

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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AVILA ADOBE

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by

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## ÁVILA ADOBE

If some of California's old buildings could relate their interesting and very human tales, many a tale, indeed, of thrilling adventure and despairing heartaches would be unfolded, and many a lost link would be discovered. Not the least gripping of these sagas would be that of the old Ávila Adobe situated at 14, 16, 18 Olvera Street in the heart of Los Angeles. It has seen the early idyllic life of pastoral California rent with dissatisfaction and revolution. It has listened to the booming of the guns and the tramp of the conqueror's feet; it has housed one of the oldest and most influential families of California; and finally, has seen a new race and a new people grow up around it, until its very existence has been threatened. In short the Ávila Adobe has played an outstanding part in the brilliant drama of California.

A particularly colorful personality was Don José María Ávila, the builder of the Ávila Adobe. His family and come to California when he was still very young. Don José soon gained a reputation as a fine horseman, and, although well liked, was considered a wild and reckless youth.<sup>1</sup> By

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1. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, III, 207.

enterprise and good fortune, Don José María was able to amass considerable property, and consequently, began seriously to consider marriage. As can well be imagined, such an eligible and romantic bachelor did not have to search long, for very soon he had won the hand of Señorita Encarnación Sepúlveda, and, in 1818, Don José built for his bride the fine house which later became famous as the Ávila Adobe.<sup>2</sup>

Don José, true to his impetuous character, spared neither money nor labor in constructing the new home. The extensive building was in the form of an "L," with adobe walls more than three feet thick, its high ceilings held up by large cottonwood beams. The flat roof, as was usually the case in Southern California houses, was made water-tight by the use of black asphalt from the Brea pits. Facing the long veranda at the front of the Ávila home were the living rooms. These were furnished in the best style allowed by the slow transportation from the markets of the outside world. There were French doors. Rich imported satins and damasks from France were brought all the way around the Horn by the Yankee traders of Boston.<sup>3</sup> What could not be imported was of the best local manufacture. At the back of the house, a long row of bedrooms opened into the patio. Don José María and his

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2. C. D. Willard, The Herald's history of Los Angeles, 228.

3. H. E. Rensch, Historic spots in California, the southern counties, 47.

attractive spouse, Doña Encarnación Sepúlveda, indeed had no need to envy any of their neighbors.

Don José María Ávila continued to gain in importance in the community, and with his increase in power came a hardening of his dashing, reckless spirit into one of overbearing pride. In 1825, he was elected alcalde, but was suspended later because of his despotic conduct.<sup>4</sup> An example of Don José's spirit was found in a reply made to Governor Argüello, when called upon to explain the arbitrary imprisonment of one of the citizens:<sup>5</sup>

My motive for putting this person in jail was just that I thought it proper to do so. Also, I had other grounds, which would take a great deal of your time and mine to state; and since this man's complaint is intended only to take up your worship's time and mine, I close by stating that I have nothing more to say. I remain obedient to your superior orders.

Thus haughtily did Don José brush aside an order from his superior. Eventually he made himself heartily disliked by the officials, and, in November, 1831, he was imprisoned for badly wounding a certain Nieto in a duel. Don José appealed to the governor, Manuel Victoria, but the governor imposed a fine of \$2,000 and ten years at labor on the public works in San Francisco. Naturally, Don José was

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4. Bancroft, California, III, 207.

5. J. Carrillo, Documentos para la historia de California, 17.

furious. A short time later, when a revolution broke out, Avila was rescued from prison and given a leading part in the movement.<sup>6</sup>

When, finally, the forces of the insurgents and those of the governor met, there seemed to be no disposition on the part of either side to make a determined stand. However, when Avila saw his hated enemy, Victoria, his old reckless daring took possession of him. He set spurs to his horse and charged with his lance, shouting: "A negro carajo, a ti te busco," "Ah, you black-hearted villain, you are the man I want"! In the ensuing melee, Don José María Avila lost his life, but not, however, before he had badly wounded the governor and killed one of the enemy.<sup>7</sup>

Doña Encarnación continued to inhabit the adobe which her husband had built for her, although it must have seemed to have lost its very soul with the passing of the fiery Don José. Nevertheless, it continued to be one of the social centers of the town, and still was classed among the outstanding residences of Los Angeles. It soon leaped to further prominence in a manner which did not meet with the approval of its loyal California mistress.

When the United States armies invaded California,

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6. M. I. Avila, Cosas de California, 28-30.  
7. P. Pico, Narración histórica, 38-39.

Los Angeles was one of the important objectives. Commodore Stockton, the commander-in-chief of the forces for the United States, took the city, without resistance, on August 13, 1846. Upon Stockton's withdrawal, Captain Archibald H. Gillespie, the arrogant and indiscreet officer who had been left in charge, was driven out by the Californians. Once more Stockton returned, but this time he had to fight his way to Los Angeles. On the morning of January 10, 1847, the commodore was able to march triumphantly into the city.<sup>8</sup>

Dofia Encarnación, learning of Stockton's return, took her daughters, perhaps as a precaution against possible danger at the hands of invading soldiery, and retired to the home of Don Jean Luis Vignes, an early French settler. Meanwhile, she had placed a native boy on guard at the Ávila Adobe, cautioning him against opening either doors or windows. One possibility had been overlooked by the widow of Don José, however. That was the reaction of the Californian to music, for instead of entering the city with fire and sword, Stockton marched into the plaza with his fine brass band playing. He kept this band playing for the greater part of the day. The result on the hostile inhabitants was electric.

The city was won over as it would have been impossible to do with rifle balls. The youthful guard of the Ávila

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8. J. G. Layne, Annals of Los Angeles from the arrival of the first white man to the Civil War, 1769-1861, 39-41.

home was intrigued along with the rest of the people, and ventured out of the house to watch the band in the plaza. Some of Stockton's staff, upon passing by, noticed that the house was empty, and because of its fine appearance and inviting interior, chose it as the headquarters for their commander-in-chief. In this way, the Ávila Adobe became the capitol of California until Commodore Stockton retired from the city on January 14.<sup>9</sup>

For some years after the conquest by the United States, the adobe house, the pride of old Don José María, remained in the Ávila family. With the new immigration, which began after 1847, came a German, Theodore Rimpau, a man of some education and business ability. In 1850, he married Francisca Ávila, and the old adobe passed into his hands. The third son, Fred C. Rimpau, was born there on March 13, 1865.<sup>10</sup>

As the years passed, the once magnificent home of the Ávilas was discarded by its owners for newer and more modern dwellings, and the old place was put to other and less distinguished uses. By 1901, it was greatly in need of repair, its glory and dignity seemingly a thing of the past.<sup>11</sup> It was

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9. H. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 1853-1913, 100.

10. J. S. McGrearty, California of the south, a history, II, 47-50.

11. Willard, Los Angeles, 228.

later turned into a cheap boarding house for Mexicans, and continued to fall into ruin. In 1911, a report to the City Housing Commission, made by Manuel S. Carrezosa, inspector, called attention to the unsanitary condition of the building, due to a lack of proper plumbing and ventilation. Since it would have been almost impossible to make the necessary changes, because of the danger that the adobe walls might crumble, many of the commission members were in favor of razing the old building.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, because of its historical associations, it was spared.

By 1927, the once proud home of a proud family seemed doomed. There was a sign across the front door which read: Condemned. The steps had fallen in; the walls were crumbling; the windows were boarded up; and rats raced through the empty rooms. Certain public spirited citizens began at that time to collect funds to restore the old adobe, and by 1930, the street had been paved and the building repaired. In all, old Olvera Street, named after a famous California judge, had been made into a world of its own, preserving as far as possible the atmosphere of the former times.

At the present time (1936) the Ávila Adobe is open

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12. McGroarty, California of the south, II, 51.

to the public. The rooms are furnished in the style of the early Californians, and the patio is filled with the flowers and trees common in the early period.<sup>13</sup> It is possible once more to tread among surroundings familiar to the early inhabitants of California. In imagination, at least, the fiery Don José comes galloping up to the door, and with spurs jingling and with eyes flashing, strides up onto the porch. Perhaps, one can also see in the mind's eye the native boy, oblivious to everything but the flourishes of a splendid band, deserting the house he was prepared to defend against fire and sword, because he was charmed by the music of Stockton's band.

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13. C. Sterling, Ávila Adobe, 3.

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