

The Historic

ROAD

That Never Was



By **Gary Robinson**

“The truth of California Indians has never been told. It’s never been told by the Catholic Church. It’s never been told by Spain, by Mexico, by the state of California, by the U.S. government. The truth has never been told regarding our history.”

—Valentin Lopez, Chairman of the Amah Mutsun Band of Ohlone Indians



THERE IS A movement afoot in California to make the historic El Camino Real a UNESCO Cultural Corridor, which would place this ancient road in a class of truly significant locations around the world. The only problem is that during the Spanish mission era, the historical era in which this thoroughfare was supposedly created, nothing resembling a road connecting the missions existed. It's part of an elaborate myth that emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a means of promoting the state of California as a tourism destination and economic center.

Here's how the myth goes—and remember, this is still accepted by many Californians as historical fact. When Father Junipero Serra began building his string of missions up the California coastline in the late 1700s, he placed them about a day's journey, roughly thirty miles, apart. He needed a wagon road to connect them, so he constructed California's first highway. He called this road El Camino Real, which translates to "King's Highway" or "Royal Road." For nearly two centuries this road, later restored and called U.S. Highway 101, was the principal north-south route in California.

That's part of the false historical view of California's missions. The truth is there was no such road during the mission era (1769–1833) or in the decades that followed. Nor were the missions built in sequence from south to north, nor were they located a single day's walk or horseback ride apart. Geographical and historical facts easily disprove parts of this myth, along with narratives written by travelers in the region during that era or shortly afterwards.

"There are many myths generated for the purpose of denying the history of genocide," wrote Nicole Lim (Pomo), executive director of the California Indian Museum and Cultural Center. "The myth of El Camino Real is an example of how the colonization of California is often celebrated, portraying the decimation of native populations as necessary for 'progress' and 'civilization.'"

To begin debunking the myth, we'll start with the actual order in which the missions were created over a fifty-four-year period. The process began, of course, in San Diego in 1769. The second mission was established 450 miles north on the south end of Monterey Bay in what is now called Carmel. Serra took a boat from San Diego to that location and didn't travel over land. The third mission was San Antonio de Padua, established in 1771 in Jolon, eighty miles south of Carmel. The fourth was San Gabriel, established the same year some 250 miles south of Jolon. And thus the pattern of construction continued.

As to the distance that separates the missions, the following examples disprove the one day's journey aspect of the myth. It is fifty-seven miles from San Juan Capistrano to the next nearest mission to the north, San Gabriel. It is sixty-one miles from Mission San Fernando to San Buenaventura, the nearest mission to its north. Only eighteen miles separates Mission Santa Ines from its neighbor, La Purisima. But from La Purisima to San Luis Obispo de Tolosa is fifty-five miles. Finally, a mere twelve miles separates Mission Santa Clara from its neighbor, Mission San Jose.

And then there are the travelers' narratives. Fifty recorded accounts of the missions were written by travelers who passed through Alta California during that era. This included sea captains, naval officers, explorers, scientists, clergy, merchants, fur traders, colonists, and diplomats from more than twelve countries. Several of these writers characterized the missions as slave plantations. Not one of these narratives mentions the existence of a royal road, or any road for that matter. Some of the travelers specifically commented on transportation issues and the difficulties they faced in traveling from one mission to the next. No doubt some set of paths connected each mission to its nearest neighbor, but these did not qualify for such terms as *road* or *highway*, much less *royal*.

Thomas Jefferson Farnham published *Travels in the Californias* after visiting most of the missions. The book included descriptions of the region and detailed maps. He noted that there were trails and roads that connected some Spanish colonial settlements to the nearby missions, and some that even connected the nearest seaport to a mission, but there was no road that connected the missions.

The famous traveler Captain George Vancouver described the journey from Mission Dolores (in the San Francisco area) to Mission Santa Clara, which included a few unconnected trails. The route, he wrote, "was quite bad in spots, especially a six-mile area where our horses were generally knee-deep in mud and water."



Photo by Gary Robinson.

Alfred Robinson's description of the route from Mission San Antonio to Mission Soledad goes like this: "We traveled slowly, owing to our miserable horses and the almost impracticable state of the route which in many places extended across the mountains in narrow pathways, and was so obstructed with rocks, that I was obliged every few moments to dismount and walk."

A Swedish gentleman, G. M. Waseurtz of Sandels, traveling a few years later, wrote that the route from Mission Santa Barbara to Mission San Buenaventura "led along the beach and at high water was not passable. A person overtaken there by the tides could drown without help or prospect of escape for the side of the coast is perpendicular and smooth."

Traveling the fifty miles from La Purisima to San Luis Obispo in the 1830s to perform his duties as a clerk in the hide and tallow trade, Faxon Dean Atherton wrote in his diary that "in some places there is no sign of a road or anything to guide a traveler." Also in that diary we find Atherton's description of the stretch between Santa Barbara and Santa Ines as "almost impossible to descend, being in some places literally perpendicular. The distance from top to bottom in a straight line might be about one mile, but the only possible way of descending is by a zigzag course of about four, and as rocky and uneven as can well be imagined."

In 1850, a California resident named Edwin A. Sherman visited every mission, and he wrote that no Camino Real was marked on any map, and there was only a trail that connected a few points. Later, in 1905, he was among the most vocal opponents of spending state funds on the design and construction of any modern road so named.

James M. Guinn, founder of the Historical Society of Southern California, was thoroughly versed in the earlier writings of the narratives of Vancouver and others of the mission era, and he, too, objected to any attempt to name any state roads after the mythological El Camino Real.

What should be considered the final nail in the coffin of California's El Camino Real comes from Elias Castillo, author of *A Cross of Thorns: The Enslavement of California's Indians by the Spanish Mission*. Castillo spent eight years researching material for the book in every archive containing documents and letters of the Spanish mission era. Able to read eighteenth-century Spanish documents, he easily translated letters from Junipero Serra and others of that time. "There was no El Camino Real during that period," he said during a recent interview. "There is no proof that what is now identified as El Camino Real ever existed." Castillo

confirmed that during those eight years of research he never found a single document that mentioned the ordering of supplies, materials, or tools for the construction of this road. Nor were there any mentions of Spanish or Indian laborers designated to build it. The whole idea is conspicuous by its absence.

Some people point to the 1775–76 expedition of Juan Bautista de Anza as the official establishment of this road. True, this expedition, which brought a group of Spanish settlers to Alta California, did blaze a trail to or near mission sites, but it never became anything more than a seldom-used trail.

It should be noted that there really was a Spanish-built El Camino Real that connected Mexico City to the Spanish colonial capitol of Santa Fe, New Mexico. It largely followed trails initially established by Indians who were already traveling north and south to trade with distant Native communities.

So how and why did the rosy story of the peaceful and productive missions created by compassionate and visionary Spanish padres come into existence? Almost fifty years after the mission period ended, new California residents, who were mostly Anglos, were looking for a cultural and historical context for their lives. They were also looking for reasons to be proud of their state and messages that could attract tourists, businesses, and new residents. From the 1880s to the 1920s, real estate developers, state boosters, marketers, writers, educators, Catholic and Protestant religious promoters, women's clubs, automobile clubs, regional magazines, playwrights, and newcomers romanticized the mission era to fill that need. Each new writer, imagining a glorious and romantic bygone era, added something new to the myth, so it grew and flourished, and people believed it.

"The colonial invasion and then the capitalist development of California and the social construct of society based on exploitation, capital accumulation, and racism—this is the background that necessitates the myth," said Marcus V. Lopez, chairman of the Barbareño Chumash Tribal Council. "The master narrative must be challenged by those individuals and groups of Indigenous nations and others. The honoring of El Camino Real is like honoring the paths of Hitler's SS as they organized its infrastructure in Nazi Germany."

A coalition of groups in the first decade of the twentieth century pushed for the restoration of the so-called King's Highway. The idea for an historical highway came out of the good roads movement, founded by people wealthy enough to own automobiles. Supporters included the newly formed Camino Real Association, the Auto Club of Southern

California, and several women's organizations. A quick examination of the logo of the Auto Club of Southern California reveals an unmistakable mission bell at its center.

The idea of using mission bells as the main symbol for this supposedly restored highway came from a woman whose husband happened to own the only bell-making company in the western United States. The first such bell was installed in Los Angeles in 1906. A few short years later, California voters approved of the idea of creating Highway 101 as a restored El Camino Real to connect southern and northern regions of the state. By that time the King's Highway myth had taken solid root among the state's population.

Today, state taxpayers are forced to support the reminders of this historic road that never was, because CalTrans maintains the six hundred bells that appear every mile or two along Highway 101, along with the periodic signage proclaiming Historic El Camino Real.

“By lifting the veil of falsehoods, we can examine the bias,” Nicole Lim added.

“Regardless of religious intentions, Spanish colonizers targeted large-scale Indigenous populations for conversion and servitude, resulting in high rates of mortality from violence and disease. We must reframe the context of history through the inclusion of Native American perspectives and contributions.”

Looking to the future, Marcus Lopez said, “Let’s celebrate Indigenous peoples by telling the truth and decolonizing these narratives, allowing us to maintain and continue our own narratives that bring about a brighter future, free of exploitation in all its forms.”

By Jennie Smith

