

AVILA, MODESTA (1867–1891?)

Modesta Avila lived on a small plot of land in southern California's San Juan Capistrano. In 1889, some of the region's Anglo residents wanted to secede from the larger Los Angeles County and create Orange County. The railroad, increasingly the most powerful economic interest in southern California, expanded over people's property without permission or recompense. In 1889 she challenged the railroad through a gesture that would come back to haunt her a few months later. The sheriff of the recently created Orange County, together with the newly elected district attorney, had Modesta Avila arrested. She was charged, tried and convicted with obstructing a railroad track. Avila was sentenced to three years in the California State Penitentiary at San Quentin. Orange County's criminal justice apparatus had not successfully prosecuted anyone, thus Avila became the vehicle for polishing Orange County's law-and-order image. Prison records show that she was discharged on March 3, 1892, other sources, however, allege that she died in prison, but many details of her life are still unknown.