



# Helena Modjeska

... Orange County's  
First Celebrity

The Orange County Archives

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Presented by Phil Brigandi  
to the Orange County Board of Supervisors  
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**The Orange County Archives**

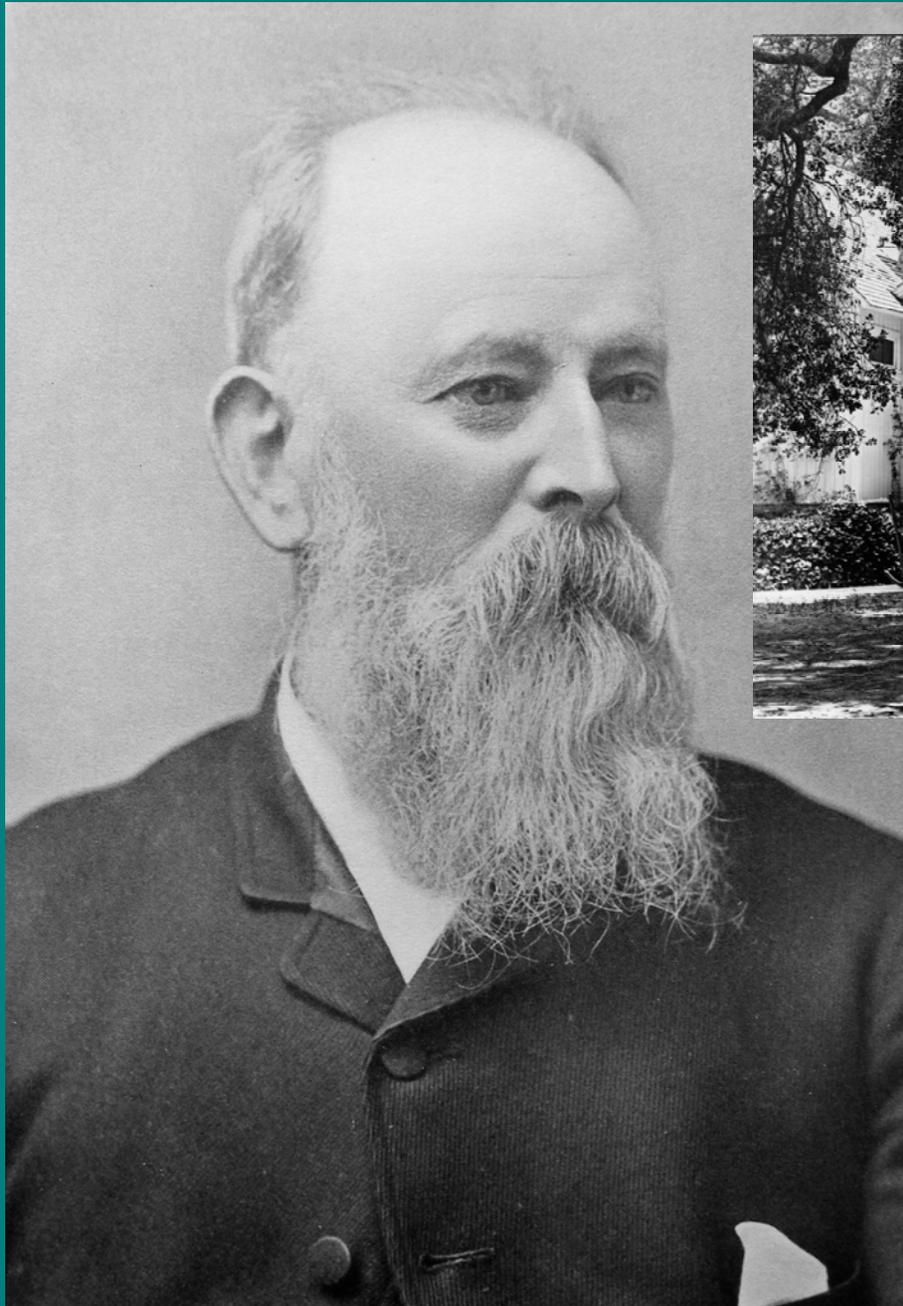
- Helena Modjeska was Orange County's first international celebrity.
- Normally we wouldn't spend a lot of time talking about someone just because they're a celebrity who happens to live in Orange County. But Madame Modjeska did much more than just live here – she was a big part of the cultural and social life of the county. And her story is really unique.
- Madame Modjeska was born in Poland in 1840. She came from a family of actors and musicians. She was considered the shy one, but she was determined to go on the stage. And she built a great career for herself. But in the 1860s and '70s, Poland was already under Russian domination, and they controlled – and censored – the theatre.

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- Modjeska, and her husband, Count Bozenta, and a group of their artistic friends decided to come to America, to find freedom.
- They decided to move Anaheim, because they'd heard of the German colony there – and the richness of the soil. Modjeska was going to retire from the stage, and she and her friends were going to be farmers.
- They arrived here in 1876 – just in time for a drought.
- And these weren't farmers. They were actors, authors, musicians, artists. After just three months, Modjeska moved to San Francisco, learned English, and in 1877 went back on the stage, touring the United States and Europe.

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- Modjeska became a huge star. She didn't play that sort of melodramatic style. She was subtle, more natural. She made her name playing Shakespearean heroines, and was considered right up there with Sarah Bernhardt, and the Barrymores.
- Now, you'd be surprised how often people today say Modjeska was a great operatic star. Guess they just figure anyone with that much class and culture had to sing opera.
- In those days, even big stars had to tour the small towns. You couldn't just perform in New York and San Francisco. And so Modjeska crisscrossed the country by train for weeks on end.
- But even as her fame grew, she still remembered Orange County. She fondly recalled the visits she and her husband made into the Santa Ana Mountains, where they'd made friends with Ed Pleasants, one of the first American settlers in the mountains. He had a homestead up near the top of Santiago Canyon.



Ed Pleasants and his homestead  
In Santiago Canyon

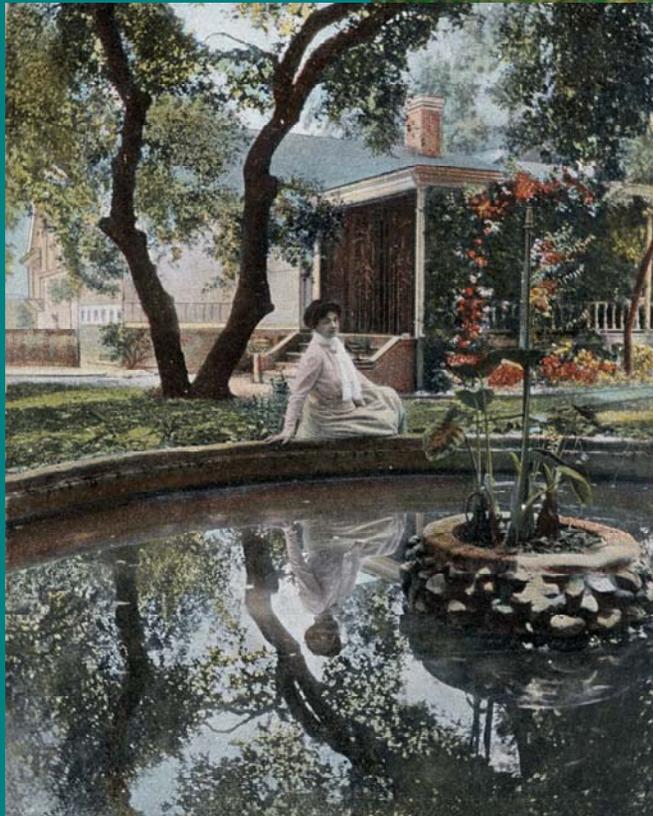
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- So in the 1880s, Madame Modjeska and Count Bozenta began spending their vacations in the Santa Ana Mountains, sometimes living with Judge Pleasants and his wife. Modjeska fell so much in love with the area that she convinced Judge Pleasants to sell his ranch to her. She kept buying more land, in fact, and eventually she owned over 1,300 acres.
- Now, Judge Pleasants lived in Santiago Canyon, and that's how it was known. But once Madame Modjeska moved in, it didn't take folks long to start calling that upper end of the canyon Modjeska Canyon. Eventually they even named the north half of Old Saddleback Modjeska Peak.
- Pleasants had just a little cottage in the canyon. But in 1888, Modjeska built an addition that's probably three times as big as the original house. Judge Pleasants' place is still there, on the east end of the house.

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- Modjeska called her home the Forest of Arden – one of the scenes in Shakespeare's "As You Like It." It was her vacation home, and later her retirement home when she stopped touring.
- But even in her later years, she would still perform in Orange County – especially for benefits. And she was friends with many of the local singers, actors, artists and authors. And, of course, her celebrity friends from her acting days would also come to see her at Arden.
- Helena Modjeska was, by all accounts, a truly remarkable woman. Along with her acting, she was a singer and a musician, she designed and sewed elaborate costumes, she was a writer – her memoirs are really quite engaging – and an artist. In fact, she wrote and illustrated a story for her grandchildren that can only be described as a science fiction adventure story full of all sorts of amazing creatures and inventions.

Madame  
Modjeska's  
"Arden"



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- She lived at Arden until 1906, then was briefly in Tustin before moving to a new home on Bay Island, in Newport Harbor. She spent her last few years there, dying in 1909. She's buried in Poland, where she is still considered a national hero.
- Her Modjeska Canyon property passed through several hands. For a while, they even tried to make a tourist resort out of the place. But eventually the home and grounds were purchased by the Walker family of Long Beach, who owned them for more than 60 years.
- In 1986, when they were finally ready to sell, we were very fortunate that a former Board of Supervisors stepped in, and agreed to purchase the property as a county park. The house has been restored, and is now a National Historic Landmark.
- The Old Courthouse Museum across the street currently is hosting an exhibit about Madame Modjeska, with artifacts, costumes and photos.



Modjeska Exhibit at the Old Courthouse Museum

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Orange County Clerk-Recorder Dept.  
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