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MODJESKA'S HOME

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MODJESKA'S HOME

The closing years of the last century and the opening decade of the twentieth witnessed the reign of the society queen and the search of the title hunter, the matinee idol and the stage door Johnny, the evangelist, the minstrel, and the muckraker. In the entertainment world, American drama passed through its richest period in variety of presentations and excellence in acting. Preceding the era of the "star system", the stock company tended to dominate the stage, but there was never a more brilliant array of beloved actors and actresses in our history.¹

In the vanguard of these leaders, and one of the most notable women who ever made a home in California, was Helena Modjeska. She was born Helena Opid, on October 12, 1840, in Cracow, Poland, where her father, a philologist, taught high school. Helena was one of ten children, of whom two brothers and a sister preceded her on the stage. While still in her teens, she married her tutor, Gustave Modrzejewski, which name she later shortened to Modjeska at the request of her first American producer, John McCul-

1. W. Winter, The Wallat of time, I, 27-33.

lough, manager of the famous California Theater in San Francisco.

With the aid of her husband, Helena started her stage career in Cracow, played in Germany in 1863, and returned to her native city two years later to become the favorite of her day. About that time her first husband died, and in 1868 she married Charles Bogenta Chlapowski, a Polish noble, who acted as her manager for the remainder of her career. During the same year, Modjeska accepted an invitation to join the Imperial Theater in Warsaw. She remained there until 1876, winning acclaim as the "reigning actress of the nation."²

Modjeska's success in her home country was not to be enjoyed to the full. Always a sincere Polish patriot, she was disgusted with the increasing severity of the stage censorship imposed by the Russian imperial government after the unsuccessful nationalist uprising of 1863. Furthermore, her health was failing, and a long sea voyage seemed advisable. A vacation from the theater was also indicated by the harsh criticism of other actresses and their supporters, jealous of her eminence.

2. W. P. Eaton, "Helena Modjeska" in Dictionary of American Biography, XIII, 73; H. Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 15-231.

With a group of fellow Poles whose political views also made life under the Russian repression more difficult, Kodjeska and her husband decided to go to America. They were attracted by the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. But more than this, the group had decided to settle in California where they would establish a communal colony based on the Brook Farm idea.

California, they had little doubt, was an earthly paradise. Here game abounded for the shooting, gold was plentiful, and coffee grew wild. Fruits did not have to be cultivated, and flourished three times as large as in any other country. "Blackberries and the fruit of the cactus grow wild, and they say the latter is simply delicious!" There were some obstacles but these could easily be overcome. The mountain lions would provide good hunting, and one could kill the rattlesnakes with sticks.

These ideas were discussed in preliminary conversations, but two of the group made a voyage of reconnaissance and confirmed their rather fantastic notions. Their scouts reported a paradise of "green meadows, blue hills, and orange-blossoms." Madame Kodjeska explains: "Of course it must not be forgotten that our friend was there in the spring, after heavy rains, and the country really looked green."

Having decided that California was the paradise in

which to establish their coöperative Utopia, the colonists made preparations to emigrate. They provisioned themselves with the materials needed in the wilderness: heavy rugs, telescopes, brass knuckles, guns, two huge medicine boxes, and a quantity of surgical instruments. There were eight colonists in all, five of whom were adults; Henry K. Sienkiewicz, who later wrote Quo Vadis, was one of the party.³

The group sailed to America in the summer of 1876, stayed for a while in New York and Philadelphia, and then continued to California by way of the Isthmus of Panama. After a short stay in San Francisco, the party went south to Anaheim in Orange County. That town had been selected by the scouts for their experiment because of the mild climate and the presence of a colony of Germans, for the members of the party spoke German but no English.

There they rented a small ranch house, on the present site of the Anaheim High School, consisting of "two bedrooms, a dining room, a so-called parlor, with a square piano and a sofa." About a hundred feet away stood a barn in which two of the men camped because the house was too small to accommodate the whole party.

Modjeska's dream of finding freedom, peace, and

3. Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 241-259.

happiness was not fulfilled. Their surroundings were painfully commonplace and discouraging. "The only redeeming point was the view of the mountains of the Sierra Madre to the north, and of the Santa Ana range in the east." But a far greater drawback to the success of the cooperative was their unfamiliarity with hard labor. As one of the townspeople who knew them said, "They expected to plant their trees and crops and then sit in their hammocks on the veranda, smoke cigarettes and watch things grow." Besides, all the members indulged different tastes, making house-keeping for them a troublesome job. Thus, at breakfast five different drinks were served - tea, coffee, milk, chocolate, and wine-soup.

It required only a few months of hard labor - of washing clothes, splitting firewood, tending crops - for the novelty of the experiment to wear off. During this time, Chlapowski spent some 15,000 dollars, and would have spent more had not Madame Modjeska recognized its futility. She decided, therefore, to go to San Francisco, study English, and return to the stage.⁴

4. Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 265-289; L. E. Dickson, "The founding and early history of Anaheim, California" in Annual publications, Historical Society of Southern California, XI, 35; A. Inkersley, "Modjeska's life in California" in Overland monthly, LVII, 177-180.

After studying her new language for only six months, Modjeska started her American career in August, 1877, with a production of Adrienne Lecouvreur at the California Theater. She was immediately hailed by the public, and signed for a two-year tour. The next few years were spent on the American and English stages, with occasional trips to Poland. A notable theatrical innovation of Modjeska's was her production of Ibsen's Doll's House, which she introduced at Louisville, Kentucky, in 1883. This was probably the first Ibsen production in English, and certainly the first in this country. Unfortunately, she used the "happy ending" then in fashion in Europe, despite the author's protests. At the time, however, Modjeska's Nora "attracted no attention - as, indeed, it did not deserve to, with the whole point removed by the botched, sentimental ending."⁵

During the early years of her renewed career, probably in 1882, Modjeska bought the California estate which is now preserved as a memorial for her. While the Anaheim colony was in existence, Modjeska had visited some friends who lived in Santiago Cañon, in the Santa Ana Mountains. She was enchanted with the location and establishment of her homesteader friends. They had a tiny shanty

5. Eaton, Helena Modjeska, 73.

near which was a vine-and rose-covered arbor furnished and used as an outdoor dining room and living room. The kitchen was also outdoors, under a wide-spreading oak. Wild lilac, honeysuckle, and oaks grew all around, and the swift-running Santiago Creek passed in front. In the distance were mossy rocks, and mountains, the whole dominated by Flores Peak which rose from the other side of the creek.

This charming spot was bought and named "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." Here they built a "... bungalow of modest dimensions, but in harmony with the surroundings, and designed by Stanford White." "Arden" meant to Modjeska a haven of retreat from the turmoil of the world, and she often returned to her mountain home.⁶

Modjeska crossed the ocean for the last time in 1903 to settle at "Arden." The United States had some years before become her adopted country when Count Chlapowski became a citizen. Their world-famous compatriot, Paderewski, visited their mountain retreat two years later. In the

6. Modjeska, Memories and Impressions, 293-294, 540-541.

taurant for some years, but in 1923 the home was made into a memorial museum.⁸ Roundabout it still stand the old oaks, whose rustling leaves whisper of the graceful, charming woman who walked among them.

8. Inkersley, Modjeska's life in California, 185; F. Rider, California, a guidebook for travelers, 579.

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