

HIGHWAY OF HISTORY REVISITED

Santa Cruz Sentinel March 9, 1999

By John Sanford, Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ – Rain pelted a man dressed in a dark-brown Franciscan robe Monday as he blessed the New El Camino Real Bell at the Santa Cruz Mission Plaza.

The Rev. Alexander Manville had traveled from San Juan Bautista to join a small crowd gathered under umbrellas for the bell's dedication to the city of Santa Cruz.

The California Federation of Women's Clubs and the California State Automobile Association are spearheading a project to replace or rededicate roughly 450 of the bells that once dotted 700 miles of "The King's Highway", a more than 200-year-old road that stretches from San Diego to Sonoma and links the California missions.

Tammy Guensler, the federation's centennial chairwoman, said the project is slated for completion by the state's sesquicentennial celebration next year.

In 1906, the federation held a contest for the highway markers' design. The result was a 100lb., cast-iron bell attached to a metal pipe shaped like a shepherd's staff. By 1913, 450 such bells had been placed in front of the missions and along the highway.

The new bell in front of the Santa Cruz plaza was designed from the original bell's cast but is made of concrete, Guensler said. It is set in cement at Mission and Sylvar streets. The Santa Cruz Woman's Club dedicated it to the city.

Guensler said the federation had decided to undertake the project because of the "need to cherish the heritage that we have in California."

"The bells have told us for many years how far we've gone and how we've come," said Don Foley of the California State Automobile Association.

Spanish missionaries established Mission Santa Cruz in 1791, and, until it was leveled in 1886, it had a fairly manic history.

The early years of the mission were ripe with agricultural production.

But the Spanish introduced new diseases that wiped thousands of the Ohlone American Indians, who were beaten or shackled or thrown into jails by the missionaries and soldiers for disobedience.

The mission was also threatened by pirates, specifically one Hypolito Bouchard of Buenos Aires, who rampaged through Monterey but left Santa Cruz alone.

Earthquakes in 1845 and 1857 destroyed much of the mission, which was secularized in 1834.