

Madame Helena Modjeska

by Dale Robert Brown



Helena Modrzejewska Chlapowska

Oct. 12th, 1840 – April 8th, 1909

Decades before Hollywood Motion Pictures, Orange County was home to one of the greatest actresses of the 19th century, Madame Helena Modjeska. For 30 years, she was one of the biggest stars on the American stage. Modjeska was best known for her Shakespearean tragedienne roles. She and her husband, Count Charles Bozenta, were Orange County's first international celebrities. Modjeska was a pioneer of the modern-day celebrity. She was a cultural and fashion icon who was among the first theater stars to be promoted using photography. Her name and image were also used for the marketing of a wide variety of products, almost always without consent or compensation. Modjeska was an incredibly famous and revered person who, at the end of her career, chose Tustin as her home and planned to retire here.

Modjeska was born on Oct. 12th, 1840, in Krakow, Poland to widowed Mother Josefa Benda. She was raised as Helena Benda. While she never knew her biological father, Helena had a godfather named Michael Opid, who was a teacher, and accomplished musician. She referred to Michael

Opid as her father and credits him with her love of Music and the arts. He would unfortunately die of consumption when she was just 7 years old. Helena was one of six artistically talented children. One brother became a musician, another an architect. Helena, her sister, and two other brothers all became actors. Her first introduction to acting was at home watching her siblings perform elaborate family productions in the living room. Helena first attended the theater when she was just 7 years old and from that point on, was determined to become a star of the Polish stage.

She was born into an occupied Poland, partitioned between 3 neighboring European powers, Russia, Prussia, and Austria. She grew up in the “Free City of Krakow” which was the center of conflict for independent Poland. Constant military aggression and nationalist uprisings meant she would experience violence as a young girl.

In 1850, when she was just 9 years old, a fire destroyed much of the city of Krakow including Helena’s childhood home and several rental properties her mother owned. This plunged the Benda family into poverty. With her mother returning to work, young Helena was charged with managing the household and helping her mother run a coffee shop to make ends meet.

When she was 10 years old a man named Gustav Sinnmayer entered her life. He was 25 years old and a family friend with theatrical connections on the German stage. He was brought into the home as a boarder and family tutor. In theatrical circles, he was known as Gustav “Modrzejewski”, an invented stage name. Sinnmayer recognized Helena's talent and took a special interest in her development. He taught her German and encouraged her acting ambitions. His plan was to groom her for the German stage. He organized a small acting troupe, and she made her stage debut at age 19, performing at a benefit in Bochnia Poland. The stage wasn’t all Sinnmayer was grooming Helena for.

in 1861, at the age of 20, she bore his illegitimate son, Ralph. Although Gustav is historically referred to as Modjeska’s first husband, it’s unclear if he and Helena ever had a wedding ceremony. If they had, it wouldn’t have been official since Gustav was an already married man who’d been estranged from his wife and never divorced. Regardless, Gustav and Helena were touring as a married couple, and she started using his invented stage name as her own. She became known as Helena Modrzejewska, which is the feminine version of Modrzejewski. In 1862, Helena gave birth to a daughter Marylka, who would, sadly die before age 3. Her cause of death was never revealed, but was suspected to have been from illness.



Gustav Sinnmayer “Modrzejewski” & Helena Benda “Modrzejewska” Circa 1859



Rudolf "Ralph" Modrzejewski

After the death of her daughter, Helena left Sinnmayer, and returned to her family in Krakow, taking son Ralph with her. Free from Sinnmayer's control, Helena committed herself to training and quickly became the leading actress of the Krakow Theater. Sinnmayer retaliated against Helena for leaving him by kidnapping Ralph from the cloakroom of the theatre. He held him for ransom, and it took Helena over three years to save up the money to pay off Sinnmayer and have her son returned to her.

In 1866, Helena met the love of her life, Karol Bozenta Chlapowski. (Known in America as Count Charles Bozenta) Charles was the son of a Baron and one of eleven children in a wealthy, land-owning family. He was passionately fond of the theater and worked as a critic. He met Helena while reviewing one of her performances. They had a lot in common. They not only shared a love for the theater, but were extremely patriotic Polish nationalist. They quickly became inseparable, and Charles would spend all his time

with Modjeska acting as her manager. Bozenta's family initially disapproved of his relationship with Helena because of her profession and past relationship Sinnmayer. However, she ultimately won over his family. After a two-year courtship, they married in 1868.

They moved to Warsaw where, after a successful acting debut Helena would negotiate a lifetime contract with the Imperial Theater. She became the highest paid actress in Poland. To this day, she's still considered to be the greatest actress in the history of Poland.

By 1875, several factors led Helena and Charles to consider immigrating to the United States. Helena dreamed of performing to larger audiences, and Warsaw was too small a venue for international recognition. Since she was performing with the Warsaw Imperial Theatre under the watchful eye of Russian authorities, she lacked full artistic freedom. Before each new performance, Russian censors would review the play's content and edit any material they found objectionable. Unflattering portrayals of Russia or references to Polish nationalism were impermissible.

In Warsaw, Helena and Charles' home was the hub of intellectual and artistic life. Every Tuesday night, the city's most prominent artists, writers, poets, musicians and actors attended meetings at their home. It was at these meetings that they forged a plan to emigrate to United States and start a Polish Artist Colony. In the end, a group of 10 committed to emigrating to the United States with California as their destination.



Count Charles Bozenta Chlapowski

One of the Polish emigrants was future Nobel Prize winning novelist, Henryk Sienkiewicz. He preceded the rest of the group by several months in order to secure a location for the group's arrival. While visiting in San Francisco, he learned of an already established agricultural community called Anaheim, founded by German settlers in Los Angeles County. The colonists there spoke German, but little English. It made Anaheim a smart choice since the Polish emigrants spoke no English.

In July, 1876, Charles, Helena, her 15-year-old son, Ralph, and 6 others boarded a steamship headed for the United States. From Germany, they first traveled to New York. While there, Helena took time to scope out the city's theaters because she dreamed of an American debut. From New York they traveled to San Francisco via the Panama overland route. After more than two months of travel, the group arrived in San Francisco. From there, they traveled South to Anaheim to fulfill their dream of starting a Polish Artist Colony. Unfortunately, in under three months their colony failed.

Life in Anaheim was not as idyllic as the enthusiastic Polish party envisioned. No one in the group had any farming experience. They struggled to keep crops and livestock alive. They owned a cow but had to buy milk and butter from their neighbors because nobody knew how to milk it.



The Polish Colony House Anaheim

They quickly spent their entire life savings. The need to earn money jumpstarted Helena's quest to start her American acting career. A chance meeting in Anaheim impacted their future life in California. She recounted this meeting in her autobiography:

“One afternoon, when I sat at the window, sad, unnerved, brooding over our fate, I saw two people approaching the house. They came to the window, and an introduction took place. The name of the man was Mr. J. E. Pleasants, and his wife Maria. The couple seemed very sympathetic. They expressed a wish of our visiting them at their homestead in the Santa Ana Mountains, where live oaks grow and clear brooks wind around the rocks. We had not the faintest idea then how closely this visit was connected with our final settlement in California.”

Joseph and Maria Pleasants were two of the earliest homesteaders in Santiago Canyon. This meeting was the beginning of a lifelong friendship and set the stage for Helena and Charles' future life in Orange County.

After meeting the Pleasants, Helena moved to San Francisco to learn English and conquer the American stage. Money was so tight that she could not afford to support her husband and son in San Francisco. Instead, Charles and Ralph built a small "Squatter's Shanty" near the Pleasants homestead and lived in upper Santiago Canyon. After a few months, Ralph joined his mother in San Francisco, but Bozenta remained in Santiago Canyon for the better part of a year.

While renting a room in San Francisco, with help from a Modjeska traveled to England roles in English. With a thick Polish accent and no experience on the American stage, she found it hard to be taken seriously. Months of persistence at trying to master English finally paid off. She secured an audition with the manager of California Theatre. She impressed him so much that he offered her a leading role on the spot.



Joseph and Maria Pleasants 1868

Helena's triumphant debut on August 20th, 1877 launched a 30-year American career of 26 national tours with 2,800 performances in 36 different roles. American audiences, who were accustomed to bombast and melodrama didn't quite know what to think of her more natural and realistic European style of acting. One critic described her acting as "if taken from life itself." To ease pronunciation for her American audiences, she simplified her Polish surname, Modrzejewska, to Modjeska. She became known as Helena Modjeska, the Countess Bozenta, and eventually simply "Modjeska". Her stardom took off rapidly, and by December of the same year she was headlining in New York.

Modjeska spent from 1878-79 on the East Coast touring New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington D.C. In 1880, Modjeska traveled to England Modjeska traveled to England to improve her English and make connections on the London stage. She spent two years performing across the British Isles and Poland. Modjeska returned to America in 1882 and began to use the rail system, crisscrossing the continent to play in both grand theaters and small country playhouses.

Modjeska co-starred with some of the greatest leading men of the 19th century. One of her early co-stars was Maurice Barrymore who was the first of a distinguished American family of actors. His three children John, Lionel, and Ethel all followed in his footsteps. Modjeska was the godmother to Ethel Barrymore. In the early 1890's, Modjeska starred alongside Edwin Booth, brother of the infamous John Wilkes Booth. Later in her career, Otis Skinner became another of Modjeska's leading men and starred opposite her in many of her famous roles. Modjeska was responsible for introducing Skinner to his future wife, Maud Durbin.

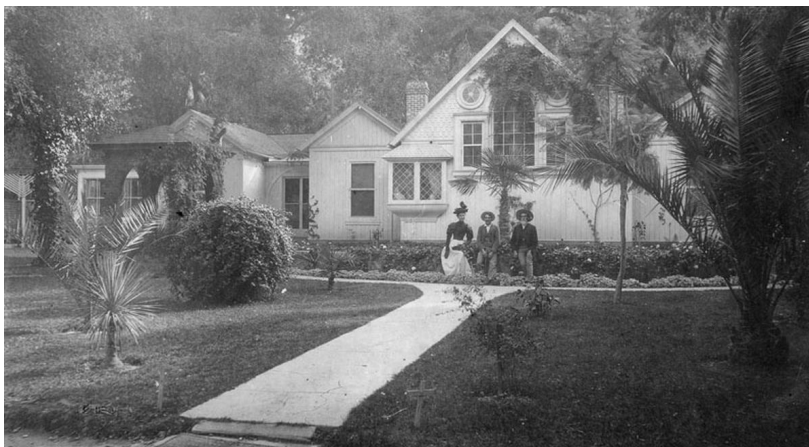
With her career firmly established, Modjeska and Bozenta returned to California and spent the summer of 1883 with their friends, the Pleasants, at their homestead in Santiago Canyon. They also spent 10 days in San Juan Capistrano, as the guests of Judge Richard Egan who was a friend of the Pleasants. Judge Egan was said to have enchanted Modjeska with “relics of Spanish California’s past and tales of the beautiful and quaint old town which was still untouched by the feverous breath of civilization”. Modjeska was very impressed with Judge Egan and gave him his nickname, the “King of Capistrano”. After their visit, an ecstatic Egan was quoted saying:

“She was so delighted with the country and climate that she intended on purchasing land in the immediate vicinity and would make it her permanent home!”

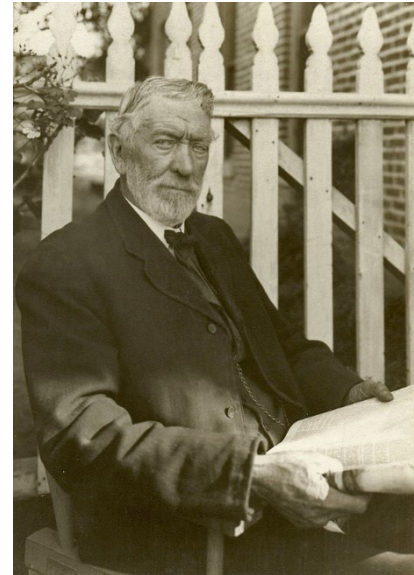
Initially, Modjeska considered buying land near San Juan to start building a new town named Modjeska. Instead, she decided to invest in the Pleasants 240-acre ranch by buying 50% undivided interest in it and becoming partners with the Pleasants. Between 1883 and 1888, Modjeska and Charles spent several summers at the Pleasants’ ranch. In 1888, Maria Pleasants fell ill and died of consumption. Joseph Pleasants then sold his remaining interest to Modjeska and Bozenta, making them sole owners of the Pleasants Ranch. Modjeska renamed the ranch “Arden.” She writes of the naming of their new home in her autobiography:

“I called it “Arden”, because, like the “Forest of Arden” in “As You Like It,”, everything that Shakespeare speaks of was on the spot, oak trees, running brooks, palms, snakes, and even lions, of course, California lions. really pumas.”

Modjeska and Bozenta commissioned their friend, New York architect, Stanford White, to design an extension to the original Pleasants Cottage. White had been responsible for buildings such as Madison Square Garden II, the Boston Public Library, the Triumphal Arch in Washington Square and many others. In addition to public buildings, he was known to design private homes for the elite.



Modjeska’s Home “Arden”



Judge Richard Egan

Arden was built to be a quiet haven for Modjeska to recuperate between tours. While at home, she spent time rehearsing her roles for the next season, as well as researching, sketching, and sewing her own costumes. The ranch was Bozenta’s passion. He was up with the sun to tend to his duties as ranch manager, fulfilling a lifelong dream of owning and

working the land. He tended the property's vegetable garden, livestock, citrus orchard, apiary, and olive groves.

Arden was extremely remote with the closest town, El Toro, 11 miles away and 3 to 4 hours of travel each way. El Toro was also encountering rocky soil the location of the closest rail station. It served Modjeska's need to embark on her national tours and allowed her to receive out of town guests. Although Arden was secluded, Modjeska often entertained friends and neighbors from the canyons, Tustin, Santa Ana, Anaheim and Los Angeles, as well as family and acting friends from across the country.



El Toro Train Station Circa 1888

Some of the more frequent guests at Arden were Modjeska's son, his wife, and their 3 children, Felix, Charles and Marylka. Known as Ralph Modjeski in America, he was now a Civil Engineer who'd been educated at The School of Bridges and Roads in Paris, France. He was a pioneer of suspension bridges and oversaw the design and construction of nearly forty bridges that spanned the great rivers of North America as well as the development of new rail lines. At that time, he was considered by some to be "America's greatest bridge builder."

As time went on, Charles bought up surrounding land, eventually expanding the original 240-acre property to 1,341-acres. While Modjeska made a good living, a big portion of it was going toward maintaining the ranch. The ranch needed to become profitable if Modjeska ever hoped to retire. So, she and Charles decided to plant 30 acres of olive trees with the goal of producing and selling a Modjeska brand of pure olive oil. At the end of the 19th century, after encountering rocky soil and years of drought, their retirement plan dramatically slowed. They realized that something had to be done to improve the water supply in the canyon or they would face bankruptcy. Charles along with Ralph, created a plan to construct a 4-acre reservoir by damming a portion of Harding Creek. Later, the reservoir was named Lake Modjeska and supplied water through pipes that ran to the main house and olive groves. Unfortunately, this did not alleviate the water problems. Not a drop of olive oil was ever produced.

In December, 1904, one of Modjeska's most notable friends, Ignace Paderewski, visited Arden. He was a world-famous pianist and composer and had been Ralph's classmate. When Paderewski was a young man, Modjeska had recognized his talents and organized a benefit that raised enough money to pay for his schooling. Without a current theatrical contract, Modjeska, now 64 years old, lacked any form of income, and Arden was falling into disrepair. Paderewski unsuccessfully urged Modjeska and Bozenta to sell their beloved Arden, but succeeded in organizing a benefit in New York that helped Modjeska pay off ranch debts. He also helped arrange a 2-year farewell tour for her that enabled her to retire in dignity.

Modjeska and Charles ended up taking Paderewski's advice. In 1906, they sold their ranch to a group of mostly Long Beach investors, who were looking to capitalize on Modjeska's fame. They turned Modjeska's home into a private country club and resort and divided up the surrounding acreage into plots of land that were sold to be developed as homes and vacation cabins.

From November, 1905 to March, 1907, Modjeska embarked on a two-year farewell tour. Her 25th national tour continued to expand her reach by visiting 94 locations across the country including 20 cities she'd never performed in before. Modjeska's 26th and last tour was her most expansive. She visited 103 cities; a third were new to her. When her farewell tour was complete in the Spring of 1907, she and Bozenta returned to California. They split their time between Los Angeles and Orange County, spending time with friends as they looked for a place to live.

While Modjeska and Charles had many friends throughout Los Angeles and Orange County, their very best friends were James and Coralinn Rice of Tustin. Two things Modjeska and Coralinn had in common were love of the arts and promoting charity. An ad on July 12, 1890, in the Anaheim Gazette was the first record I could find of the two mentioned together. It was for a charitable event on the opening night of French's Opera House in Santa Ana. Modjeska was to perform portions of some of her most notable roles, while Coralinn was to lead the musical portion of the program. Other close friends of Modjeska and Charles were Dr. James Boyd, his sister Rosa, Sam Tustin, James Irvine and Stella Preble who Modjeska called "The Greatest Actor in Tustin".

Modjeska and Bozenta ultimately chose to move to Tustin. They rented a ranch dubbed; "Los Alisos," named after the 4 ancient sycamores that sheltered the house. It was also known as the Byron Oliver Estate, and later, the Plumbstead.



Modjeska's Tustin Home "Los Alisos"

The house has quite an interesting history. It was built in 1903 by Roy Ozmun, a wealthy Los Angeles investor and Sportsman. It was described as "A Mexican-inspired house that was a multi-sided one-story dwelling that encircled a central patio." It had rooms of immense size. The living room was 48' by 24' and the master bedroom measured 36' in length. Its outbuildings included stables for 6 horses, space for Ozmun's collection of early-day automobiles, and rooms for guests and servants. A separate 90' long structure housed a regulation bowling alley, billiard room, and a shooting gallery.

Surrounding the home was a 23-acre walnut and citrus grove. The lease for the entire property, including furniture, dishes, and silver, was just \$700 for the year. Modjeska and Charles moved into this rented Tustin home Sunday, June 30, 1907. They also purchased 3 acres of land from James and Coralinn Rice where they planned to build a permanent residence for their retirement.

Modjeska was Tustin's first international celebrity, and local newspapers often wrote of her social life. Below are portions of some of those articles.

July 5, 1907

"One of the most pleasant celebrations of the "Glorious Fourth" was enjoyed at the beautiful Tustin home of Mr. and Mrs. James S. Rice." More than 30 people attended. The festivities took place on the lawn that was decorated with Stars and Stripes. Dinner was at 6 o'clock and described as a "sumptuous banquet". In the evening, a game of whist broke out complete with prizes that created amusement galore. The ladies' consolation prize went to Madame Modjeska and was a pair of red, white and blue hose. Dr. Boyd won the men's consolation prize, which was a pair of fiery red socks. First prize for the women and men went to Mrs. Turner who won a pair of solid silver scissors and Mr. Huff who won a silver whisk broom."

July 19, 1907

"Madame Modjeska was the charming hostess yesterday of a function given in the honor of Miss Agnes Yoch of Santa Ana. It was a tennis party on the handsome grounds of the home she now occupies in Tustin. Punch was served during the game. Following the tournament, ice cream and cake were served in the beautiful dining room. After refreshments, guests enjoyed billiards, bowling, and whist."

July 20, 1907

"Miss Margaret Goetz, a friend of Madame Modjeska, has come from the east to make her home in California. She is a very fine vocal teacher and has studied in New York and in Europe for a number of years. She will make her headquarters in Los Angeles but will come to Tustin to teach every Thursday. She will teach for the present at home of Mrs. James Rice but later at Madame Modjeska's."

July 27, 1907

"Madame Modjeska, Count Bozenta and Percy Rice formed a box party in Los Angeles at the Thursday night performance of "Captain Jinks," starring Ethel Barrymore. They traveled back to Tustin the next morning where Modjeska hosted Ethel for the day. Modjeska, Bozenta and Ethel were taken around town in a "Big Touring Car" driven by Percy Rice, to view "The Beauties of Tustin". Miss Barrymore was delighted with the spot saying it was the "Dearest Spot She Had Ever Seen." The young actress returned to Los Angeles in time for the evening performance."

December 21, 1907

“Distinguished Guest Ralph Modjeski, of Chicago, who has been as guest in Tustin for the past week while visiting his mother, is said to be one of the ablest civil engineers of the time. He has built some of the biggest bridges of the country and is highly esteemed in the construction world. James and Coralinn hosted a lunch in his honor at their home before moving the party to Modjeska home for Bowling and refreshments.”

January 4, 1908

“A brilliant assemblage of merry makers watched the old year out and greeted the New Year at the beautiful home of Madame Modjeska and Count Bozenta. Several hours were spent at the whist tables and just a few short moments before the “witching hour” each guest was presented with some species of musical instrument. There were harmonicas, music boxes, cornets, trombones, and all manner of contrivances from which a noise could be coaxed, and as the chimes in the court-yard merrily rang out the hour of twelve, a grand march was begun, led by Mr. and Mrs. James S. Rice, to the tune that each guest loved best, played in their own favorite time and key. The result was one grand, tumultuous blare of harmony. For two hours after New Year’s, the guests danced waltzes, two-steps and the Virginia Reel. The night ended with Miss Stella Preble on the piano with the guests singing “Home Sweet Home.”

April 20, 1908

“A delightful Easter dinner was given yesterday by Madame Modjeska at her beautiful Tustin home. Besides Count Bozenta and his distinguished wife, there were seated at the table Mr. and Mrs. James S. Rice, Mr. and Mrs. Ben Turner, Miss Davis and Miss Treadwell, James and Percy Rice.”

Modjeska’s life in Tustin wasn’t all parties and card games. She spent the year compiling her memoirs for publication. Modjeska was aided by Miss Constance Skinner who was a Canadian writer, historian and editor and had previously worked as a theater critic for the New York Herald. She was a guest at Modjeska and Bozenta’s Tustin home for several months.

As their one-year lease was nearing its end, Modjeska and Charles bought Sam Tustin’s cottage on Bay Island for \$3,000. Modjeska liked Bay Island for its simplicity and solitude and several of Modjeska’s Tustin friends had weekend/summer homes at Bay Island. They planned to live there while their permanent residence in Tustin was being built.

Before Modjeska and Charles moved to Bay Island, their Tustin friends threw a farewell party for the couple. It was held at the



Miss Constance Skinner

Preble Ranch and hosted by Stella Preble. It was said to be a lavish luncheon attended by a group of 30 women and a handful of men disguised as Women's Rights' leaders. Women composed poems and toasts while the men put on a skit for the ladies. Tustin Actor, Ernest Philipps, who'd been a member of the Modjeska Company, presented each of the guests with a "Mysterious Parcel". Each parcel contained a carnival cloak, a mask, and a package of firecrackers. The women were speedily converted into a group of "grotesque carnival merry makers". Games were played for prizes, and coffee was served on the lawn. The event closed with a procession of guests throwing their box of firecrackers into a raging bonfire. It was touted as "Tustin's Wildest Party."



Modjeska's Bay Island Cottage "Little Arden"

Modjeska and Bozenta moved to Bay Island in July, 1908. Friends closest to them knew Modjeska's health was failing and visited her frequently. Dr. Boyd purchased his first automobile so he could remain in better contact with his friend and patient. In early 1909, it became evident that her days were numbered. James and Coralinn visited Modjeska on Wednesday March 10th. Days later, on March 16th, Modjeska fell ill and was hospitalized for a week. Her

condition improved slightly, but worsened after returning home. She went into a coma on April 2nd. Newspapers across the country reported on her condition nearly every day. Modjeska never woke from her coma. After suffering complications from a serious heart condition and an attack of Bright's Disease (an inflammation of the kidneys), on April 8, 1909, Madame Helena Modjeska passed away.

Modjeska's death was met with widespread sorrow in the U.S. and Poland. Thousands of mourners crowded the streets at four public funerals. Modjeska's Los Angeles funeral was held on April 12th, at St. Vibiana's Cathedral. Even schools were closed for the day and hundreds of mourners lined the streets. Her pallbearers included James Rice, Sam Tustin, Joseph Yoch, Richard Egan, and J.E. Pleasants. From Los Angeles, Modjeska's body traveled by rail to Chicago where Ralph lived. Her body then traveled to New York where services took place at St. Stanislaus Church. Lastly, Bozenta accompanied her body to Poland where she was laid to rest in her native Krakow. She and her husband, who died in Poland five years later, lie buried in Krakow's Rakowicki Cemetery.

After Modjeska's passing, Coralinn Rice led a movement to rename the tallest Peak of Old Saddleback, Santiago Peak, named after St. James, the patron saint of Spain and one of the Twelve Apostles to "Mount Modjeska," in Modjeska's honor. However, the name was too well established and was not changed. Luckily, the second highest peak of Old Saddleback was unnamed and simply known as "North Peak." In June, 1909, The Ebell Society of Santa Ana successfully campaigned to have North Peak renamed to Modjeska Peak.

In 1923, one of the principal investors of the Modjeska Country Club, Charles Walker, founder of Farmers and Merchants Bank, purchased the Modjeska house in Modjeska Canyon, and for the next 63 years made Arden his family's vacation home. The Walker Family's long-term care and sensitivity to the historic buildings and grounds resulted in the ultimate preservation of this site. In 1986, the family sold the property to the County of Orange for the purpose of establishing a historic park.

In 1990, the site was designated a National Historic Landmark. It remains one of only two National Historic Landmarks in Orange County. The other is Richard Nixon's birthplace in Yorba Linda. After several years of intense restoration, Arden opened to the public in 1992. To sign up for docent lead tours of Modjeska's Arden, visit www.ocparks.com/modjeska.

Modjeska's Tustin home was moved from its original location during the construction of the 5 and 55 freeways circa 1950 to 1037 W 1st Street, and is now part of the Santa Ana Assistance League Property.



The Helena Modjeska Historic House and Gardens