

*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
Beryl Dakers
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
South Carolina Community Bank
South Carolina State Museum
South Caroliniana Library
University of South Carolina Libraries, South Carolina Political Collections

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Cover photo: Jeff Amberg, Jeff Amberg Photography, Columbia S.C.

This booklet is a project of the S.C. Progressive Network Education Fund
made possible through a grant from the Richland County Conservation Commission.

Printed May 2014

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

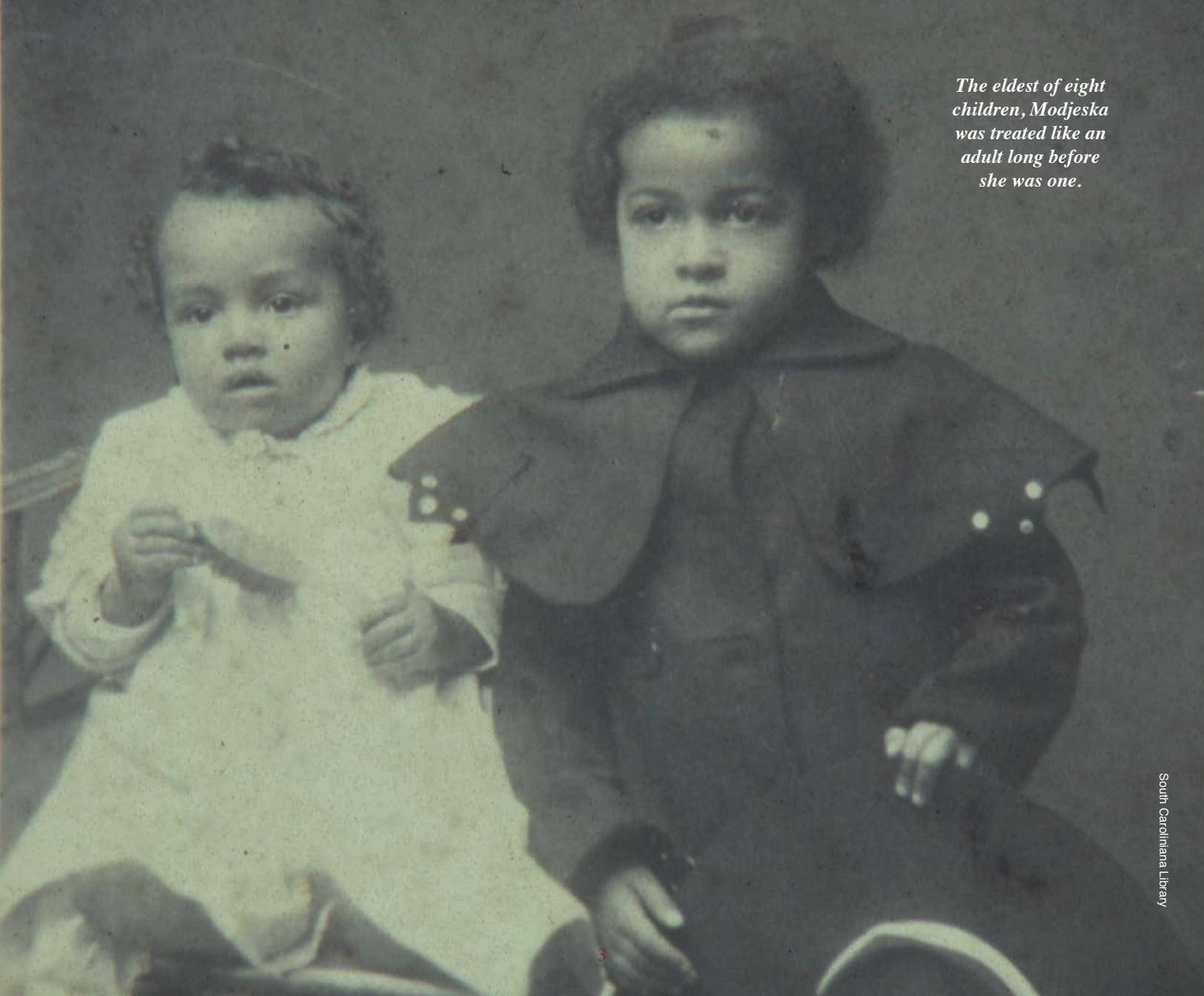
Modjeska was named after the Polish actress Helena Modjeska. “My mother’s baby sister thought it was a beautiful name. She loaded me up with that, and I’ve been toting it all these years,” she said.

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

Modjeska 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.



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.

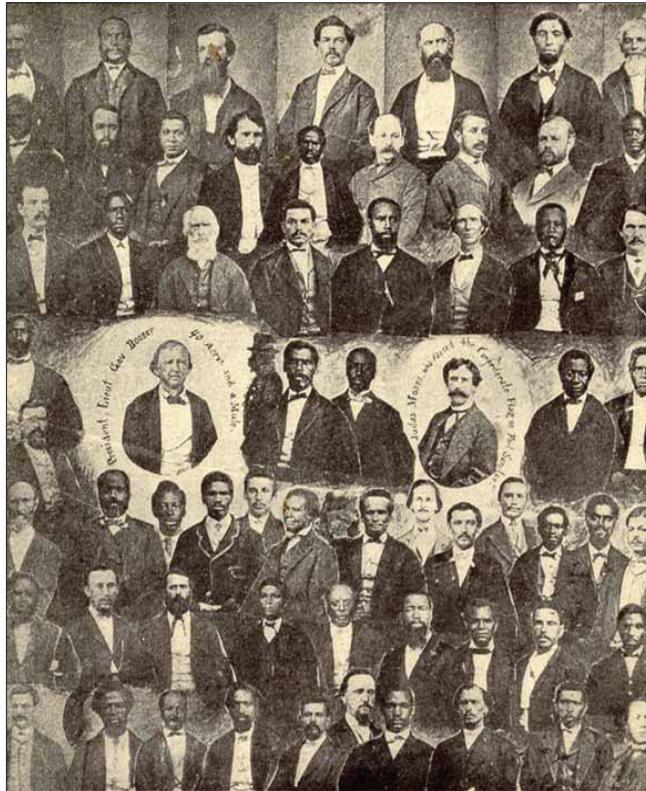


radically. By the end of Reconstruction, South Carolina had the only majority-black House of Representatives in the country, a diversity of members not seen before or repeated since.

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.

SHE SAID

“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

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

sin, and here come my pretty, brown-skinned daddy.

“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 marvelous 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



“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!”

black leaders such as Booker T. Washington who favored slower, incremental change.

“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.

Modjeska at Benedict College in Columbia



Although Modjeska was born in the city, when she was still young her family 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 smoke-house 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.

Coming from a family of educators, Modjeska could already read when she entered first grade at Benedict School, so was immediately advanced a grade. She was taught by "Yankee teachers," whites

who came into the South to educate black students when the state school systems 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.

"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



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

to go and see Mrs. So-and-so, 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.

“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.

The twice-widowed Andrew was 16 years older than Modjeska. A former college professor and insurance salesman, he was a capable 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.”



In the 1950s and 1960s, Modjeska and her husband owned and operated the Motel Simbeth on Hwy. 1.

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

“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.”

and poor health. In the cities, low wages, high unemployment, bad sanitation, and substandard housing were widespread. Rural areas, already 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 notes, “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 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 deli-

*Back of palm card
Modjeska used when
she ran for the S.C.
House in 1966.*

cate matters of public health that raised the eyebrows and ruffled the feathers of her white colleagues.

She did more than talk about tuberculosis. She 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



“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

Modjeska Monteith Simkins

women were at their homes taking care of their children.

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

ity, 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.

“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

“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 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

Come, See, and Hear

MRS. A. W. SIMKINS

Corresponding Secretary of the South Carolina Conference
Branches of the National Association for the Advancement of
Colored People

Sunday Afternoon, May 20, 1945

at 4:00 P.M.

—at—

The Second Presbyterian Church
CHERAW, SOUTH CAROLINA

We are Inviting Members and All Citizens of Chesterfield County
and State to Hear this Distinguished and Noted Speaker

The Cheraw Branch of the National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People

“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

schools. In 1943, she became secretary of the Teachers Defense Fund, set up to raise money for court 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 circumvent 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 this 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.”

TELEPHONE

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The Lighthouse

AND INFORMER

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2-7079

Published by The Lighthouse Publishing Co., Inc., at 1507 Harden St., Columbia, S. C.
 R. S. A. W. SIMKINS _____ Acting Editor

Subscription Rates, must be paid in advance: 1 yr., \$3.75; 6 mos., \$2.50; 3 mos., \$1.50

Momentum was building, and South Carolina activists knew it was critical to harness and focus that emerging energy. “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 S.C. Progressive Party, which he had helped

start 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.

“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

“Thurgood Marshall always stayed in my home,” Modjeska said. “We had two extra bedrooms. Some of the lawyers 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 testified 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 long-held 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 bank 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.” In 1999, the bank changed its name to South Carolina Community Bank.

Modjeska was one of the co-founders 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.

“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 associa-

“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

tion with socialists. Although she was never 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 Un-American 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-smeared 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 the publication of his 20th book.



South Carolina Library

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.”

Not cowed by the party brass, Modjeska replied that if they found her position in

“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 chair 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

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

former State Sen.
Maggie Glover

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.

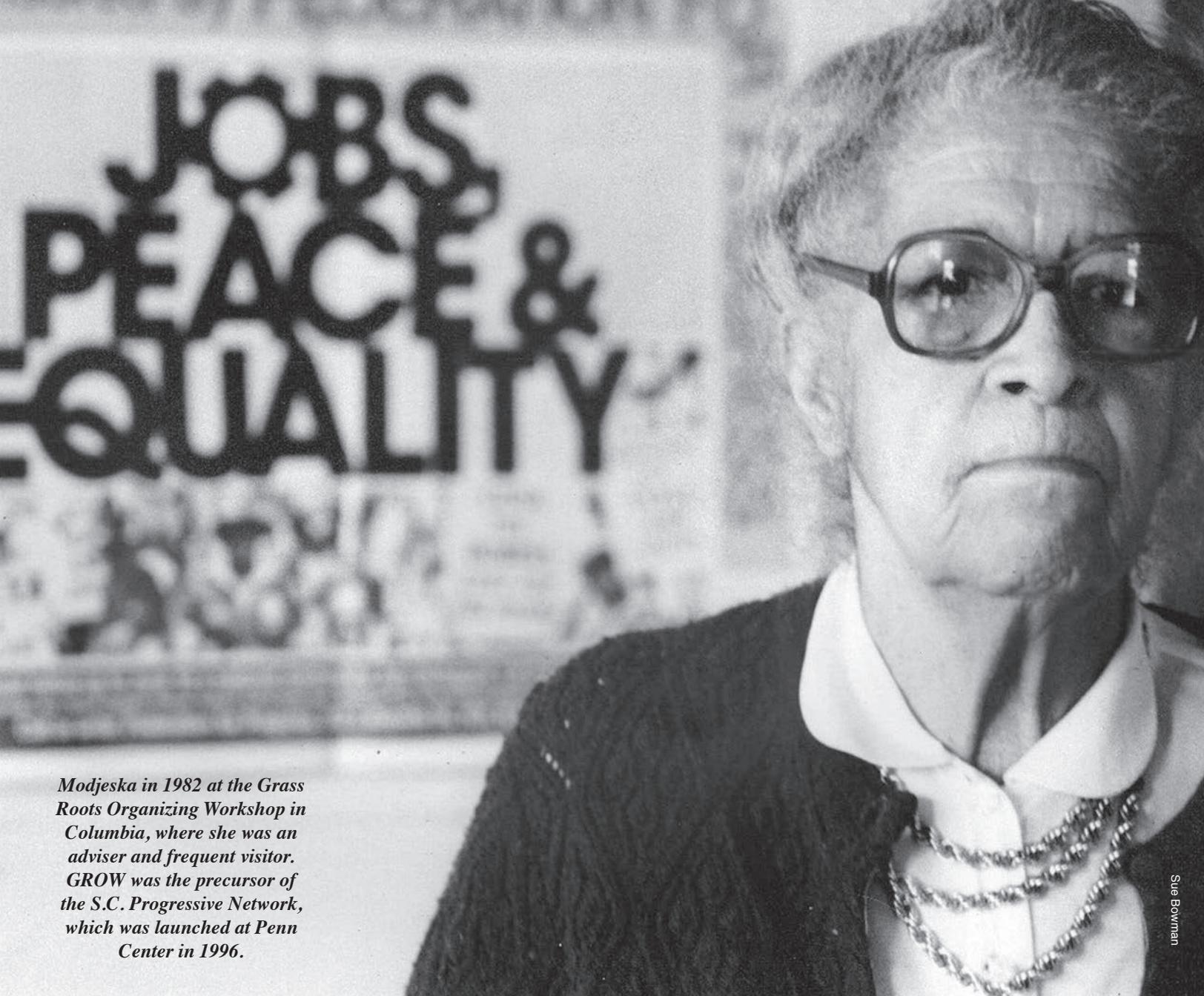
They have gotten kind of washed out. You see, organizations grow old just like people, and the fighting and revolutionary spirit that the NAACP had in those years is no more.”

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.”



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

“Whenever she spoke,
she moved people.”

Eunice “Tootsie” Holland,
feminist activist

“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

“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

“The hardest job I ever had
was being Modjeska’s boss.”

Tom Felder, President and CEO,
South Carolina Community Bank

“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.

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



“Modjeska was an environmental activist early on in that movement. She never could figure out why politicians passed laws as if they drank different water and breathed different air than the rest of us.”

Merll Truesdale,
former GROW staff

“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 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.

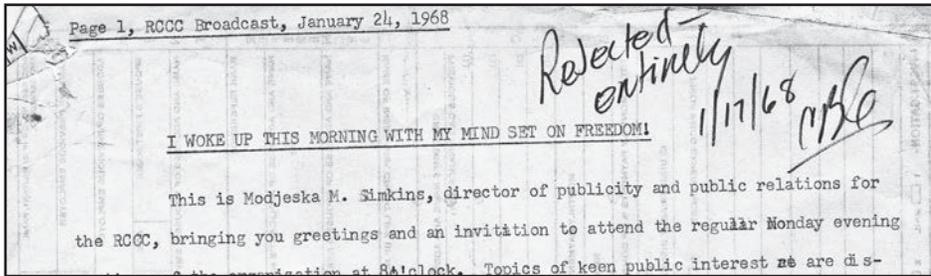
For the most part, Modjeska was given free rein to express herself, but one broadcast was censored completely. In a single radio bit, she thrashed NAACP head I. DeQuincey Newman, U.S. Sen. Fritz Hollings, and the entire military-industrial complex. Scheduled to run on Jan. 24, 1968, here are excerpts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



I. DeQuincey Newman Papers,
SC Political Collections, USC

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

“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 turns her attention to U.S. Senator 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



Modjeska's portrait in the S.C. State House.

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, she 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.”

She continued, “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.”

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 women were granted that right in the United States 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.

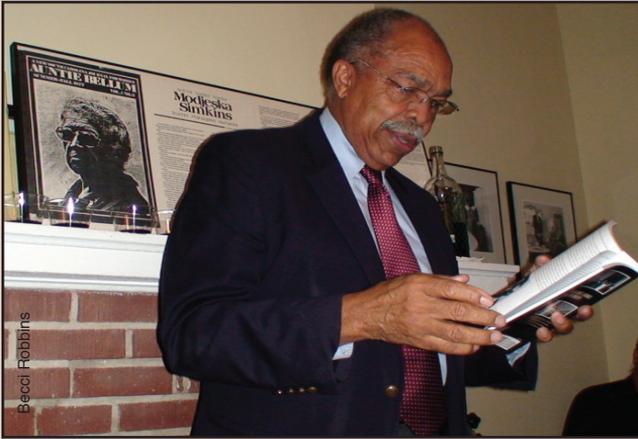
"The first day of the national convention, we found out that the Mississippi delegation had sent several KKK members as delegates," Holland said. "They were quite open about it. Modjeska found a Xerox machine, made a petition to have the Klansmen removed, and got just about everyone at the convention 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 always respected. No matter their politics, nobody could deny Modjeska's integ-



James Felder reads from his book *Civil Rights in South Carolina: From Peaceful Protests to Groundbreaking Rulings* at a birthday party for Modjeska, which the S.C. Progressive Network holds each year at her former home on Marion Street in Columbia. Here is that passage.

On April 25, 1995, Modjeska Monteith Simkins’ portrait was unveiled at the South Carolina State House. In my capacity as executive director of the NAACP at that time, I delivered a tribute to Ms. Simkins on that occasion.

It is only fitting and proper that a portrait of Mary Modjeska Monteith Simkins be unveiled here today in this State House in remembrance of her. I remember Modjeska for being one of the found-

ing members of the S.C. Conference of Branches of the NAACP.

I remember Modjeska for serving as the first field secretary of the S.C. NAACP and receiving no pay for her work.

I remember Modjeska for discovering that white teachers were earning more than black teachers in 1943, and she pushed for litigation that led to *Thompson v. Gibbs* and the equalization of teachers’ pay in South Carolina in 1945.

I remember Modjeska giving civil rights seminars to students from Allen University and Benedict College from behind the teller cage at Victory Savings Bank on Harden Street.

I remember Modjeska, who would drive alone to Clarendon County for a mass meeting and then would have the last word in the debate after the meeting in Billy Flemming’s house at his bar.

I remember Modjeska, who cranked out more press releases and letters to the

editor than all of the civil rights groups in South Carolina combined.

I remember Modjeska, who had a great sense of humor and was quite a crowd pleaser, but she was a fierce warrior for preserving freedom for all of us.

I remember Modjeska, who was just at ease registering wins to vote on Read Street as she was entertaining Thurgood Marshall at her home on Marion Street.

And I will remember Modjeska as a legend in her own time. She was our Harriett Tubman and our Sojourner Truth. She was a woman who woke up every morning with freedom on her mind.

So after today, when you happen to be passing the State House one evening and the lights are flashing and the building is shaking, do not be alarmed, for that will just be Modjeska debating with Edgar Brown, Sol Blatt, Marion Gressette and Ben Tillman, and she will be winning the argument.”



rity and lifelong dedication to South Carolina's most vulnerable citizens.

"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. (For details, see page 39.)

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 Cornell 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! 🐾



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 at the Township in Columbia. W.E.B. DuBois gave one of his last and most important 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.” 🍷

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 on tape (especially **Jackie Hall**, whose interviews are masterful), **Vennie Deas Moore** for research help, **Ed Madden**, **Victoria Reed** and **Herb Hartsook** for lending their expert editing and proofing skills, **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 partner, 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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Support the Modjeska Simkins School

The Modjeska Simkins School of Human Rights is a civic engagement institute to help citizens of all ages promote democracy and justice in South Carolina. The school is located in Modjeska’s house at 2025 Marion St. in Columbia. Call 803-445-1921 to arrange a visit. View the school’s programs at www.scpronet.com.

The school is a project of the S.C. Progressive Network Education Fund. Contributions are tax-exempt. Send checks made out to the Modjeska School to S.C. Community Bank, 1545 Sumter St., PO Box 425, Columbia, SC 29201. Credit/debit card donations may be made at scpronet.com. (Select Modjeska School after clicking on the Donate link.) Or call 803-808-3384.



**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 M. 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."