



# *Modjeska Monteith Simkins*

*A South Carolina  
Revolutionary*

Becci Robbins

2025 Marion Street  
Columbia, South Carolina (24)  
April 17, 1944.

C  
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P  
Y

The Honorable Olin D. Johnston  
Governor of South Carolina  
The State Capitol  
Columbia, South Carolina.

My dear Sir:

According to certain of your public statements which have been brought into high relief very recently in connection with the Special Session of the General Assembly of South Carolina, you hold that the mere fact of being born of white parents transcends all other human values, - that all white men and all white women are superior to all men and women of color simply because they are not born white. And there are thousands in South Carolina who think just as you do. But it happens that I do not agree in the least with you and your constituency on this thing you call "white supremacy".

With the assistance of your adherents, however, you should be able to give a precise definition of what you term "white supremacy," and to present logical and indisputable data to substantiate whatever you think it is. I do not believe, on the other hand, that you will be able to present authentic information to prove your claims.

Consequently, since in South Carolina at the present time you are the most outstanding exponent and advocate of the "white supremacy" concept, I am hereby CHALLENGING YOU TO PUBLIC DEBATE on the subject, Resolved: The Concept of "White Supremacy" is Sound - Biblically, Historically, and Scientifically. In your presentation, I am challenging you to prove, unequivocally and conclusively, that you are superior to me to say nothing of the hundreds of Negroes and other nationally and internationally renowned persons of color.

The least publicity on the prospective debate would draw a discerning audience. While the composite reactions of the audience would give each of us some idea of the impressions made, there must be special judges. You may choose one judge; I shall choose one, and we must agree on a third. Better still, you may choose two and I shall choose one. If you desire, you may select any person of your choice as a colleague. In that case, I shall choose a second.

The debate may be held in any public assembly hall in Columbia, preferably in the Hall of the General Assembly on an evening during your Special Session.

Page 2. Governor Johnston.

The time has come for a showdown on the "white supremacy" issue. Demagoguery, haranguing, supposition, and emotionalism must be pitted against logic, commonsense, science, and the teachings of Jesus Christ. I remember, by the way, that you are a good Baptist - a member of the First Baptist Church here in Columbia. Therefore, Dr. Campbell, whom I believe to be a brilliant theologian, may be willing to assist you with your biblical data.

Now, I am awaiting an early if not an immediate reply to my challenge - just as soon as you can possibly arrange your schedule. But if I receive no answer by midnight of April 22, or if you reply that you will not accept the challenge, it could be considered as conclusive proof that you and your fellow-travelers realize that you have been bluffing yourselves all along.

It could also be considered as clear evidence that you have conceded that "white supremacy" is a myth for which, therefore, neither sensible nor scientific bases can be found. Such an admission made either by your disregard of this challenge or by your expressed refusal to accept it would place you in an embarrassing situation, my dear Governor, for many besides the two of us would learn of your refusal to defend your favorite concept, as fanatically as you have done before, when it is challenged by an intelligent, educated person.

Very sincerely yours,

*In her inimitable style, Modjeska wrote this letter challenging Governor Olin D. Johnston to a public debate on white supremacy — this during a special session of the legislature, which passed 147 laws in six days to change political parties to private clubs as a way to circumvent a court order forcing parties to open their primaries to black voters.*

*She warns that if he doesn't respond, "it could be considered clear evidence that you have conceded that 'white supremacy' is a myth for which neither sensible nor scientific bases can be found."*

*The governor did not respond.*



## Thank you

Brett Bursey

Kyle Criminger

Beryl Dakers

Bobby Donaldson

Graham Duncan

Vennie Deas Moore

John Egerton

James Felder

Tom Felder

Bob Hall

Jacquelyn Hall

Herb Hartsook

Eunice “Tootsie” Holland

Ed Madden

Constance Ashton Myers

Victoria Reed

Jhan Robbins

Historic Columbia

Richland County Conservation Commission

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South Caroliniana Library

University of South Carolina Libraries, South Carolina Political Collections



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**M**odjeska Monteith Simkins was bigger than any box anyone tried to put her in, broader than any label anyone tried to pin on her, more fearless than any politician who dared take her on.

She was uniquely a product of her time and place, a well-educated, well-off, light-skinned black woman with a spine of steel and an appetite for justice.

She wore many hats in her long, busy life. She was a teacher, banker, writer, campaign adviser, public speaker, and health care worker. She was a tireless advocate for the poor, the mentally ill, the incarcerated, and the disenfranchised.

The title she gave herself most often was hell-raiser.

“I’m a creature of confrontation,” she said. “My first name is fight. My middle name is fight. And my last name is fight.”

And fight she did. South Carolina has not seen the likes of her, before or since. Over the more than half-century that she was politically active, Modjeska belonged to dozens of organizations — and left nearly as many. Some she simply outgrew; some edged her out. The power elite, white and black alike, were threatened by her radical politics and no-nonsense, no-holds-barred brand of diplomacy.

Fuelled by a lifelong sense of passion and urgency, Modjeska had no use for making nice. “You don’t need no mealy-mouthin’ and messin’ around,” she said. “If something needs to be done, it’s got to be done.”

Modjeska didn’t suffer fools gladly, and Lord knows she crossed paths with more

than a few. They included governors and senators, council members, and university presidents. Titles did not impress her so much as provoke her, and she was not shy about speaking her mind.

“I’ve never had an inferiority complex,” she said. “And I’ve never seen anybody in the world I was scared of — I’m just that big a fool.”

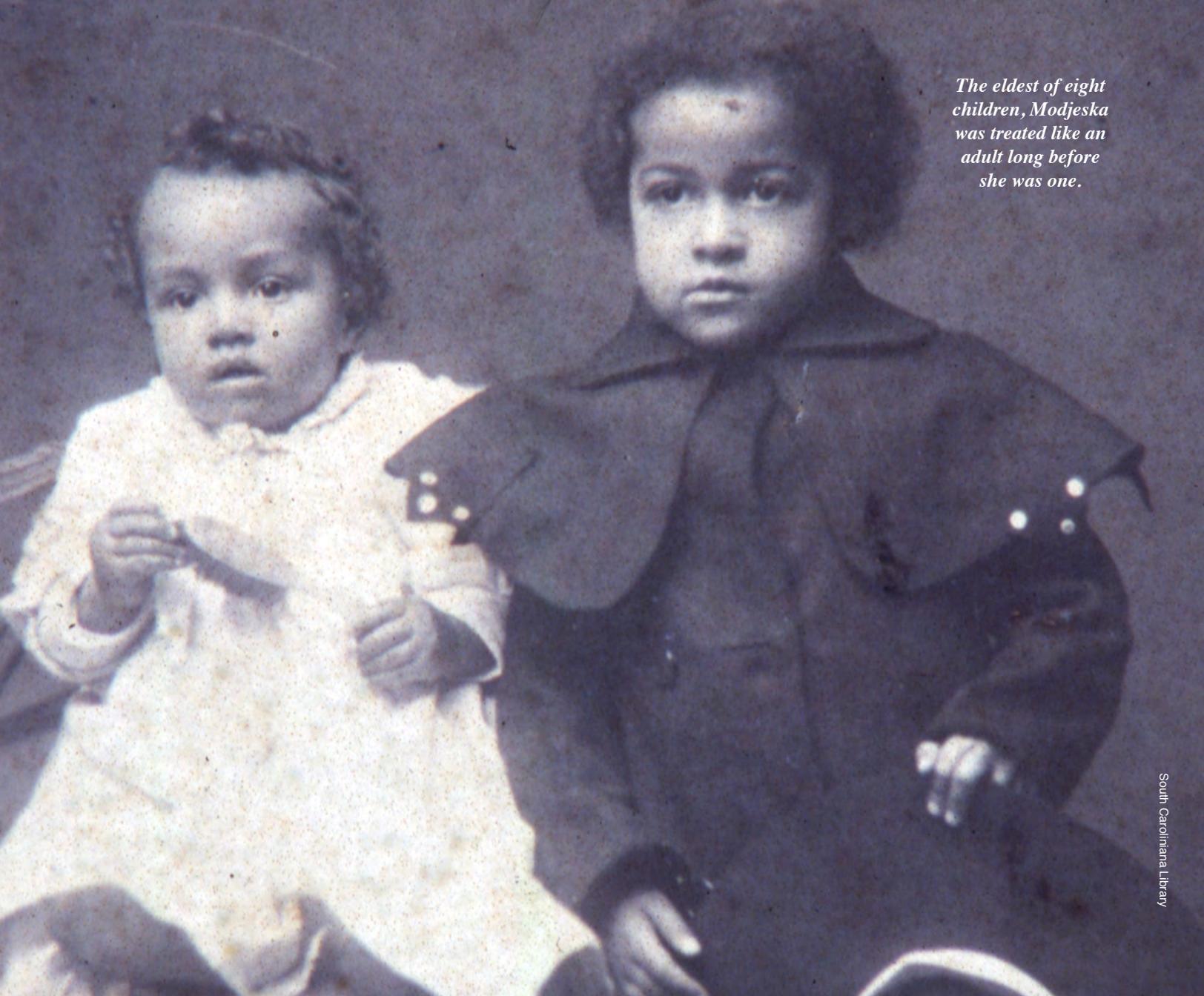
That fighting spirit was woven in the DNA knitting one generation of her family to the next. “Stand up for yourself,” she said. “I was brought up that way.”

## Family Roots

Modjeska was named after the Polish actress Helena Modjeska. “My mother’s baby sister thought it was a beautiful name. She loaded me up with that, and I’ve been toting it all these years,” she said.

When she was born on Dec. 5, 1899, the state constitution legalizing segregation was four years old. That document didn’t just condone racism, it codified it.

Not so many years removed from the turmoil that followed the Civil War, the Palmetto State was suffering an identity crisis, reluctantly reinventing itself as the political and social landscape shifted



*The eldest of eight children, Modjeska was treated like an adult long before she was one.*

*Modjeska's mother, Rachel Hull Monteith, was a prominent educator and community activist who fashioned big shoes for her children to fill. Here she sits with Modjeska, Rebecca and baby Henry.*

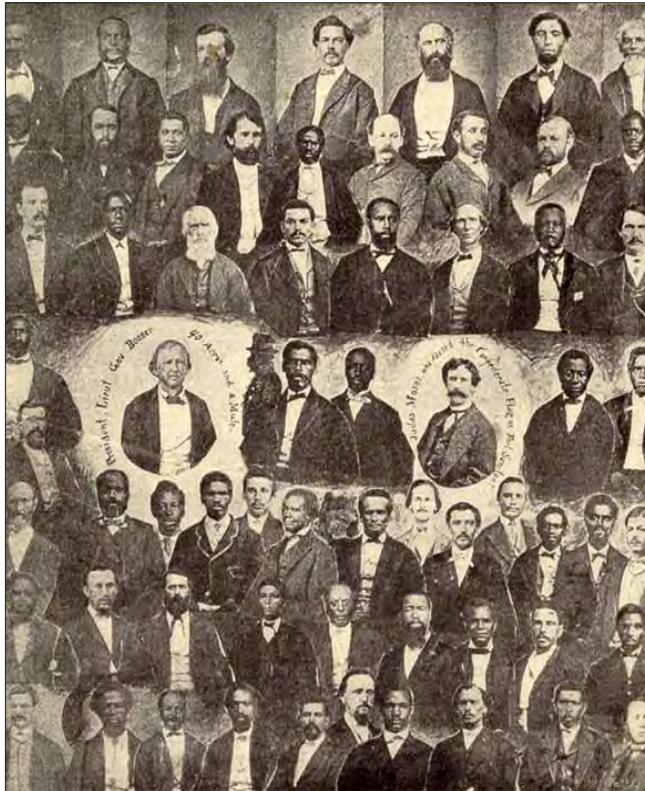


radically. By the end of Reconstruction, South Carolina had the only majority-black House of Representatives in the country, a diversity of members not seen before or repeated since.

Local and state governments — peopled and powered by wealthy white men — resisted change at every turn. The threat of emancipated blacks to the established order gave rise to extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Red Shirts, determined to preserve the status quo at any cost. By the turn of the century, any progress made by blacks in South Carolina had been crushed.

These were grim and perilous days to be born black in the American South. In hindsight, however, Modjeska's birth seems perfectly timed, a fortunate convergence of talent, passion, and opportunity in exactly the right place.

Her life spanned a remarkable chapter in American history, decades marked by great tragedy and great promise, and by extraordinary change. Modjeska's grandparents on both sides of her family were enslaved, their stories heartbreaking and triumphant.



*Members of the first S.C. General Assembly after the Civil War comprised a body that has never been as diverse.*

## SHESAID

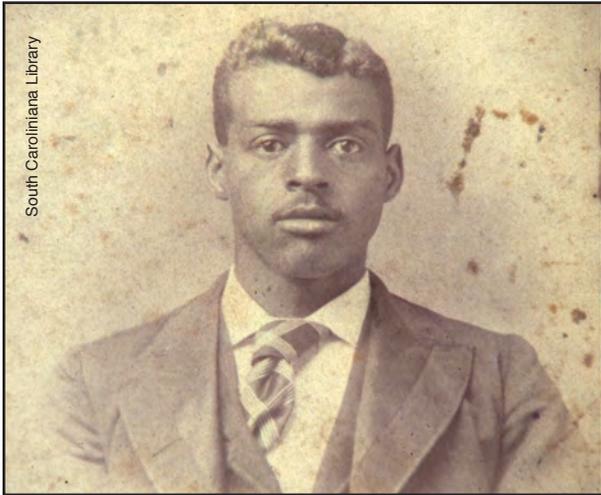
“We must pay the world for the space we take.”

“I lived in the lynching era, and they are still lynching, but it’s now a lynching of the mind.”

“There is no more debased and groveling a slave than one who sees what is wrong but who fears man so much more than he does God that he cannot gather the strength to speak out loudly against that wrong.”

“I don’t want to see anybody suffer. You know we are all a part of humanity, and when one of us loses, we all lose. When one human being dies, each of us dies a little bit, too.”

“Until the silent majority takes over from the vocal minority, nothing in this state will change.”



“My grandparents, they were all slaves,” Modjeska said. “My daddy’s mother was black as three midnights. She was born in 1840. When freedom was declared, she was working in the home of this white family, kind of well-to-do. As the old folks used to say, the head of that family bedded my grandmother, black as homemade sin, and here come my pretty, brown-skinned daddy.

*Modjeska’s father, Henry Monteith (above) was a master brick mason who oversaw construction projects across the South, including Olympia cotton mill in Columbia.*

“My daddy’s daddy never disowned his flesh. We admired him for that, although I’m not proud to say that things came about that way. My father never lost the sting of how he came about.

“Here is what he resented his mother more for: this old man had a daughter by another colored woman in Columbia, and he gave money to educate both of these children. But my grandmama was one of them going-to-heaven Baptists,

so she gave it to the preacher, and [my father] never got through the third grade.”

Of her maternal grandmother, Sarah, Modjeska said, “She was a house slave, and her mother was a quarter slave — that is, lived in the quarters with what

they call the servant slaves. She was very devoted to her mother, and after dark would slip to the quarters to see her. Her mistress found out, and had her whipped the next morning. I understand she was undressed in the presence of some of the people on the plantation.”

Humiliated for what she vowed would be the last time, Sarah ran away to Columbia to find her grandmother. On the highway from Sumter, she saw Union soldiers in the road, and fled into the woods to hide. They told her not to run because she was as free as they were. Like many emancipated Americans, she wouldn’t find out about her changed status until months after the fact.

Modjeska’s father was the son of wealthy white Columbia lawyer Walter Monteith and his family’s hired nursemaid, Mary Dobbins, who was formerly enslaved. She gave birth to Henry in 1870.



Henry Monteith would be forever haunted by the circumstances of his birth, and vowed that his own children would never work as hired help in a white home, then one of the few ways black females could earn money.

He was strong-willed and fearless, Modjeska said, recounting a time when he faced down an Alabama redneck who taunted him with the severed finger of a black lynching victim.

Although schooled only through the third grade, Henry was ambitious and quick with figures. “He had a marvellous mind,” Modjeska said. When she was young, he taught her how to read blueprints and make complex calculations, nurturing in her a confidence with numbers and a love of math that would stay with her. “I was always interested in exactness,” she said.

Henry was a master brick mason who built a solid professional reputation in the region, heading up construction projects across the South during the burgeoning industrial revolution. He worked long hours and was often on the road, leaving Modjeska to assume the role of parent when he was gone.

The eldest of seven siblings (an eighth died in infancy), Modjeska was treated

like an adult long before she was one. As a young girl she took on responsibilities that required her to travel alone into Columbia to pay bills and run errands.

Modjeska’s mother, Rachel Hull Monteith, and several of her aunts were leaders in the Niagara Movement, founded in 1905 by W.E.B. DuBois and named for the “mighty current of change” the group envisioned. They called for full integration and voting rights, rejecting the path of conciliation advocated by prominent black leaders such as Booker T. Washington who favored slower, incremental change.



South Caroliniana Library

“The movement rises up when the pressure comes down.”

“I believe in fighting against injustice: Black, Indian, Chicano, Mexican-American – it doesn’t matter to me.”

“I think if the Southern Negro Youth Congress could have gone on, there would have been great change in the South because younger people would have worked together better. But the power structure doesn’t want that. They don’t want poor whites and Negroes getting along. There’s always been the effort by the reigning element to keep the forces of blacks and whites apart.”

“I remember telling the mayor: I’ve been begging you all these years, and I’m not begging anymore. I’ve got the vote now. See you at the ballot box!”

“Simkins denounced her fellow Carolinians’ confidence in the normal evolution of society and urged extreme self-sacrifice to alter history’s course,” writes David Chappell in *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*. “Her witty, withering denunciations of white gradualists and the black ‘ain’t ready yet conclave’ are prophetic in tone. In dangerous times like hers, Simkins had no patience with liberal gradualism.”

Modjeska inherited that radicalism from her mother, who made her firstborn a Niagara member when she was a toddler. Young Modjeska was used to going to meetings with her mother long before Rachel helped start the Columbia branch NAACP in 1917. These experiences exposed Modjeska to people and ideas that would help shape her social and political consciousness. Her mother and aunts fostered a sense of responsibility to the community, and a belief that she had the power to change it.

While the men in the family were accomplished professionals, it was the women in Modjeska’s family who were more spirited and boldly political. Asked why that was so, Modjeska had her theories. “It has always been said that the only two classes of people free in the South are white men and black women,”

she said. “The mother instinct in them is one thing — you know, a cat or a bird will fight for its children. The other is that in very few instances have Negro women been lynched; they lynched black men.

“Women got away with things that a man wouldn’t have gotten away with saying or doing. Take the case of Rosa Parks. If that had been a Negro man, they would have thrown him out on his can. They put her in jail, but they certainly didn’t abuse her.”

In *Southern Black Women in the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, Merline Pitre writes, “Throughout the South, black women were crucial to the civil rights movement, serving as grass roots and organizational leaders. Ignored at the time by white politicians and the media alike, with few exceptions they worked behind the scenes to effect the changes all in the movement sought. “

Pitre notes, “Until relatively recently, historians, too, have largely ignored their efforts. It was African-American women, collectively and individually, who had to challenge the racial status quo in South Carolina.”

Modjeska’s mother was one of those women. She was a community activist and a prominent, well-respected educator

in Columbia. In 1932, to recognize her long service as a teacher and principal there, the New Hope School — opened in 1890 — was renamed the Monteith School in her honor.

Education, both biblical and secular, was a priority in the Monteith home. Rachel made a habit of reading books to her children, all of whom would go to college. She read fairy tales and children’s classics, as well as movement newsletters and stories from the daily newspaper, sparing them none of the chilling details of the day, including lynchings. (South Carolina recorded 186 lynchings between 1880 and 1947.) In reading the horrific accounts and showing them graphic photographs, Rachel was preparing her children for the cruel reality of living in dangerous times.

Modjeska’s mother was practical and tough, the family disciplinarian. The Monteiths lived on a small working farm on the outskirts of Columbia. With her husband often on the road, Rachel was left alone for long stretches of time with their small children. Not one to leave things to chance, she had a gun and knew how to use it. More importantly, everyone else knew it, too.

Although Modjeska was born in the city, when she was still young her family

*Modjeska at Benedict College*



moved to the country because Henry didn't want his daughters to work in a white home, the kind of arrangement that had put his mother at risk.

“So, he bought land outside of Columbia,” Modjeska said. “He wanted his children to learn how to work and to know the value of a dollar. We raised cotton, and we raised all our foodstuffs except perhaps rice and sugar. And we made our own molasses, white potatoes, sweet potatoes, peanuts, vegetables for canning. My mother would corn beef and kill pork. We had smokehouse arrangements, and we had our own well. So we were self-sustaining.”

Through her chores on the farm, Modjeska learned to pull her own weight as well as the satisfaction of self-sufficiency. But she was no country bumpkin. She was smart and well-read, with dreams of living in France. She also wanted to become a lawyer, but her father thought such pursuits unsuitable for a young woman.

Modjeska could already read when she entered first grade at Benedict School, so was immediately advanced a grade. She was taught by “Yankee teachers,” white women who came into the South to educate black students when the state schools failed to do so.

“I revere their memories,” Modjeska said. “They came down and taught for years, some of them for nothing. They gave us a type of training that you just don't get today. There was a certain stamp of culture that was required before you made the mark. It was a polishing process, and every day you got a little brighter.”

The irony and unintended consequence of South Carolina's policies of exclusion was that Modjeska and her classmates received a superior education, not just in academics but in race consciousness. Things were not simply black and white; the world, and its people, were shades of both.

That perspective would inform Modjeska's political and personal relationships, broadening her view of history and her place in it.

Modjeska's passion for public service, her lifelong habit of caring for “the least of these,” was instilled in her as a child. She was raised in a Baptist church that preached doing good works, and in a family that practiced it. The Monteith home often served as a refuge for neighbors down on their luck. It was customary for the family to visit people in the hospital and in nursing homes, to reach out to neighbors in crisis and provide them with practical and financial support.



Modjeska Monteith Simkins Papers, South Carolina Political Collections, University of South Carolina

“My mother and father were always interested in helping people. They were concerned when somebody was taken advantage of, and my mother was very sensitive to people's problems. Very often we would leave the fields and my mother would say, ‘Well, we'll have to go and see Mrs. So-and-so because she is sick.’ I can remember

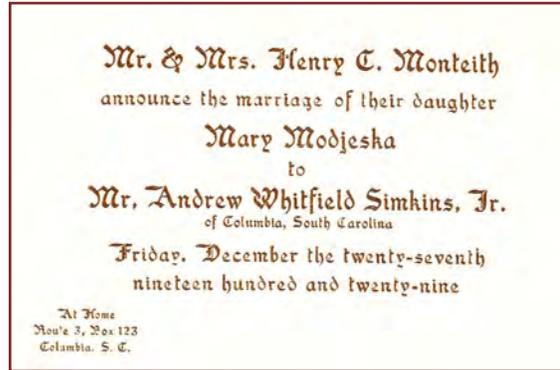
those sick rooms, you know; they didn't have electricity, no electric fans, and windows were made of wood. They didn't have any way to cool people. They would have a sheet wrung out of water and hang it up over the bed, and as that sheet would dry, it would cool them.

“My mother would say, ‘You go out there and get some leaves off that peach tree and beat them so I can put them on Sister So-and-so’s head.’ The men in the rural area in those days didn’t think that a woman got through the week unless she got a whipping. And so my mother anointed many of them where they were whipped.”

## Finding Her Voice

In college, Modjeska concentrated her studies on history, world religions, and mathematics. After graduating in 1921, she stayed on at Benedict for a year, teaching ancient history. She then was hired at all-black Booker T. Washington School in Columbia, where she taught algebra.

“They tried to get me to teach South Carolina history but I didn’t want to — in fact, I refused to use the textbook,” she



said, deeming it racist. Modjeska was already finding her voice, speaking up at faculty meetings and school board functions.

She was also becoming increasingly involved in the community outside of school. And so began her journey as an activist — as well as her lifelong habit of making some of her colleagues uncomfortable.

On the eve of the Great Depression, in 1929, Modjeska married businessman Andrew Simkins over the Christmas holidays. She was forced to quit teaching, as in those days only single women were allowed in the classrooms. “I got a husband and lost a job,” she would quip.

The twice-widowed Andrew was 16 years older than Modjeska. A former college

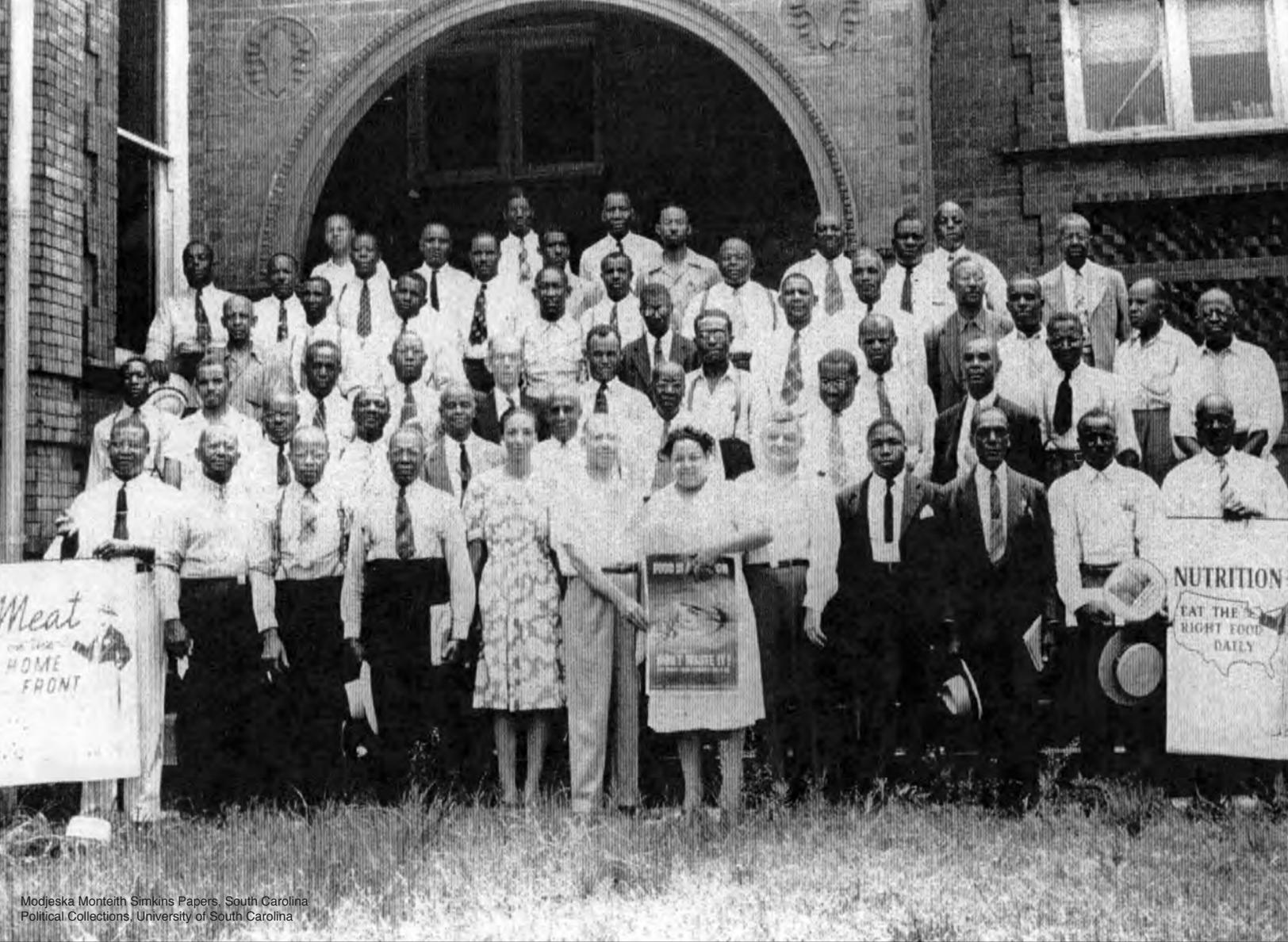
“I don’t know how it is in white churches; I know how it is in the black churches. They get the women to do the hard work, but when officers are elected, it is very seldom that they put a woman in position. That’s also true in almost any organization.”

“Some people are just like contented cows. Their eyes and mouths are wide open, but their minds are sound asleep.”

“The masses are crushed by politicians who don’t understand poverty or homelessness.”

“I cannot be bought and will not be sold.”

“If you’ve got enough sense in your noggin, you’re going to know a fight is there — not just for black people, but for all mankind.”



Modjeska Monteith Simkins Papers, South Carolina  
Political Collections, University of South Carolina

*Modjeska (in flowered dress) was the first African-American to hold a full-time, statewide public health position in South Carolina.*

professor and insurance salesman, he was a carpenter, owned real estate, and operated a service station. Social by nature, Andrew was a card player who loved parties but usually went alone, as Modjeska hated small talk. “I don’t want to be bored just to give people the pleasure of my company,” she said.

Their marriage was unconventional for the times, but of course Modjeska would not have entered into any arrangement that would diminish or define her. “Sometimes a woman is kind of curbed by her husband’s thinking,” she said. “I was just as free to follow my interests as if I had not been married.”

While the new couple was financially secure enough that Modjeska didn’t need

a job, she wasn’t one to sit around the house — much less tend to it. In fact, she wasn’t domestic at all, proudly claiming to never having ironed even one of her husband’s shirts. A housekeeper and a relative moved in to care for Andrew’s five children, leaving Modjeska free to support various causes with her time and money.

## Fighting for Their Lives

In 1931, Modjeska was hired by the S.C. Tuberculosis Association as Director of Negro Work, making her the first black to hold a full-time, statewide public health position in South Carolina. She spent 10 years working an aggressive campaign to improve the health and quality of life for the state’s poorest, most vulnerable citizens.

At the time, the death rate from tuberculosis for blacks was three to four times that of whites, a crisis compounded by the fact that it took decades for hospitals to allow black patients full access. One of the poorest states, South Carolina was suffering from the deep-rooted problems of poverty and poor health. In the cities, low wages, high unemployment, bad sanitation, and substandard housing were widespread. Rural areas, already

“I can always look through muddy water and see dry ground ahead.”

“Start each sunrise as a new day. Start out believing there’s good to be done and people to do it for.”

“War makes killers. War hardens men. War unbalances men, for war is a type of insanity.”

“We must remember that as long as one man’s liberties are restricted, all men’s liberties are imperiled.”

“Be careful not to throw out bad vibes. We paint a picture as we go along. We want to be remembered for contributing something.”

“I’m not going to say that there hasn’t been change; I’m saying that it all came as a result of struggle. The power structure doesn’t give anybody anything.”



*In the '50s and '60s, Modjeska and her husband owned Motel Simbeth on Hwy. 1.*

reeling from the financial uncertainties of sharecropping and declining cotton sales, were now facing a full-blown economic depression.

Bad as things were for the country at large, they were much worse for African-Americans. Writer Carol Sears Botsch noted, “As whites lost jobs, they moved into positions that had traditionally been held by blacks.

In the first nine months of 1930 alone, jobs for South Carolina’s African-Americans dropped by nearly 35 percent.

“Federal jobs provided through the New Deal helped, but in most places in South Carolina

whites received preference. Although the WPA, a federal relief agency, did not discriminate in terms of salary, the better jobs in all the relief programs almost always went to whites.”

Botsch continues, “In 1935, Modjeska Simkins and other black leaders attended

a meeting called by WPA officials concerning prospective jobs. Learning that the WPA officials planned to offer blacks only low-skilled manual labor positions, Modjeska and another leader, Dr. Robert Mance, demanded better jobs for African-Americans. The result was that the WPA hired black teachers for the schools and black professionals for a state history project and an anti-tuberculosis

project in Columbia. These reforms were unique.”

With meager funding from the state, Modjeska was tasked with raising money herself, all while setting up and managing health clinics in classrooms,

church halls, cotton mills, and tobacco fields across the state in a daunting effort to stanch the sharp rise in deaths from tuberculosis and other illnesses ravaging black communities.

“At that time, the incidence of tuberculosis was very high among

blacks,” Modjeska said. “The South Carolina Tuberculosis Association decided that the problem was so real that they wanted to set up a special program for blacks. The rate was very high because of the conditions under which they were forced to live: open houses, open wells, often no toilets, unscreened houses, poor incomes.”

Describing the diet of blacks in rural South Carolina, she added, “I can remember when we moved to the country, the chief food was cornbread with some fatback grease poured over it and some black molasses. Now, blackstrap is the worst kind of molasses you can get. It’s what they used to give to the animals — like the dregs after you get through all the barrels.

“Cotton was king. I’ve seen cotton planted right up to the back steps because the planters wanted that cotton for the money. So they didn’t have any garden space, and if they did they didn’t have time to take care of it, so they didn’t know much about vegetables.”

Her travels across the state lecturing, running workshops, and raising money sharpened skills that would serve her well the rest of her life. The work was demanding, but gave her a deep and abiding understanding of the gap



South Carolina Library

between rich and poor, the powerful and powerless. The relationships she built with people at both of those extremes — and in between — gave her a unique perspective that made her a valuable liaison.

“I guess at one time I have known more black people in South Carolina than any other woman that wasn’t in politics,” Modjeska said. “So I was able to reach them.” She could speak to any audience with authority and firsthand experience about a rural South Carolina unknown to lawmakers crafting policy in Columbia and Washington.

While Modjeska was hired to reduce the incidence of tuberculosis, she took a broader and practical approach, teaching women about sexually transmitted diseases and other delicate matters of public health that raised the eyebrows and ruffled the feathers of her white colleagues.

She did more than talk about tuberculosis. She

*Card Modjeska used when she ran for the S.C. House in 1966.*

also was talking about politics — getting people registered, making sure they got to the polls, discussing the days’ issues, and demystifying the mechanics of voting.

Modjeska’s increasing involvement with politics and the NAACP became a problem for her boss, Chauncey MacDonald, who also didn’t like it that Modjeska was holding meetings on Sundays, a practice she thought ungodly. When she asked that she do as the white ladies did and meet on weekday mornings, Modjeska icily reminded MacDonald that the white women were able to do so because black women were at their homes taking care of their children.

The relationship between Modjeska and her boss soured, then became impossible.



“Men have messed up the world. Women produce the babies and then men send them off to die in places like Vietnam. It’s a shameful thing — and for what?”

“We are in an era of radical revolution of thought. We must keep an eagle eye out for ‘misleaders’ within our own ranks. There are demagogues, self-seekers, and crooks in every race.”

“America’s slumbering millions — as much brainwashed and hoodwinked on the violation of their liberties as any people — must be awakened to the onslaught on the bedrock of their liberties.”

“We have a job laid out for us, ladies and gentlemen; this is no sitting-down time.”

“I’m 92, but I feel like I’m 27. I tell folks, ‘Don’t start nothing, ’cause I ain’t near dead.’”

## THEY SAID

“There were people in the civil rights movement who were not afraid of the police dogs or going to jail, but being called a traitor to your country, that’s a scary thing. There are different kinds of courage – there’s physical and moral. But Modjeska had both. I don’t think she ever feared anything – man or beast.”

Anne Braden,  
civil rights activist

“She probably will be remembered as a woman who challenged everyone. She challenged the white political leadership of the state to do what was fair and equitable among all people, and she challenged black citizens to stand up and demand their rightful place in the state and the nation.”

Judge Matthew J. Perry

Modjeska Monteith Simkins

The cultural divide between them was too great, their motives too divergent.

“She came from a highly religious family,” Modjeska said. “I didn’t say Christian; I said religious. She thought quite often that I was an awful creature. She did not want me to work with the NAACP. I said, ‘Am I bringing production?’ She said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘Well, what’s the gripe?’ She just thought that I ought not be in it.

“I said, ‘Well, if that’s the way you feel about it, I’ll tell you how I feel: I’d rather all Negroes die and go to hell with tuberculosis than go through some of the things they’re suffering right now.’ Why, she just came near having 10 kittens!

“She had her qualms about venereal diseases, had the old-time idea that the way you get venereal disease is a sin. She always connected it with illicit sexual activity and did not want me to talk about venereal diseases at all. I refused.

“I quit working for them because the conditions became untenable. She told me I built up my program on personality, and what she meant by that was that I had made myself so close to the people that maybe it could create a problem. I said, ‘I think anybody that builds a public relations program builds it on personality.

Jesus Christ built his on personality, so I don’t see why you should fault me for that.’

“They never had another director of Negro program after that. They tried, but they could never get the Negro populace to accept a person in that position. So that’s the milk in the coconut.”

### “A Need So Cruel”

Modjeska worked closely with the Birmingham-based Southern Conference for Human Welfare, which operated between 1938 and 1948 to bring New Deal-inspired reforms to the South. One of the most prominent organizations to grow out of the movement for racial reform, the SCHW laid the groundwork for much of the civil rights organizing that followed.

“The Southern Conference for Human Welfare was organized as a direct outcome of the Roosevelt recovery program,” Modjeska said. “My husband didn’t have work; he worked on the bread line serving soup and apples to people here.

“People were just on their knees, and many of them were in abject poverty. I’ve ridden into certain sections of

this state where I wondered if South Carolina would ever come back. I've seen pot-bellied children eaten up with hookworms, rickets, impetigo, scabies, every earmark of malnutrition, and nothing to look forward to — nothing.

“You'd walk in some houses and you wouldn't see anything — nothing. There was just a need that was so cruel it would be hard for the average person to realize. I realized it because it was my job.”

She added, “The most pitiful human being in the world is what Negroes call a ‘po-tacky,’ a very, very, poor white person, like we found in mill villages. I used to ride through these towns where the factories were, the cotton mills, and see those poor little children, barefooted, bare-legged, bow-legged, razor shins and pigeon breasts. You could just look at them and tell they were infested with hookworms.

“So I say that the Roosevelt program came as almost a program out of the hands of Jesus Christ.”

## Inside and Outside the S.C. NAACP

In 1941, Modjeska left the Tuberculosis Association, and began serving as



*Victory Savings Bank in Columbia, cofounded by Modjeska, was the state's first and only black-owned bank.*

secretary of the South Carolina State Conference of the NAACP, a position she would keep for 16 years. She was the only woman holding elected office in that organization, and did so during what was arguably its most productive years in South Carolina.

During her tenure, she traveled widely giving lectures, holding meetings, and mapping strategy with some of the brightest minds of the times. In the mid-1940s, Modjeska worked with national

NAACP lead counsel Thurgood Marshall to win equal pay cases for black public school teachers. It was an issue close to her heart, making the victories all the sweeter.

Years earlier, when she was teaching, Modjeska was in line behind a white teacher at the bank one day, and was shocked to discover the difference in

their paychecks. “I saw she was making absolutely twice as much as I was making,” she said. “I know she wasn't a damn bit better teacher than I was, and I know I had as good an education as she had, but she was getting twice as much as I was getting.”

That bitter memory would fuel her passion for working to secure equal pay in South Carolina schools. In 1943, she became secretary of the Teachers Defense Fund, set up to raise money for court

“No one can deny that Negroes are entitled to representation in government, irrespective of whether office-holders be white or colored. The ultimate test of their civic responsibility lies in the nature of the persons they select to represent them. Modjeska Simkins represents trouble.”

The State editorial, 1966

“She was a fearless warrior for justice.

Through her deep concern and involvement in human and civil rights issues, she has touched the lives of many people across this state. She has never been afraid to take on battles, even when the odds were very much against her. She has been a source of inspiration to all of us.”

Henry Cauthen,  
The State editor, 1992

costs. In 1944, a year after teachers in Charleston won a case for equal pay, Modjeska’s sister Rebecca Hull Walton, a teacher at the Monteith School, won a similar lawsuit in Columbia.

South Carolina’s school districts slowly began to equalize salaries, but the battle over education equity was far from over. In fact, 20 years later Rebecca would again enlist Modjeska’s help to craft a legal case to integrate the University of South Carolina. In 1963, Rebecca’s daughter Henrie was one of three black students who were the first to enroll at the university. She would be the first to graduate.

The NAACP’s next target was the state’s all-white political primary system. In South Carolina and other Southern states, black voters were systematically excluded from the Democratic Party’s primaries. Because these were essentially one-party states, the policy kept black voters from any meaningful participation in the political process.

When the Supreme Court struck the practice in a Texas case in 1944, Modjeska and her allies began challenging the policy in South Carolina. After light-skinned George Elmore successfully registered, the state legislature met in a special session to craft a way to cir-

cumvent the Court’s legal directive by deeming the parties private clubs, free to operate under whatever exclusive rules they wished.

“Even though the Supreme Court had given us the right, these cats started making up new rules that you couldn’t vote,” Modjeska said. “We had to continue wrangling around here because they didn’t intend to do anything but run the business like it is a white man’s country.”

In face of continuing subterfuge by the Democratic Party, the state NAACP again went to court. The all-white primary finally was struck down in 1948, with Charleston Judge J. Waties Waring writing in his ground-breaking opinion, “It is time for South Carolina to rejoin the Union.”

The ruling ended the white-only primary, galvanizing civil rights activists to take full advantage of the new political reality. They wasted no time organizing in black communities. “We had a big registration campaign as soon as we had the decision against the primary,” Modjeska said. “We registered 150,000 people, enough to turn a politician wrong-side outwards.”

Momentum was building, and South Carolina activists knew it was critical to harness and focus that emerging energy.

TELEPHONE

-7079

# The Lighthouse

AND INFORMER

TELEPHONE

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“We were getting ready to open the statewide fight about the ballot, and I said we needed a newspaper,” Modjeska recounted. She helped recruit from Charleston the talented journalist John McCray, who set up shop in office space her husband owned in Columbia. Along with Osceola McKaine, they managed a merger of two newspapers to launch *The Lighthouse and Informer* in 1941.

Until it folded in 1954, it was the leading black newspaper in South Carolina. Modjeska, who also worked as a stringer for the Associated Negro Press, regularly wrote articles and edited copy. At the end, she briefly took over managing the newspaper while McCray was jailed on a probation violation stemming from questionable libel charges.

“McCray served time on the chain gang,” Modjeska said. “This was in the ’50s.

When he was convicted, the lawyer gave him time to call me asking me for help. He begged me to see that his family had food and to see that the paper got off the press. I did both, without him giving me a quarter.

“When McCray came back, he came by the office. He walked by and didn’t even say, ‘good morning’ or ‘thank you,’ and walked on out. I never saw him again. I ran the paper a little bit longer, and then he just closed it down. He was a good writer. Those papers were priceless.”

When McCray was convicted and sent away, he was serving as chair of the Progressive Party, which he had helped establish in 1944 to put black candidates in the field. Modjeska worked as the party’s lead strategist and adviser. While the party struggled to get candidates elected, it became a voting bloc

sought after by white candidates in the Democratic Party.

Modjeska herself became sought after because of her connections, skills, and increasing political clout. Black activists relied on her leadership, financial resources, and legal savvy. Her home on Marion Street, just blocks from the State House, became a hub of activity, an unofficial headquarters for grass roots organizing.

Because motels that would serve black people were few and far between in the segregated South, Modjeska opened her home to visiting lawyers, community organizers, and national leaders when they were in Columbia.

“Thurgood Marshall always stayed in my home,” Modjeska said. “We had two extra bedrooms. Some of the lawyers

“If Modjeska had been a man, she would have been right up there with Martin Luther King. She was the conscience of South Carolina.

Nathaniel Abraham,  
newspaper publisher

“Mrs. Simkins was one of the little people who decided to wear big shoes.”

Henrie Monteith Treadwell,  
Modjeska’s niece

“The description that fits her best is that she is indeed a citizen of the world.”

John Roy Harper,  
civil rights lawyer

“Modjeska Simkins is synonymous with struggle.”

Ben Chavis,  
civil rights activist

stayed there, and the others stayed across the street, but they would have their meals and jam sessions around the table in my home.”

Modjeska worked with Marshall and the Rev. Joseph DeLaine on the Clarendon County case that would become part of the U.S. Supreme Court decision to integrate public schools. Judge Waring, who heard the original case, was the first federal judge to challenge the 1896 “separate but equal” doctrine that institutionalized racial segregation in the South.

A system that spent \$10 on white children for every dollar it spent on black children would seem a basic violation of rights. And indeed it was ruled so, but not without a fight.

In the 1951 *Briggs v. Elliott* case, Judge Waring wrote, “Segregation in education can never produce equality, and it is an evil that must be eradicated. I am of the opinion that all of the legal guideposts, expert testimony, common sense, and reason point unerringly to the conclusion that the system of segregation in education adopted and practiced in the State of South Carolina must go and must go now. Segregation is *per se* inequality.” Three years later, the U.S. Supreme Court, in considering *Briggs* and four other segregation cases, delivered

a unanimous verdict that “separate but equal” public schools were unconstitutional. The landmark *Brown v. Board* ruling in 1954 has been called “the dissent that changed America.”

None of these monumental changes came easily or without sacrifice. People who were brave enough to testify in court risked trouble at home, with their businesses and families targeted in a vicious backlash. White Citizens Councils were organized to put economic pressure on blacks who dared challenge the day’s social order. Many black farmers found themselves unable to buy feed or sell their tobacco. Teachers and public employees risked losing their jobs and homes.

Victory Savings Bank in Columbia played a critical role during these dark days, stepping in to help support the people who paid the price — many of them quite literally — for education equality in South Carolina.

“Victory Savings Bank was the first and only black-owned bank in South Carolina,” said its president and CEO Tom Felder. “It was founded in 1921, and has weathered the storms of several depressions, wars and down times in our economy, and remains one of the oldest black-owned banks in the country.”

Modjeska was one of the cofounders of the bank. It was managed by her brother Henry Monteith, and her family held a majority on the board for more than 65 years. (In 1999, the bank changed its name to South Carolina Community Bank.)

“When the NAACP was asking us to push forward for integration in the schools, economic pressures were put on blacks in those areas,” Modjeska said. “And from various parts of the country, the money was pooled into this bank to help save crops and farms.”



When the White Citizens Councils started to pressure politically active blacks by refusing them service and denying them credit, Modjeska and her allies pushed back. They knew the fight wasn't just black and white; it was green, too. They organized a boycott.

“We are not angry with anyone,” said state NAACP President James M. Hinton, “but we are fully determined to spend our money with those who believe in first-class citizenship for everyone.”

They targeted certain products, including Coca-Cola and Sunbeam bread. “We said, if they can put on a squeeze, we can put on a boycott,” Modjeska said.

News of the boycott ran in *Jet* magazine, the nation's leading black weekly. The story began, “In South Carolina's sparse, cotton and tobacco-producing lowlands, a new danger threatens the welfare of thousands of Negroes even worse than two consecutive years of poor crops. It is a slow, gnawing hunger.

“For five weeks now, Negroes have been forced to search for milk and bread outside of their neighborhoods in Orangeburg, and in Clarendon County, as some white grocers flatly refuse to sell to Negroes. It is all part of a vicious hate boycott sponsored by the White

Citizens Councils to ‘starve’ some 3,000 Negroes in the two counties who are NAACP school petition signers, members or sympathizers. Fear has caused 20 of the 58 NAACP school petitioners to withdraw their names to save jobs or homes.”

The national spotlight on the fight being waged in South Carolina generated monetary and material donations from around the country. Some came with handwritten notes like the one that read: “Dear Mrs. Simkins, My wife and I just read of the Citizen Council's inhuman attitude toward South Carolina Negroes in *Jet* magazine. May God help the suppressed colored people in your state and elsewhere in the sleeping South. Sincerely, Mr. and Mrs. William Stewart.”

After having served its purpose, the boycott was ended in 1956. “It was most effective, child,” Modjeska said.

## Black, White, and Red All Over

In 1957, after serving for 16 years as state secretary, Modjeska was edged out of the NAACP, purged because of her radicalism and unapologetic association with socialists. Although she was never

Modjeska Monteith Simkins

“She was one of the rare ones who left so much more on this Earth than she found.”

Brett Bursey,  
S.C. Progressive  
Network director

“When Modjeska spoke, everyone listened. I was inspired by her strength and courage. I always listened carefully to whatever she had to say because I knew she spoke the truth from the heart.”

former S.C. State Rep.  
Candy Y. Waites

“The pioneering work by Simkins and her colleagues in the 1940s and 1950s laid the foundation for radical changes in the political machinery operating the state.”

Barbara A. Woods,  
historian

a member of the Communist Party, she worked with people who were, and openly supported allies blacklisted at the height of the red scare.

While she was working with the NAACP, Modjeska also was involved with a number of more militant reform movements at the regional and national level. They included the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and its successor, the Southern Conference Educational Fund. Because of these associations, she was targeted by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, which in the '50s created a list of targets in an effort to threaten and neutralize left-leaning activists and groups.

“I’m up on that list, along with hundreds of organizations,” she said. “Why? Because we didn’t follow like sheep in the path of the people in power. Nobody — black or white — wants to be called red.”

Civil rights activist Anne Braden describes the atmosphere during the McCarthy era as a political pathology. “In the late '40s and early '50s, there was a real sickness in the country of very hysterical anti-Communism which had very little to do with Communism, really, because most of the people caught

up in it didn’t know Communism from rheumatism. It was a buzz word, a scare word. Anything was Communist if it was advocating any kind of change.”

“Sure, I signed some petitions,” Modjeska said. “I’m against transgressions on civil liberties. I’d do it again. But I’m no Communist, and never have been. I belonged to all kind of things that were called Communist fronts, so I’ve been red-smearred up and down South Carolina.

“If you worked for peace,” she explained, “you were supposed to be Communist. I always told them, ‘If Communists do all the good things you all say they do, it looks like to me that it would be good to be one. If they want peace, there is nothing wrong with that.’ Although they did all kinds of things, they never were able to faze me.”

In 1960, Modjeska delivered a speech in Washington, D.C., at a national celebration of the Bill of Rights, which she called “the bedrock upon which the prestige and protection of civil liberties are based.” Reporting from the front lines, she reminded the audience that civil liberties in America were under assault.

“Tonight, 169 years after Congress adopted the Bill of Rights, the

constitutional liberties embodied in them are being trespassed upon with contemptuous disregard, even by agents and agencies of the very government which itself guaranteed these liberties. Various loyalty boards along with the most dastardly culprit, the Un-American Activities Committee, have hounded to social annihilation, physical suffering, emotional instability, death, and even at times worse than death, hundreds of honorable citizens.”

She continued, “Add to these, hundreds of thousands who have trembled in stark terror of character assassination, guilt by association, social ostracism, loss of work, with the blackest terror being the refusal of the guarantee to be confronted with accusers.

“Witnessing the struggle in the Southland, the civil liberties of those seeking civil rights are under attack. The Dixiecrats are solidified in their determination to exert road-blocking interference against civil rights advances. Just as determined are similar forces elsewhere in the nation who aspire daily to nullify all efforts on the part of liberals or progressives to enjoy their already guaranteed civil liberties.

“The blackest trespass in the last two decades has been that of not allowing

those under attack to confront their accusers. I need not give you a history of the Un-American Committee or a biography of its patron saint, Joseph McCarthy, who being dead, yet speaketh. It is unnecessary to elaborate on the dogma and slimy claptrap of McCarthyism that is masticated and regurgitated by the big and little loyalty boards and investigating committees.”

“America’s slumbering millions, as much brainwashed and hoodwinked on the matter of the violation of their liberties as any people, must be awakened to the onslaught on the bedrock of their liberties.

“Our forefathers, recognizing fully the prime necessity to guard jealously the elemental rights of even the least among men, and knowing only too well that tyrants of greater or lesser breed had trampled upon these liberties through countless generations, clearly stipulated certain definite fundamentals in the Bill of Rights.”

For her high-profile defense of civil liberties, Modjeska would be red-baited the rest of her life. But she never bowed to pressure to distance herself from her radical activist friends such as the legendary Paul Robeson, Harlem councilman Benjamin Davis, or the Marxist professor Dr. Herbert Aptheker, who invited her to speak at a dinner in

New York to celebrate his 50th birthday and publication of his book.

That trip in 1966 became fodder for a smear campaign to discredit and silence Modjeska during her run that year for a seat in the S.C. House. Governor Robert McNair and Democratic Party Chairman Earle Morris Jr. issued a public call for her to leave the party because of her “association with self-avowed Communists.”

“At the time when many of our young men are waging a deadly struggle against the encroachment of Communism in Southeast Asia,” the Democratic leaders pontificated in the newspaper, “such an involvement by a citizen of our state defies reasonable explanation.”



South Caroliniana Library

“Mrs. Simkins always told it like it was. You never had to wonder where you stood. If the cause was right, Mrs. Simkins was there. She had integrity that no money could buy, or position or appointment could influence. She ran a good race, a warrior’s race, until she died.”

William Gibson,  
former chairman of the  
NAACP Board of Directors

“Modjeska Simkins did so much to influence civil rights legislation and equality of opportunity for women.”

Pam Robinson,  
USC School of Law

“Whenever she spoke, she moved people.”

Eunice “Tootsie” Holland,  
feminist activist

Not cowed by the party brass, Modjeska replied that if they found her position in the party untenable, then they would have to leave because she was going nowhere. And she didn’t.

While she did not budge from the Democratic Party, she was booted from the state NAACP in 1957. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before they would part ways. Years before she left, Modjeska had grown frustrated with the organization, accusing it of getting stale and selling out. State leadership, not daring to risk the mainstream power it had managed to carve out for itself, edged Modjeska out.

The NAACP added insult to injury when it issued a press release stating that Modjeska had not offered for re-election, implying that the shake-up was of her making. She fired back in the press, “This deliberate untruth naturally could have led my hundreds of friends and acquaintances throughout the nation to believe that I had turned my back on my people and our cause in this needy time.”

It was a bitter separation. The unfortunate ending to Modjeska’s years with the NAACP left a bad taste that lingered. The stagnation she accused it of in the 1960s only got worse. In the 1970s, she said, “The NAACP today is very

much different than it was. They have gotten kind of washed out. You see, organizations grow old just like people, and the fighting and revolutionary spirit that the NAACP had in those years is no more.”

In an open letter to the NAACP in 1981, she again took the organization to task.

“Why is the SC NAACP conference not arrayed in full force against brazen inequities forced upon Negro people of the State by the State power structure? Will the general membership continue to allow high NAACP officials to herd them perennially into compromising situations with every element of the State power structure? The fact is the Conference is not performing fully and effectively. It has abandoned historic objectives. It has been made the ‘KEPT WOMAN’ of the Democratic Party. Its high officialdom is so close to that crew that its performance is a sham — effervescent nothingness.”

Deep as her disappointment ran, she never fully severed ties with the organization that she helped build. “I pay my NAACP membership every year,” she said. “I send them a little note: I’m paying this under protest, but I want my membership in because when I get ready to raise hell I don’t want to raise it free of charge.”



JOBS  
PEACE &  
QUALITY

*Modjeska in 1982 at the Grass Roots Organizing Workshop in Columbia, where she was an adviser and frequent visitor. GROW was the precursor of the S.C. Progressive Network, which was launched at Penn Center in 1996.*

## Losing Faith

Modjeska was brought up in the Baptist church, studying the Bible at home and at school, where it was part of the curriculum. Her mother taught Sunday school. In college, Modjeska studied ancient culture and world religions. Academic curiosity and personal experiences informed her relationship with organized religion, which deteriorated over time.

She said, “I’ve had a running fight with preachers. I’ve always said, ‘You spend too much time on your knees praying and not enough time on your feet fighting.’ You see, the church (I’m talking about the black church here, as I know it) has become mercenary. They build churches, they have anniversaries, they have revivals. And they become mercenaries, a kind of religious Mafia with no socio-community outreach. Now I know they’ll want to kill me for saying that, but that’s just what I believe.

“The church could be a great leavening force; in fact, that’s what it ought to be. But I don’t see around here where it is. Now, I do know that in some cities — for instance, in the Birmingham movement and in Montgomery — they showed it. But we had our state conference secretary’s home fired in. Do you think they said anything? We had a woman

bashed in the bust by a bus driver here. Did any preacher tell the Negroes to walk like they did in Montgomery? No!

“I have lost faith in the institutionalized black church. Most of the black churches are shut all week. They go there on Sunday and warm the chairs about two hours. And the outreach programs are no good. Every church ought to have a social activities program, a social consciousness program or something like that.

“Churches ought to know how to tell people how to get food stamp benefits and Social Security supplements, but a lot of these preachers don’t give a damn whether they’ve got money to buy milk for the baby on Monday morning, just so they get their assessments on Sunday and get their salary. That’s what I’m talking about. I’m not disillusioned; I’m just disgusted.

“I think in some places they’ve done salient service. Around Columbia they gave little or no assistance. We never got very much out of them here in early times. We still don’t. Every now and then one of them would light up kind of like you see a lightning bug light up at night, and that’s it.”

For Modjeska, religion was found not in mindless ritual but in Christ’s teachings.

“She never would hesitate to tell what she thought was the truth. She was a very remarkable woman because her lack of fear was so great.”

Virginia Durr,  
civil rights activist

“Our roots are deep in her glorious black past, and we would not have it any other way.”

former State Sen.  
Maggie Glover

“From her earliest years as a member of the Columbia NAACP until her bid for political office in that city, Modjeska Simkins was a force to be reckoned with for blacks and whites, Democrats and Republicans.”

Cherisse Jones-Branch,  
author

“Some people think that if they don’t go to church every Sunday they’ll go to hell, but I’m not even worrying about whether there’s a hell or not.

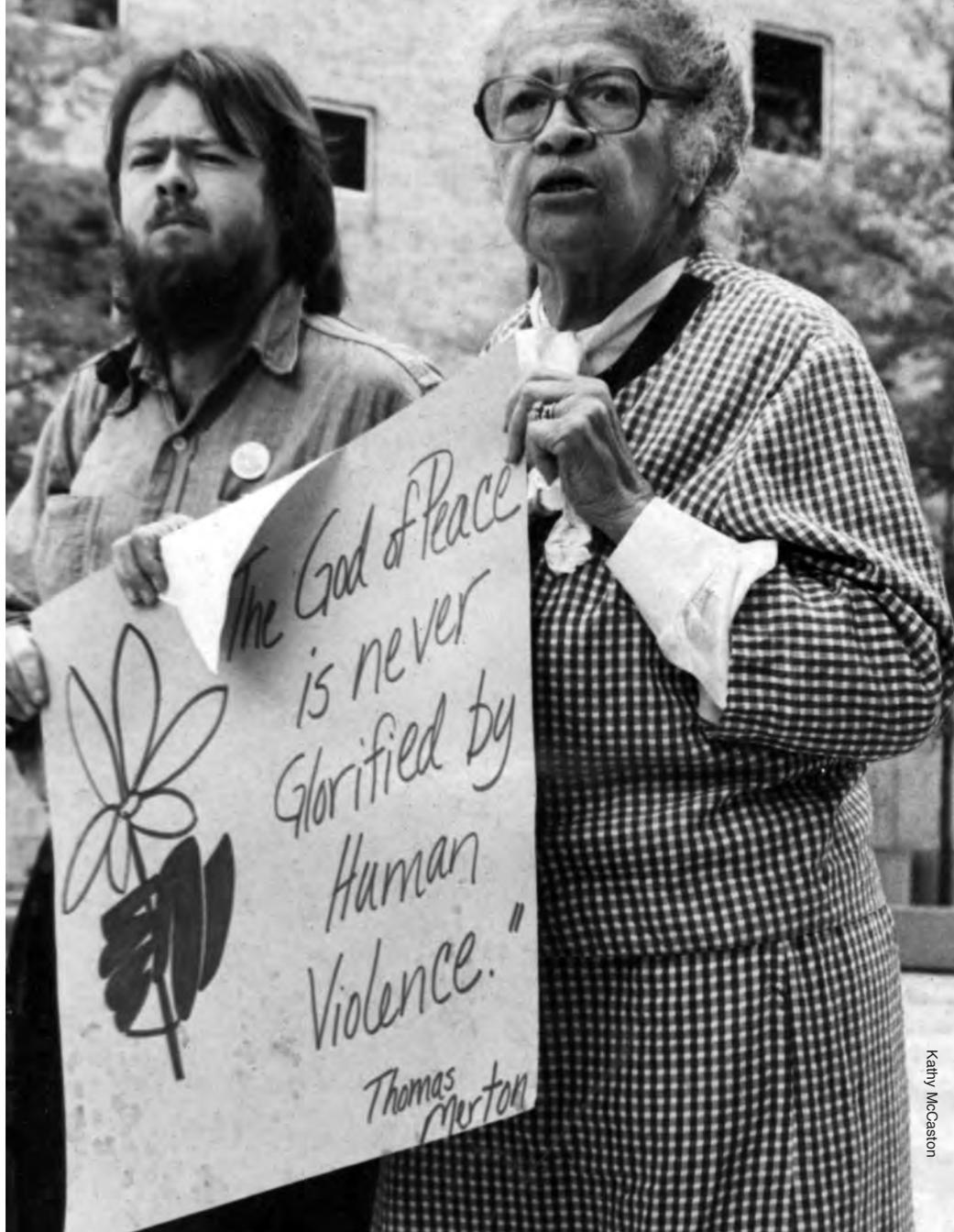
“I’ve lived every day and tried to do what I can following the philosophy and the teachings of Christ to do unto others as you desire they do unto you, and help those who can’t help themselves. And I let heaven and hell take care of themselves. That’s my philosophy.”

### Her Mind Still “Set On Freedom”

After leaving the NAACP, Modjeska took a full-time job at Victory Savings Bank, where her brother Henry was still president. She stayed until 1982, doing bookkeeping and later managing a branch office.

While working at Victory, Modjeska started the Richland County Citizens Committee, which successfully pushed to integrate the city’s parks and buses, and fight “urban renewal” that threatened black neighborhoods.

*Merll Truesdale and Modjeska in 1985 in Columbia at a GROW-organized march against U.S. intervention in Central America.*



“She worked tirelessly for the health, education and welfare of African Americans at a time when open and often violent hostility made the work especially dangerous.”

Henrie Monteith Treadwell,  
Modjeska’s niece

“She was the one who we always knew would fight for freedom and justice that would benefit all of us.”

John Williams,  
civil rights activist

“The importance of Mrs. Simkins in the history of the South Carolina NAACP – and in the pursuit of equal justice in South Carolina – would be difficult to overstate.”

Charles W. Joyner,  
author

The RCCC exposed the disparity in conditions for white and black patients, and forced the integration of the state mental hospital. It also helped organize a series of sit-ins in Columbia.

For seven years, the RCCC paid for a regular time slot on a black radio station, a soapbox Modjeska used to maximum advantage with a weekly program called “I Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Set On Freedom.”

Transcripts of those shows, typed pages laced with Modjeska’s handwritten

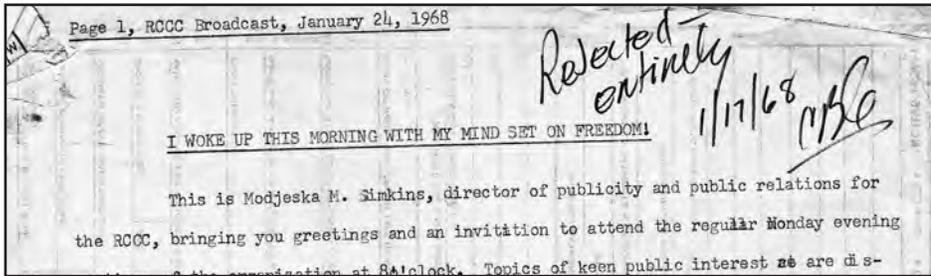


*Sen. Fritz Hollings and S.C. NAACP head I. DeQuincey Newman on what Modjeska called their “slum parade.”*

notes, are now on file at USC’s South Carolina Political Collections. They are fiery, direct, and slam everyone from do-nothing politicians to deadbeat parents. She calls the Orangeburg Massacre a tragedy waiting to happen that was “absolutely no surprise.” She challenges elected leaders to address police brutality. She speaks out early and stridently against the Vietnam War.

For the most part, Modjeska was given free rein to express herself, but one broadcast was censored completely. In a single radio bit, she thrashed NAACP head I. DeQuincey Newman, U.S. Sen. Fritz Hollings, and the entire military-industrial complex. Scheduled to run on Jan. 24, 1968, here are excerpts from the show that never aired:

“Lawlessness and the rapid increase in the crime rate are perhaps the most striking problems now facing the American public. Many are puzzled by the great number of killings. A pointed question is: ‘How can we train killers in all types of brutal destruction of



human lives and expect them to return to America ready to act like angels?”

“In the crystal clear memory of hundreds of thousands now living are the happenings of two major declared wars and other confrontations that were either not declared or not clearly declared.

“The war in Vietnam, an undeclared war — which is conceded to be the most brutal, genocidal and devastating in the history of man — is training almost a million men in the vilest types of human destruction. Will those who return home be free of the vile killer infection? Will they leave the killer techniques and the expert guerilla-type training in Vietnam?”

“Will these men, no matter what their race, but particularly black soldiers, be content to fight through the vicious battles in Vietnam and be content to fall easily back into the situations that they left behind — where color determined the rights of men?”

“War makes killers. War hardens men. War unbalances men, for war is a kind of insanity. It makes insane killers of men by training them in the fine art of killing. It places them lower than the beast, for no beast has been known to try to fashion the most devastating types of killer methods to utterly destroy other beasts. Only man does that.

“Hundreds of thousands of Americans today are working in plants where the purpose is to manufacture equipment to kill other God-made creatures — other men who have done nothing to anyone, as helpless civilians are being slaughtered in Vietnam today. America the so-called great God-fearing nation is bypassing any efforts at securing peace, and playing the war game to the fullest.

“The U.S. has not called one national meeting in an effort to study methods of achieving peace. Even to mention interest in peace is to be classed immediately as anti-American.

“So we go on perfecting killers in the most expert killer methods, and foolishly expect them to return to us as angels. Many of them will not. They will be ready to kill on the spur of the moment.”

Modjeska then turned her attention to U.S. Sen. Fritz Hollings’ “Hunger Tour,” a high-profile campaign that she dismisses as an empty political stunt orchestrated by NAACP operatives and the state Democratic Party.

“Perhaps the hottest topic of discussion has been, ‘What are NAACP bigwig I. DeQuincey Newman and Senator Fritz Hollings really putting down?’ The RCCC could ask why the Senator has become so interested in slums now when the same slums have been in Charleston all the Senator’s life and, while he served in Columbia both as Lt. Governor and as Governor, he was in spitting distance of some of the worst slums in the country, the same he just found out about.

“Negroes should stop meekly suffering insults and forgiving these politicians that want to come fawning back to say whatever they have to say to hold the white vote.”

She ended with a final barb: “One of the great tragedies of this decade is the fact that the NAACP on both the state and

local level has become a namby-pamby, apologetic group — saying more and more about less and less.”

Modjeska had a long memory and was slow to forgive. She cancelled plans to attend Benedict College’s commencement in 1971, on the 50th anniversary of her graduation there, because of its plans to bestow Sen. Hollings with an honorary degree.

In a letter of regret, Modjeska wrote, “Hollings’ recent charades of smooth talk on poverty and hunger, and his belated slum strolls and ghetto walks cannot erase from my memory the treatment of protesting State College students during his gubernatorial administration, his praise and support of Citizens Councils when he was Lt. Gov., and his long-standing callousness toward the sufferings of the masses of disadvantaged and utterly deprived.

“Add to that Hollings’ lengthy and unnecessarily bombastic, exhibitionist effort to prevent the seating of Thurgood Marshall on the US Supreme Court bench. This pompous act is etched in high relief on the minds of black South Carolinians. Even though you and your faculty may have wizened memories, there are tens of thousands of blacks who refuse to forget.”



*Modjeska’s portrait in the State House.*

In an ironic twist, many of Modjeska’s papers, which she donated to the University of South Carolina, are housed in the Ernest F. Hollings Special Collections. A library brochure features her photo prominently.

### “Ain’t Dead Yet!”

Modjeska stayed politically active into her late 80s, speaking at anti-nuclear rallies, testifying at hearings against the death penalty, and fighting polluting industries in poor neighborhoods. In the early 1980s, Modjeska waded deeply into the fight over reapportionment. No black candidate had been elected to the state Senate in the 20th Century, so it was targeted by the U.S. Justice Department for violating the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

*The State* newspaper in Columbia ran a photo of Modjeska with the caption: “Longtime civil rights activist Modjeska Simkins of Columbia points to a reapportionment map of the state Tuesday as she speaks to the Senate Judiciary Committee. She declared ‘war’ if the committee does not vote to reapportion before the 1980 elections.”

At age 87, she was part of a group of activists from South Carolina who drove to Washington, D.C., for the national March for Women’s Lives to protest the rash of regressive laws rolling back rights it had taken decades to secure. Modjeska knew from personal experience just what was at stake. She had registered to vote just after American women were granted that right in 1920. Keen to cast her first ballot, she was thrilled that women at long last were becoming full partners in American politics. Or so she thought.

“I had great hope when women won the vote,” she said. “You know those early women went through hell. The greatest disappointment of my life was that women did not take hold right away. I was so sure that they’d take what they’d worked so hard to earn, and turn this world around.”

While Modjeska never called herself a feminist, she acted like one her whole

life. Often the only woman at the table, she could more than hold her own with anyone, anywhere, about nearly anything. “I’ve never really considered myself a woman so far as being apologetic about it,” she said. “I just was like an old, blind mule; I just didn’t give a damn. If I saw something that needed to be hit, I just hit it.”

Modjeska worked to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, first introduced in 1923. It says simply: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.”

Such a modest, even obvious amendment took 50 years to pass Congress when, in 1972, it finally was sent to the states for ratification. Congress extended its original seven-year time limit to 1982, but by that deadline was still three states short of the 38 required for inclusion in the Constitution. True to form, South Carolina was among the states to say no to gender equality.

Columbia NOW organizer Eunice “Tootsie” Holland remembers getting a call from Modjeska in the early ’70s. “Modjeska said she wanted to be part of the fight to get the ERA passed in South Carolina. She told me her mother was a suffragette and would be very

disappointed if she didn’t do her part. Modjeska got involved and stayed involved.”

In 1977, Modjeska was among 800 people gathered in a Columbia hotel to elect delegates to the National Women’s Conference in Houston, a federally funded event that grew out of a United Nations call for gender equality.

Most of them supported the ERA, but an organized and loud opposition led by the John Birch Society tried to hijack the process by obstructing what they called a “federally imposed feminist agenda.” They protested Modjeska’s election as a delegate, passing out flyers on pink paper — like ones circulated during the McCarthy era — detailing her association with “known communists.”

In spite of being targeted, Modjeska received the second-highest number of votes, and was among 20,000 women from across the country who went to Houston in the fall of 1977 to mark International Women’s Year with a spirited four days of debate and sisterly solidarity.

“The first day of the national convention, we found out that the Mississippi delegation had sent several KKK members as delegates,” Holland

said. “They were quite open about it. Modjeska found a Xerox machine, made a petition to have the Klansmen removed, and got just about everyone at the convention to sign it. The convention chair ruled that the Klansmen were duly elected and couldn’t be removed, but everyone sure knew that Modjeska was in the house.”

She was “in the house” until the end. At age 91, she spoke to a college assembly. She reminded the students about their history, and warned them not to take for granted the rights so many had fought so long to secure, telling them, “The vote is the thing that makes a difference between a free man and a slave.”

## Modjeska’s Legacy

Even before her death at age 92, Modjeska was recognized for her service. In 1990, she received the Order of the Palmetto, the highest civilian honor awarded by the governor of South Carolina.

At her funeral, dignitaries from across the state came to honor a woman they may not always have agreed with but respected. No matter their politics, nobody could deny Modjeska’s integrity and lifelong dedication to South Carolina’s most vulnerable citizens.



*Modjeska Simkins, Joe Vaughn, Brett Bursey, Coretta Scott King, and the Rev. Fred Reese at Columbia Masonic Temple in 1983.*

*Brett Bursey, director of the S.C. Progressive Network, met Modjeska when he opened an account at Victory Savings Bank for GROW, which served as the hub of South Carolina's social justice organizing in the 1970s and '80s. Modjeska became his mentor, and they remained friends until she died.*

*He offers this remembrance.*

"I know a different Modjeska than a lot of people do. I'd be reading about some splinter group in Angola, and I'd go to Modjeska's and we'd open a bottle of port. We'd be talking about the events of the day, and she would know the names of the people who were negotiating with the Texaco oil company rig that the Angolan rebels had seized. She was amazing in her international understanding of

politics and detail. Modjeska is revered now and known in South Carolina for her work during the civil rights era, but what I want to see captured about her is the consistency and continuity of her global analysis of the problems.

She would bridle at being called a civil rights leader; she was a human rights leader. In the '40s she was involved in

liberation movements that understood imperialism and capitalism, and those classic economic and social political forces, and how they affect societies. Modjeska got that early in the game.

The “forgotten years” of King after the March on Washington, when he became more radical — Modjeska had those forgotten years almost throughout her whole life, in terms of her analysis putting off her contemporary allies.

In 1946, she helped put on the Southern Negro Youth Congress in Columbia (see page 37). W.E.B. DuBois gave one of his last speeches, “Behold the Land.” [The 78-year-old told the packed hall, “It would be a shame and cowardice to surrender this glorious land and its opportunities for civilization and humanity to the thugs and lynchers, the mobs and profiteers, the monopolists and gamblers who today choke its soul and steal its resources.”]

DuBois had a global perspective and pieced it all together. The involvement of socialists was very prevalent in the civil rights movements in the '30s and '40s. There was a movement before the involvement of black ministers going back to the 'Teens and '20s when unions were organizing against Jim Crow and fighting for integrated workplaces — decades be-

fore a recognized civil rights movement. Modjeska comes out of that school.

I came in on the tail end of the civil rights movement, having been a Southern Student Organizing Committee traveler in 1968 and '69. There was a strong anti-racist movement inside the anti-war movement that Modjeska was very much aware of. She had one of her radio speeches censored in its entirety when she came out against the Vietnam War.

When I met her in the late '70s, the issues weren't a whole lot different than those of her youth: imperialism, American involvement in Central and South America, and in South Africa, with the anti-apartheid movement. Modjeska would come to the GROW building and offer strategic thoughts, and I'd go to her house and enjoy much the same discussions.

The fighting spirit and analysis that led her into and through the civil rights era was the same analysis and insight that she applied to American ventures in El Salvador, and to what we called environmental justice. We were protesting the chemical dumps being sited in poor black neighborhoods, and she was involved with that.

She spoke at a rally at the bomb plant against nuclear weapons and nuclear waste. She marched in demonstrations

about American efforts to destabilize Nicaragua. She marched with us in front of the banks when we were protesting apartheid.

She never lived in the past; she was always moving ahead and applying what she'd learned in the past to that which she was doing in the future.

Modjeska and I fought the whole time I knew her about the Confederate flag. I was a big advocate for seeing it come down off the dome; and she disagreed. I had been arrested in 1969 for burning a Confederate flag, and to me the flag was a clear symbol of white supremacy.

She had a position about it that I remember well because she said it so often, and I had occasion to say it at the unveiling of her portrait at the State House in 1995. The flag was still flying at the time and, when it was my turn to speak I said I had to share what Modjeska said: ‘Leave the damn rag up there. I'd rather see the Klan in sheets than in suits. As long as that flag flies on top of that building, you know what's in the hearts of the people inside.’

They did bring the flag down in 2000, and they put it on the front lawn. She wasn't around then, but I'd be interested to know what Modjeska would have thought about the “compromise.” 🌸

“Mrs. Simkins always told it like it was,” NAACP Board Chair William Gibson said at her funeral. “You never had to wonder where you stood. In her weekly radio broadcasts for the Richland County Citizens Committee, or at the many marches and conferences she attended, her voice rang true in its call for social and racial equity. Forever impatient with injustice, if the cause was right, Mrs. Simkins was there.”

In 1995, a portrait of Modjeska by South Carolina artist Larry Leiby was installed in the S.C. State House. The artist was a perfect choice: unconventional and known for using unorthodox mediums like Worcestershire, berry juice and a simple ballpoint pen.

After Modjeska’s death, the house she had shared with her husband since 1931 fell into disrepair, in spite of being in the National Register of Historic Places. The modest structure at the corner of Marion and Elmwood, the address of so much life and history, was nearly lost, but a

group of historians, community activists, and civic leaders saved it, finishing restoration in 2002.

The property is now owned by the city and managed by Historic Columbia, which rents it to the S.C. Progressive Network, a coalition of advocacy organizations. A historical marker out front lets passersby know the importance of that address. It also reminds those working and meeting inside that they are part of something larger and, with care and commitment, something lasting.

To carry on Modjeska’s work, the S.C. Progressive Network Education Fund has established a school in her name to teach and nurture a new generation of South Carolina activists. The Modjeska Simkins School of Human Rights is a civic engagement institute to help citizens

build strong communities and promote sound public policy in South Carolina.

How Modjeska will be remembered remains to be seen. She knew better than most how history is

usually written: by the powerful, for the powerful. Cultural revisionists and opportunists of all stripes often remake dead revolutionaries for mass public consumption in a practice Cornel West calls “Santa-Clausification.” It happened to Martin Luther King Jr. It happened to Jesus. It could happen to Modjeska.

Already, the state NAACP has revised its history with her. It invites contributions to its annual King Day at the Dome program, with the \$5,000 level being the “Modjeska Simkins Circle.”

Sanitizing Modjeska’s history isn’t the only danger. Another is that her legacy will be diminished or erased altogether. In 2013, as the country celebrated 50 years of civil rights history, Columbia’s high-profile program included a web site marking milestones in the city’s fight for racial equality. Modjeska was not included in the historical timeline. The omission was characterized as an oversight, but the error was not corrected.

The Network, through the school and its ongoing work in the streets and in the State House, is committed to keeping Modjeska’s memory alive — and keeping it true. There is much work still left undone. As Modjeska said, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is no sitting down time.” Join us! 🐾



# Southern Negro Youth Congress

the most radical black-led organization you never heard of – and that’s no accident

Upon this booklet’s third printing, we’ve added this section on the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), mentioned just briefly in the original 2014 edition. Since then, we’ve uncovered much more about the radical organization that thrived against all odds between 1936 and 1948, when it was finally crushed by anti-Communist hysterics.

We’ve also learned more about Modjeska’s role in what historian Erik Gellman has called “the most militant movement for black freedom since Reconstruction.”

She was an early advisor in SNYC, and was lead organizer of its 7th annual gathering, held in Columbia in the fall of 1946. The conference, held in the form of a three-day youth legislature, attracted delegates from across the country and abroad, as well as luminaries W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson.

By all accounts, it was a high-water mark for SNYC. Attendance doubled from its convention the year before, in Atlanta. Reflecting a movement gaining strength, the growing interracial army of activists threatened long-established social order.



*After months of planning, Modjeska joined an all-star line-up on stage Oct. 19, 1946, at Columbia’s Township Auditorium for what USC professor Bobby Donaldson has called “one of the most extraordinary youth gatherings in the history of this country.”*

It was met with fierce resistance. Just two years after the Columbia conference, SNYC was dead, its reputation smeared, its key leaders driven North, underground, and overseas. The organization was more than dismantled; it was erased.

The same cultural and political forces that silenced SNYC also rubbed it from public memory, obliterating the record of a generation of activists who risked their lives and livelihoods to challenge the balance of power in the Jim Crow South.

We, Negro and white young people, one thousand strong, assembled in the Southern Youth Legislature at Columbia, South Carolina, do hereby declare our common purpose, to build a new and democratic South.

We are Southerners. We are united in a mutual love of the Southland, a belief in the democratic way of life and the Christian ideals of human brotherhood.

We are united by pride in the traditions of the great Southern statesmen, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass and Hiram Revels; and those nameless thousands who have always fought in the South against slavery and the oppression of man by man.

The sacrifice of millions of white and Negro youth who fought on the battlefields of Europe and Asia unite us. We are joined by our love and veneration for Franklin D. Roosevelt and the determination to realize the heritage he left us, his challenge to us, the generation which has a “rendezvous with destiny.”

We are united in righteous indignation and protest against the UnAmerican and UnChristian wave of mob violence, lynching and brutality in our Southland.

We are also bound by our common needs:

- secure and well-paid jobs
- the unrestricted right to vote

## Pact of Southern Youth

*Delegates at SNYC's 1946 legislature  
drafted this document.*

- to own the land we till
- adequate medical and hospital care
- homes for our families
- better education for all
- protection from mob violence and police brutality
- guarantee of a peaceful world, through the continuation of Roosevelt's policy of collaboration with our wartime allies.

We have come to realize that only through acting together can we reach these goals. We are resolved no longer to be the victims of the old Nazi game of divide and rule.

We have come to understand that discrimination against Negro youth — in all its forms — is but a device used by economic royalists and plantation landlords to cheat the young white people and our entire generation of Southern youth of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in a democratic South.

We know that only when Negro youth achieve the full citizenship promised them in the Constitution, and earned by them in their patriotic devotion to the

cause of democracy, only then can millions of young white people go forward and our Southland prosper.

Our generation knows that these aspirations cannot be easily won, that only our common efforts and intelligent action, through organization of students, veterans, young workers and young women, will guarantee their achievement.

We know we must join together with all democratic minded groups in the South to go forward. Our generation today is faced with two alternatives: either a life of continued poverty, ignorance and division — or the opportunity, through unity, to build a free, prosperous and happy South, as part of a democratic America and a peaceful world.

It is for this solemn reason that we who have a rendezvous with destiny pledge to join hands to realize the rich promise of the South.

We, who have liberated ourselves from the crippling bonds of race prejudice, call upon Southern youth in all walks of life to affix their signatures to this declaration of our purpose, and to join with us in common action to make our dream for a better South and a better America come true.

DONE THIS DAY, October 20, 1946  
at Columbia, South Carolina

SNYC has not been given its due in the long march for equal rights in America — nor has South Carolina claimed its unique and central part in that rich history.

So we dedicate these pages to the forgotten heroes who drove the militant human rights era of the '30s and '40s that paved the way for the domesticated civil rights movement that followed. We owe it to them — and to today's young people — to share their stories.

## New Deal or Raw Deal?

SNYC was created in 1936 in response to a surge in fascism overseas and a creeping realization that New Deal programs helping families devastated by the Depression were failing to rescue black Americans. They lacked access to education, housing and health care, and were locked out of a political system constructed to exclude them through literacy tests and poll taxes.

Blacks in the South also faced the threat of lynching, the ultimate tool of white power. Conditions were so harsh that by 1930 some 1.6 million black people



*SNYC Secretary Esther Cooper Jackson gives W.E.B. DuBois a book of mementos.*

had moved North to find work and try to escape the scourge of white supremacy. That migration had lasting implications for those who fled and those left behind. Young people of the South saw in SNYC a vehicle to chart a new way by creating partnerships across traditional barriers of race, class, gender, and educational

pedigree. World-wise and ahead of their time, these young activists looked beyond the caste system of the American South to embrace a broader human rights agenda.

Historian Johnetta Richards, whose 1987 dissertation remains the most thorough work about SNYC, noted that “whites controlled the ballot, the benches in the local park, and even southern history. The SNYC urged local blacks to resist this state of physical and mental dominance through a global politics that linked them to other working-class peoples around the world.”

In its first year, SNYC established more than 20 councils across the South. Its first campaign was to organize tobacco

“We have come here to Columbia—in the heart of South Carolina, in the heart of the deep South—to re-arm ourselves with a deeper realization of our condition and our needs. We have come to give voice and strength and organizational power to the burning and unsilenceable demand of our generation for the right to live and prosper.”

Esther Cooper Jackson, greeting delegates in Columbia

“We black people didn't have no mass organization in the South before [SNYC]. Police shoot down a Negro, it's just a Negro shot down. Some may have grumbled among themselves, but nobody said nothin'.”

Hosea Hudson, steel worker and union member

“There has been no attempt to assimilate the legacies of SNYC into the triumphant narrative about American democracy.”

Angela Davis, activist, author, daughter of SNYC organizer

workers in Virginia. A series of strikes led to a doubling of workers' wages and an eight-hour work day. The early victory affirmed SNYC's strategy of building coalitions between white labor and black activists. The potential strength of those new alliances posed a serious threat to those who stood to lose power.

"The reputation of the Youth Congress flourished as it became the unofficial barometer for youthful black thought in the Roosevelt Administration via its relations with Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune," Richards wrote. The South Carolina native was the only woman in FDR's "Black Cabinet," advising the president on matters of race. Bethune served on SNYC's advisory board, lending the organization gravitas and elevating its national profile.

SNYC's international star also was rising. Secretary Esther Cooper Jackson sailed to Europe in the fall of 1945 to serve as a delegate to the World Youth Conference in London. While there, she networked with other young organizers, visited



American soldiers, and talked to the BBC about SNYC and grim conditions in the South.

After travelling war-ravaged Europe, she returned home, where she joined her husband, James Jackson, for a speaking tour at Southern black colleges. The tour was managed by Modjeska, who arranged and advertised their appearances, which included stops at Benedict College and Allen University in Columbia.

Modjeska assumed various roles and responsibilities, working "tirelessly to promote the SNYC in Columbia," Richards wrote. "Simultaneously involved in local campaigns for recreation and for hospital facilities for blacks, Simkins employed 'personal button-holings' to get people to join."

In July of 1945, she reported to SNYC headquarters, "Picture me getting out not less than 10,000 cards and letters in this heat."

Modjeska was on the planning committee that convinced the board to hold SNYC's 7th convention in

Columbia. Converging forces made the Palmetto State the perfect stage for a serious conversation about race, democracy, and hypocrisy.

## Eyes on South Carolina

In 1945, native son and staunch segregationist James Byrnes had assumed the international stage as secretary of state, appointed to the position upon FDR's death. By then, he'd already served in

## In her own words

*From 1974 interview by Jacquelyn Hall*

**Modjeska Simkins:** I can remember the first meeting of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. I went to Knoxville where there were miners, people in overalls. The average person didn't think of wearing them then unless they were going to the field or the mines. And those fellows came out there with...overalls, and sun-hats, and all of them were working and planning together.

I don't think the South would be the same without what they did, because they opened the eyes of a number of people. The thing that the political power structure had against organizations of that kind was the fear that they would bring the black and white mass together.

Well, the first thing they did when they got a chance was to red-smear and disrupt the movement. They don't want poor whites and Negroes getting along together. There's always been the effort, either obvious or subtle, on the part of the reigning element to keep the forces of blacks and whites apart.

They didn't care any more about a poor white than they did about a Ne-

gro. And they still don't. They just give them a little more deference because he's white like they are, but they don't give a damn about a poor white. They'll exploit him just like they will a Negro. I've seen it. I know what I'm talking about.

There were some very highly intelligent young men who organized the Southern Negro Youth Congress, some of the most brilliant [people] I've ever known. Louis Burnham, James Jackson, Esther Jackson, a brilliant young woman. James went into hiding for a number of years. They intended to persecute him like they did some other people who they said had Communist leanings.

Paul Robeson was closely connected with the Southern Negro Youth Congress.



W.E.B. DuBois was an adherer. I have some programs from the meetings.

**JH:** Were there white students in the organization?

**MS:** Yes. Some of them were arrested and persecuted by Bull Connor and his crowd in Birmingham. I was down in Birmingham at the time [1948].

**JH:** The Congress was accused of being a Communist front organization, of course.

**MS:** Yes.

**JH:** What would you say that the role of the Communist Party in the Southern movement was?

**MS:** I always heard a lot about Communists trying to influence Negroes and organizing them into certain movements and all like that, but I never saw any effect of it. I never saw this thing they were talking about, that Communists were always trying to influence and build a whole phalanx of activists among blacks. I never saw it, and I've got about as sharp an eye as anybody.

Now, I belonged to all kind of things that were called Communist fronts, so that I've been red-smear up and down South Carolina.

**JH:** Were you ever called before HUAC [House UnAmerican Activities Committee]?

**MS:** Never. I wanted to be, but they never called me. I thought once — during the Henry Wallace campaign — that I might be, but I wasn't. 🍷

the US House and Senate, and on the US Supreme Court. He would later be elected governor of South Carolina.

Byrnes, a protégé of “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, had opposed fair labor and anti-lynching laws while in Congress, voting in lockstep with other Southern lawmakers under the guise of states rights. SNYC called him out, asking why someone with his record would be charged with selling democracy abroad.

South Carolina itself was making news for defying a 1944 Supreme Court ruling in Texas mandating that parties’ political primaries be opened to black voters. Instead of following the law, the Palmetto State’s political elite elected to turn parties into private clubs, a cheeky move that allowed the state’s Democratic political machine to remain effectively all-white.



*Joe Louis (left) was among many celebrities to champion the case of Isaac Woodard, blinded by cops in Batesburg, SC.*

Outraged but not defeated, a group that included Modjeska and led by John McCray formed the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). At the party’s convention, they selected a slate of 18 delegates for the Democratic convention, adopted a 10-point platform, and nominated Osceola E. McKaine for the Senate election. This happened 20 years before the better-known Fannie Lou Hamer led the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 to challenge the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party.

While the PDP did not win any electoral victories, it moved the state closer to full enfranchisement.

In February 1946, South Carolina was again making international news after the brutal beating

of black WWII veteran Isaac Woodard in Batesburg. Army Sgt. Woodard, who had trained at Fort Jackson, was returning home by bus when he was beaten and blinded by police at a rest stop, then thrown in jail without medical treatment.

McCray was the first to write about the case. It soon caught the attention of Orson Welles, who devoted five of his national radio broadcasts to the injustice. In August, a glittering line-up of stars — including Cab Calloway, Milton Berle, and Billie Holiday — drew a crowd of 31,000 to a fundraiser in New York City. Woody Guthrie closed the show with his song “The Blinding of Isaac Woodard.”

The publicity prompted the Truman administration to identify Police Chief Lynwood Shull as the perpetrator. Sadly, Woodard’s case is remarkable only in that someone was charged; most racially motivated crimes were ignored or justified. Shull was tried but served no jail time.

Lynchings were on the rise as veterans returned from the war with eyes wide open to the hypocrisy of a country fighting fascism abroad but leaving white supremacy unchallenged at home.

Veterans posed a threat to the day’s social order. “Just their physical presence in uniform was a bold challenge to the status quo,” USC professor Dr. Bobby Donaldson said. “In the deliberations of the SNYC was extended conversation about racial violence and police brutality.”

Local and national news was relentlessly grim for black Americans in the months

leading up to SNYC's convention in Columbia. It was an ambitious program, one that would require much planning, cajoling, and fund-raising.

Modjeska was at the center of it all. On July 17, 1946, she wrote to community leaders inviting them to send a "promising young person" to a training school organized by SNYC.

"An unprecedented and invaluable opportunity is being offered young South Carolinians within the next month," she wrote. "It must be conceded that AT THIS VERY HOUR moreso than at any time in the history of this Nation, there is urgent need for the development of progressive thinkers to become the leaders of TOMORROW. The LEADERSHIP TRAINING SCHOOL is planned to do just that."

For 10 days that August, two dozen students lived on campus at Harbison Junior College in Irmo, where they attended lectures and learned practical organizing skills. When not studying, they spent their time talking politics, singing labor songs, dancing to the radio, and playing sports.

A heady optimism preceded the 7th SNYC congress in South Carolina.

## "Fate of the World in Their Hands"

A never-before mixed-race crowd packed Columbia's Township Auditorium for the opening of the congress. The mood was electric as black delegates representing each of the Confederate states marched into the hall and assembled under an over-sized American flag. Portraits of the 22 black men who served in Congress during Reconstruction lined the walls.

In her opening address, SNYC Secretary Esther Cooper pointed to the portraits and called on the assembled to remember "their primary weapon in their fight for complete freedom: the right to vote."



The stage was studded with leaders from the civil rights and labor movements in America and abroad. In a series of speeches, they called the young people to action. Among the writers, educators, and organizers on the program were honored guests DuBois and Robeson, performing for just the second time in the South.

Over the weekend, delegates held animated sessions at Benedict and Allen facilitated by labor and civil rights activists and educators. They debated matters of local, national, and global significance, and drafted resolutions that were submitted to the 8th congress.

"For those three days," Gellman wrote, "the delegates felt like the fate of the world was in their hands." Among the documents they drafted was the Columbia Pact of Southern Youth (see page 38). It is passionate and full of promise but, sadly, their "list of needs" remains largely unmet.

DuBois brought the convention to a memorable conclusion Sunday evening in Benedict's Antisdel Chapel. A reverent crowd of people filled the pews and aisles

*Modjeska (3rd row, 2nd from left) at 2nd SNYC leadership training, held at Allen University in 1947.*

of the church, and spilled outside, where they listened over loudspeakers.

“The future of the American Negro is in the South,” he began in his booming voice. “Here 327 years ago, they began to enter what is now the United States... here they have suffered the damnation of slavery, the frustration of Reconstruction and the lynching of emancipation. I trust then that an organization like yours is going to regard the South as the battleground of a great crusade.”

The speech held the crowd spellbound. Regarded as one of DuBois’ finest, “Behold the Land” was printed and distributed widely. He was saying what so many needed to hear.

He took on Sec. Byrnes, “that favorite son of this commonwealth, today occupying an indefensible and impossible position. And if he survives in the memory of men, he must begin to help establish in his own South Carolina something of that democracy which he has been recently so loudly preaching in Russia. Eventually this class of men must yield to the writing in the stars.”

Depending on which papers you read, the convention was a rousing success or a shameful gathering of subversives. *The Lighthouse and Informer* reported some

5,000 people attended, a SNYC record and evidence of a movement gathering power.

*The State*, by contrast, was dismissive in its coverage, ignoring the significance of the unprecedented mixed-race event. The state’s newspaper of record quoted Gov. Ransome Wilson: “It was regrettable that Communistic elements came so boldly and brazenly into South Carolina in an effort to undermine Sec. of State Byrnes.”

As SNYC matured, it posed a growing threat to the status quo. In turn, the backlash against it intensified. The FBI and

other agents were deployed to infiltrate and cripple SNYC by branding it as a Communist front. In fact, circling among the crowd in Columbia were “colored confidential informants” and undercover agents planting microphones, taking notes, and copying license tag numbers in the parking lot.

The FBI files we’ve viewed cover the years between 1942 and 1947. They are heavily redacted, but reveal the agency employed numerous agents from 11 field divisions. One file notes that Bethune gave the keynote address at SNYC’s 1944 convention in Atlanta. Another reports “Ms. Andrew W. Simpkins [sic]... took the platform and apologized for the absence of Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. She stated he had taken ill suddenly, and she read to the group the press release he had sent in his absence.”

These FBI reports became the justification in 1947 for classifying SNYC as subversive. The designation cost the organization its tax-exempt status, marking the beginning of the end. Days before Christmas in 1948, after the heat surrounding SNYC grew radioactive, Bethune penned a polite letter to headquarters assuring them that they “can do without me, I am sure.”



*Sekou Franklin at a forum marking the 70th anniversary of SNYC’s Columbia conference.*

Within a week, SNYC suspended operations.

## Reconstructing History

Even though he spent the last 18 years of Modjeska's life working closely with her, Brett Bursey said she never talked about SNYC. "I didn't know that 70 years before we started the Modjeska Simkins School she had organized a Leadership Training Institute with an eerily similar curriculum. I wish I'd known to ask her about it."

In an effort to share this recovered history with academics and the general public, in 2016 the Network partnered with area colleges and city initiative Columbia 63 to hold a series of seminars and remembrances, bringing in special guests who were SNYC delegates in 1946.

Dorothy Burnham, 101 years old, travelled from New York to take part. She talked about the lasting impression DuBois had on her. "I was honored to be in the same room with him, to listen to him talk about what needed to happen to change the world in the South."

AB Wilson, who had introduced DuBois 70 years earlier, also joined the commemoration. At age 97, he recited his piece word-for-word, without notes. He called

DuBois "the senior statesman of the American liberation struggle, the noble and peerless patriarch of our steady climb out of slavery's darkness into the light of full freedom."

The 70th anniversary celebration deepened our understanding of the people who drove SNYC — and our appreciation for the trail they blazed. So these stories are not lost, the Modjeska School will continue to research, record, and share them. By expanding the popular narrative about South Carolina's past into a more inclusive and honest history, perhaps we can stop repeating our missteps.

As SNYC organizer Gwendolyn Midlo Hall wrote, "Few of us know what we should know about the continuity of the movements for full racial equality in the Deep South. Amnesia about black history cuts us off from the past and undermines our self image and our confidence that we can bring about important, constructive change in the world."

Change has come, but at considerable cost. While it isn't linear or easy to chart, South Carolina is making slow progress. For evidence, we need only look on the walls of the S.C. State House, where portraits of Modjeska and Bethune hang alongside the likes of Tillman, Calhoun, and other ghosts of old Jim Crow. 🌹

"This is the firing line. Grit your teeth and make up your minds to fight it out right here if it takes every day of your lives and the lives of your children's children."

W.E.B. DuBois  
at 1946 conference

"I went to a convention in Columbia, S.C., and this was the first time blacks had used the city auditorium of that city even though it was majority black. The convention had around the walls pictures of all the blacks who had been elected during Reconstruction. I had never seen that in my life. I had 12 years of high school and three years of college, and I did not know there had been black congressmen and mayors of cities during Reconstruction in the South. So it was a great educational experience with the Southern Negro Youth Congress."

Jack O'Dell

## Author's Note

Pardon the indulgence, but I feel compelled to say a few words about this project. It was personal, and it seems only fair to say so. While I never got to meet her, Modjeska feels like a member of my family. When I was dating the man who would become my husband, he kept on his fireplace mantel a framed photograph of an old woman in a flowered dress. It was his mentor, Modjeska Simkins, whom he talked about often and with obvious affection.

Over the years, but especially since 2009, when the S.C. Progressive Network moved its offices into her home on Marion Street, Modjeska has become an ever-larger presence in my life. Now, after listening to hours of her voice on tape, after reading all the books and newspaper clippings about her that I could find, after sifting through boxes of her personal papers, I know her even more intimately. It has deepened my respect for her extraordinary life and work.



In Modjeska I find a kindred spirit — both of us journalist-activists living in the heart of Dixie, where too many children are poor and poorly educated, where prison is often the first resort rather than the last, where the plantation mentality is very much alive.

The names and faces have changed, but the political and social dynamics of exclusion, extremism, and racism remain stubbornly intact in our home state. I share her frustration and sense of urgency.

So this is not a detached account; I'll leave that to the scholars and historians.

While to date there is no full biography of Modjeska, much has been written about her. Not wanting to replicate what is already published, I've focused on her activism so that it might inspire those of us living in her tall shadow.

Because her voice is so strong and her language so colorful, I've used extensive quotes throughout, letting her carry the narrative

whenever possible. Who better to tell her story than Modjeska herself?

It has been a privilege to work on this, even as I found it impossible to do her justice in this slim volume. She felt very present throughout, guiding me in a rather loud voice. I learned a lot. I hope others do, too — not just about South Carolina history and one of its finest characters, but about living true to your convictions and making your time on this Earth matter.

Thank you to everyone who helped: the historians who captured Modjeska's stories; **Vennie Deas Moore, Ed Madden, Victoria Reed, Herb Hartsook,** and **Kyle Criminger** for lending their expert editing skills; **Graham Duncan** for mining SNYC gems from the archives at Howard University; **Historic Columbia** for its commitment to preserving Modjeska's home and history; and **Richland County Conservation Commission** for its generous support.

Finally, thanks to my husband, Brett, for teaching me what Modjeska taught him: You don't do this work because you think you're going to win. You do it because you think it's right.

Becci Robbins  
Communications Director  
S.C. Progressive Network

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**WHILE THERE  
IS A LOWER  
CLASS  
I AM IN IT,**

**WHILE THERE  
IS A CRIMINAL  
ELEMENT  
I AM OF IT,  
AND  
WHILE THERE  
IS A SOUL  
IN PRISON  
I AM  
NOT FREE.**



**EUGENE DEBS**

"Let the WORK I have done SPEAK for me."

Dear Compatriot:

"Payback Time" is HERE!

When - through the years - my political action services have been sought in campaigns for public offices - I was THERE with you - ALL THE WAY. And gladly would I be there AGAIN.

N O W, it's the other way around. I NEED you! Will YOU be HERE with me - ALL THE WAY - as I seek At Large Membership on Columbia City Council in the March 1 General Election?

If honestly and urgently you request it, your constituency and friends will support me knowing FULL WELL that I - as director of Publicity and Public Relations for the Richland County Citizens Committee - along with our wide constituency - made significant efforts to insure the difference you coveted.

Yes, "Payback Time" is HERE - N O W!

Your gratitude expressed in positive action would give diamond studded evidence that persistently you are urgently requesting your constituency and/or your friends throughout the City of Columbia to be SURE to VOTE Pointer 7A for Modjeska M. Simkins on Tuesday, March 1.

Yours for "government of the PEOPLE. by the PEOPLE, and for the PEOPLE",

*Modjeska Monteith Simkins*

Modjeska Monteith Simkins

2025 Marion Street, PH 252-3507  
Columbia, South Carolina 29201  
February 7, 1983

*Brochure from Modjeska's campaign for Columbia City Council in 1983. She ran again for Council and a seat in the S.C. House of Representatives in 1966. She lost each time, but claimed that was beside the point. "I never really wanted to hold public office," she said. "You could do a gang lot more free-lancing. I did it more like being a gnat, a flea — just worrying the politicians."*