the new association and organized local branches throughout the state.

In 1906, the executive board decided to mark the roadway with milestones or guideposts resembling mission bells. According to Forbes, a mission bell was chosen as the official marker, because: “Church bells are a part of the Catholic service and when the padres came to California they came with the cross and bell. They swung the bells in the trees and rung them to call the wandering Indians together to assist in establishing the missions.”

Forbes came up with the design of the bell and patented it, so it would be exclusive to the El Camino Real project. Forbes also incorporated the California Bell Company to manufacture the cast iron bells. Installing the bells was put into the hands of a Camino Real Association committee that was chaired by Forbes’s husband, Armitage S. C. Forbes, and later herself. Civic organizations and city governments purchased the bells and then donated them to the association for installation. The cost was \$25 per bell.

The first bell was installed in August 1906 in front of La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora la Reina de *los Ángeles*, (also known as Plaza Church) in Los Angeles. By 1912, only 6 bells had been installed, due to disagreements over where the road actually ran. By 1914, around 450 bells had been installed.

The Myth of the Royal Road

Unfortunately, the El Camino Real its supporters promoted and celebrated never existed. Modern historians see their invention of an ancient, long-lost roadway as the result of a confluence of the desire of Anglo Californians for their state to have an older, more romantic past and the desire of the nascent automobile industry and new car owners to have drivable roads that went to interesting places.

Forbes, Pitcher, and many others involved in the El Camino Real project were influenced by a larger cultural movement to write California’s history as a land of romance and adventure. Like many Anglo Californians, Forbes’s longing for a more interesting past for the state was sparked by the book, *Ramona*, a fictional story about the tragic life of a mixed indigenous/white girl in the mission era. The book, which was meant to be an *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the indigenous people of California, was written in 1884 by the immensely popular author Helen Hunt Jackson. It was an instant success and swept English-speaking America. In California, it engendered a powerful sense of false nostalgia, or a “fantasy heritage,” as archeologist David Hurst Thomas put it, for a Spanish colonial era that was passionate and exciting – and could compete with the long dramatic history of Pilgrims and revolutionaries on the East Coast.

In 1915 Forbes published a third edition of her 1903 book, *California Missions and Landmarks*, which included the mythic story of El Camino Real and the bell markers. Throughout her book her desire to emphasize the importance of the road and the romance of the missions is clear. She starts with a dedication poem by Anna I. Dempsy that reads: “Fair California, with her Missions old, Her tales bewitching, and her days of gold, Her brown-robed padres of the distant past, Would that the glory of that age might last.” She concludes her book with these comments: “Those bells of the past, whose long-forgotten music still fills the wide expanse; Tingeing the sober twilight of the Present with color of Romance.”

In the same book, Forbes describes El Camino Real as “a well defined and picturesque road,” “the recognized route of official travel when California was a part of Spain,” and, “in ... portions... [a] beautiful, excellent highway.”

While it was true that there was regular travel between the Spanish missions, pueblos, and presidios, there was no highway *per se* running the length of Alta California. Travel by ox-cart, foot, mule, and horse between adjacent settlements followed routes that changed with the weather and tides. Major transportation of goods and personnel was done by ship.

In a *Los Angeles Times* article from 2003, Orange County historian, Jim Sleeper, stated: “A lot of the lore of El Camino Real is rather mythical, sort of by guess and by gosh.”

Keith Robinson, a Caltrans executive, who was extensively involved in efforts to restore the bells in this century noted the difficulty in establishing the exact path the Spanish used to traverse the state: “El Camino Real was never one route. One year it may have been two miles from the coast, and the next year it was a mile from the coast. Over 200 years, you can imagine how many changes they made.”

Mathew Ross of the Southern California Automobile Association Archives shared a similar viewpoint: “There may have been some kind of more or less continuous footpath, but it was not a regularly travelled thoroughfare. El Camino Real was a product of the same impulse that gave us the Spanish Colonial Revival in architecture – imparting an exotic hue to the region as a way to attract more tourists and settlers.”

A large part of mythologizing the El Camino Real involved mythologizing and romanticizing the missions that supposedly provided way stations along its way. Referring to the bell installed by our club, president Katherine Cumberson stated the intent was: “commemoration of the good work accomplished by the Franciscan Padres.”

More floridly, Forbes wrote: “In memory of the band of ardent missionaries who opened the way through the wilderness of the West a chain of bells is being erected... they swung the bells in the branches of trees and rang them to call attention to the work they had in hand, that of betterment and improvement of body and soul.”

Speaking at a meeting in Santa Barbara to encourage interest in building the road, Dr. O. Shepard Barnum of the now renamed El Camino Real Association said: “Romance hangs over every foot of the old highway of the padres, and over the missions which it connected.”

In an interview aired on KQED’s show Bay Curious, Professor Robert Senkewicz, of Santa Clara University, debunks this romantic history: “The mission past that they construct was a fantasy past: heroic missionaries, happy, contented Indians, fandangos all over the place.”

As is typical, there is no record of what California’s indigenous people thought of the bells going up to commemorate the Spanish missions. Modern indigenous people, however, have made their voices heard. In an interview posted on the *Voices of Monterey* website on August 8, 2019, Valentin Lopez, chair of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band said:

“These bells are deeply painful symbols that celebrate the destruction, domination and erasure of our people,” said Valentin Lopez, chair of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. “They are constant reminders that our people, and our history, continue to be disregarded to this day... they represent a mission that tried to destroy our people. We were considered animals. We weren’t human beings. So these bells, even if they were put up innocently, people should learn what it represents, and that’s my mission, to teach as much as I can.”

The Later History of the Bells

Forbes remained involved in the El Camino Real bell project for many years, and in 1911 rose to be president of the organization, which she renamed El Camino Real Association. Two years later, she ceded her position to her husband and assumed the chair of the bell committee, which had previously been held by him.

Armitrage was also an avid member of the Good Roads committee, which continued to push for the development of a state highway from San Diego to Solano. The work was slow at first, and the mission bell guide posts did provide useful in helping motorists navigate along the rough road. As recounted on the *California Highways* website:

“The roadway itself fell short of expectations at first. While the 1910 State Highways Act authorized construction of a paved road along the route of El Camino Real, construction lagged and for many years much of the historic road was only a primitive trail. Between cities there were streams to ford and steep grades to scale. Sometimes, teams of horses would rescue automobiles trapped in mud. Finally, by the mid-1920s, the highway construction was complete, and in 1925 the route was signed as US 101.”

Harrye Forbes attracted media attention over the years, heralded as the “world’s only woman bell maker.” She continued to run the California Bell Company until she sold it in 1948 to Mae Franklin and Evangeline Aldrich of Alhambra. In 1952 a man named Joe Rice bought the

company, but let it fade out. In 1998 a customer, John Kolstad, wanted to buy a bell for his backyard, but Rice refused to sell one to him unless Kolstad bought the company and its inventory. Kolstad agreed in 2000 and bought the company, which still exists and produces bells today.

By 1926, the El Camino Real Association had run its course and ceased operations. The California State Automobile Association and the Automobile Club of Southern California took over maintenance and replacement of the bells until 1933, when the California Division of Highways stepped in. In the 1960s Justin Kramer provided facsimiles of the bells to the department. In 1974, the California Legislature appointed the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to assume responsibility the bells. In 1978, Caltrans switched to cement cast bells for a number of years, to cut down on the constant thefts of the bells.

In the intervening years, many of the older bells were lost not only to theft, but also to rust and highway expansion projects that saw bells pulled down and junked. Interest in the bells continue to fade until 1996, when Caltrans Statewide Coordinator of the Caltrans Adopt-A-Highway Program, Keith Robinson, started the "Adopt-A-Bell" program. The CFWC was offered the opportunity to adopt as many bells as it could until 1998, after which point anyone could adopt and maintain a bell. The California State Automobile Association and the Auto Club of Southern California gave \$35,000 to the CFWC for the two-year project.

Throughout the past 25 years, Caltrans has worked with nonprofit groups and municipalities to install new bells. Keith Robinson, who became Caltrans Principal Landscape Architect, received around \$2 million in federal highway beautification funds to this end. The bells were produced once again in cast iron by the California Bell Company.

The Bells and Redwood City Woman's Club

The Redwood City Woman's Club has had an El Camino Real bell on the front lawn of our clubhouse since 2008. The club's involvement with the bell project however, dates back to October 24, 1909 when our members placed a bell at the corner of Broadway and El Camino. We have written and photographic records of this event in our archives.

The bell in our front yard is not the bell from 1909, and the whereabouts of the original bell have been unknown at least since 1957. A newspaper clipping in our archives from that year reports: "the bell is missing."

There is mention in a 1998 press release from our club that the Peninsula Hills Women's Club adopted the "original bell marker," referring to a bell located at Lathrop Street and El Camino Real, as part of the Redwood City welcome sign. It is unknown how this bell, if it is the original 1909 bell, migrated from its location at Broadway and El Camino. That same year, 1998, our club sponsored a bell to be installed at the corner of El Camino Real and Claremont Avenue,

around five blocks from the clubhouse, as part of the welcome to Redwood City cluster of service organization signs.

There is also a bell in the San Mateo County History Museum, but it was donated by a former Caltrans supervisor who received it as a retirement gift. It is unknown where that bell came from, but according to museum staff, it was delivered in a wooden crate.

In 2008, according to then-president Christine Cheshire, the CFWC had an extra bell that they offered to us for installation on El Camino Real in Redwood City. Former club president Edythe Miller was active in the CFWC bell project at the time and may have been instrumental in the offer of the bell to us. Cheshire received permission from Caltrans and the City to have the bell installed in front of the clubhouse, instead, to commemorate the club's centennial in 2009. She also marshalled the Sunrise Lions to help with the installation. This event is noted on a plaque at the base of the bell.

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