

Creation of Ruth Rowell Modie Wildlife Park a true community effort in the City of Lewiston



School kids add plants to the community garden at Ruth Rowell Modie Wildlife Park. (photo courtesy Modie Conservancy)

This is the 7th in a series of 12 articles about the 50th anniversary of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands.

By Steve Stuebner

It all started in 1981, with the donation of a 6.8-acre small farm in the center of Lewiston from Donald and Ruth Modie to the Idaho Foundation for Parks and

Lands. The farm property was a beloved sanctuary where Donald Modie and his family could escape the toils of city life, and Modie wanted to dedicate it to his wife as Ruth Rowell Modie Wildlife Park.

In the early 1990s, Lewiston citizens created the non-profit Modie Conservancy to support the park development. The Modie Conservancy teamed up with several key adjacent landowners to convince the City of Lewiston to add the park to the city’s park and recreation system and expand its size. Over time, they



Above, a paved pathway winds through the length of Modie Park. The grounds feature some turf as well as xeriscaping and native grasses suitable for the Lewiston climate (courtesy Modie Conservancy). Left, Donald Modie and Ruth Modie (courtesy Janie Modie)



roughly tripled the size of the open space/wildlife park to approximately 20 acres.

Today, the park is jointly managed by the Modie Conservancy and Lewiston Parks & Recreation. It's a community treasure that's used for youth and adult environmental education, a quiet place to walk close to home, and a

place to enjoy and appreciate nature.

"I grew up enjoying the great outdoors near Glacier National Park," says Phil Shinn, a longtime board member of the Modie Conservancy. "I wasn't a ball sports kind of guy. One of my passions always has been to go outdoors and commune with nature. We have worked all along to ensure that Ruth Rowell Modie

Wildlife Park is a place where people could come to appreciate nature. People who go there just love it!"

The wildlife park lies adjacent to two, 20-foot twin towers that served as the grand entrance to the Lewiston Orchards area, dating back to 1909. The property also features the home of the first licensed and bonded winery built in Idaho following Prohibition. It was the second official nature preserve to be established in the state of Idaho following the creation of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Land's nature preserve in Barber Pool.

"Modie Park has come a long way," says Garry Bush, another longtime board member of the Modie Conservancy. "It's taken a lot of time and effort to put it together. But it's been very gratifying to see what an incredible community asset it has become."

Former Lewiston Parks and Recreation Director Lynn Moss, who played a pivotal role in the park's development, grew up next to the Modie farm and played on the property with his friends. "It's a tremendous resource – it's a one-of-a-kind park for the City of Lewiston."

In the 7th story of our 12-part series detailing the 50th anniversary of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands, we are focusing on properties donated to the Foundation in Lewiston. Ruth Rowell Modie Wildlife Park is particularly noteworthy among those properties because of its value to the Lewiston community and the many challenges involved in creating it.

Origins of the Modie Farm

Don and Ruth Modie (pronounced Mode-EYE) met in Lewiston in 1937 during the Great Depression. He had a farming background, having grown up on a grain farm near Colfax, Wash., and on an original dry farm homestead north of Rupert in Southern Idaho. Ruth was born in Minnesota; her family moved to Lewiston when she was 3 years old. Her father, H.H.S. Rowell, was a reporter and columnist for the Lewiston Morning Tribune, and her mother, Emily, was a homemaker, raising three children.

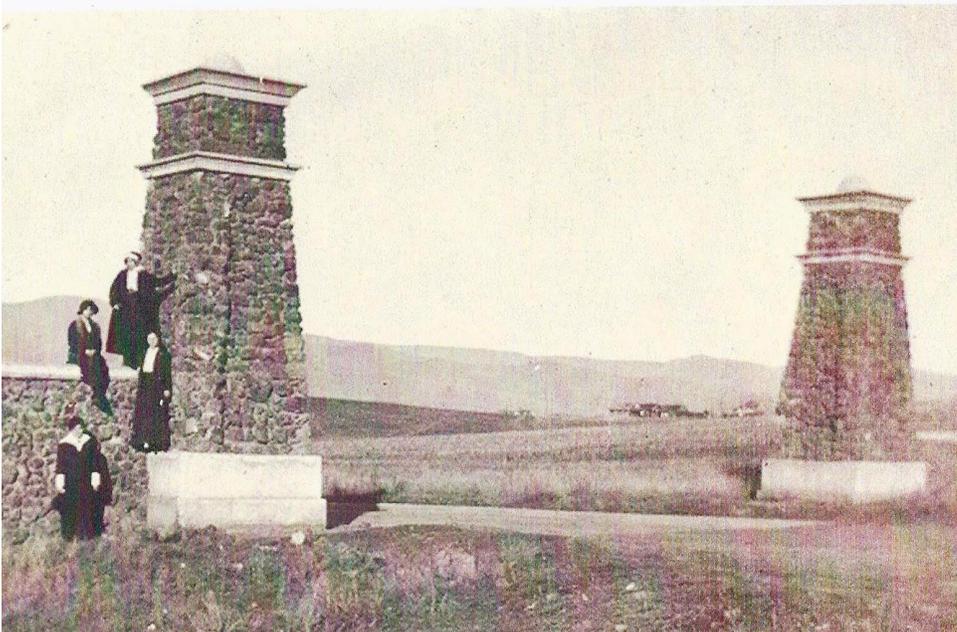
Ruth Modie was a highly educated woman, earning a bachelor's and master's degree in mathematics from the University of Idaho. She taught math in Lewiston schools for most of her adult life, taking a break for a time to raise three children. Don Modie had a long career as a grain broker for Kerr Gifford in Lewiston, which was later acquired by Cargill, Inc., a multinational ag business.



Don Modie with daughter Janie at the Modie Farm back in the day (courtesy Janie Modie).

Don Modie purchased a 120-acre farm on the Lewiston Bench in 1939. The family never lived full-time on the farm – they had a home above the Snake River – but Don loved working on the farm. He raised dairy cattle, beef cattle, pigs and horses on the farm. He put food on the table for his family, butchering the cattle and pigs himself.

“He’d go out there every morning and evening to milk the cows,” says Janie Modie, one of three children raised by Don and Ruth in Lewiston. “Growing up, one



Above, the 20-foot-high Twin Towners created a grand entrance to the Lewiston Orchards in 1909. The towers are located adjacent to Modie Park (courtesy Nez Perce County Historical Society). Right, volunteers work on restoring one of the towers recently (courtesy Modie Conservancy).

of the best ways to spend time with my father was to go out with him on the farm.

“We had our own milk from the dairy cows, and my mother made butter and cream,” Modie says. “The farm was a big part of my dad’s life.”

Janie Modie recalls that her parents were both quite strict. Her mom, being a math teacher, liked things to be organized. “People would describe her as smart, gracious, and an excellent teacher. My dad was kind of gruff, but he had a heart of gold,” she says.

Both of her parents were active in politics. Ruth was active with the Nez Perce County Republican Central Committee, the Idaho Republican Central Committee and the Idaho Federation of Republican Women. She attended several national Republican conventions in the 1970s.

Don Modie regularly attended City of Lewiston Planning & Zoning Commission meetings and Lewiston City Council meetings. He was concerned about zoning changes that could affect the agricultural zone of his farm, and how city officials handled growth.

An October 1978 feature article about Don Modie, citizen activist, in the Lewiston Morning Tribune, indicated that he played close attention to city decisions for “self-defense.”

“I am not a curmudgeon, I am a silent observer,” Modie said in the article. “I do not relish sitting through a boring meeting, but I feel I must be there to defend myself. Many times, things just silently slide through that can have a greater effect later on.”

The reporter, Thomas Campbell, wrote, “The wary Modie watches for both the silent sliders and the blatant bombs when he attends meetings” of the planning commission and city council. “These two bodies, with an assist from the planning department, Modie believes, are tossing the city’s future destiny around as though they are playing bean bag.”

Following Don and Ruth Modie’s retirement, Don sold off the outer edges of the farm to a variety of



Students gather to learn about butterflies at Modie Park, while a bicyclist stops to listen. (Courtesy Modie Conservancy)

entities, including a church, funeral home, hospital and residences. Then, he donated the core of the property to the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands for the development of a nature and wildlife park.

Sharon Hubler, former Executive Director of the Foundation, recalls touring the property for the first time. “Actually, the property was very rough to begin with,” she says. “But there was a little creek running through it, and so you could see little pockets of potential.”

Multiple efforts to grow and expand Modie Park

Following the initial gift of 6.8 acres to the Foundation, it would be 25 years before the Foundation gifted the property to the City of Lewiston Parks & Recreation for development as a wildlife park.

Shinn, a founding board member of the Modie Conservancy, says Don Modie likely picked up on the potential of getting federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) dollars to develop Modie Park into a public park through attending all of those Lewiston City Council meetings.

“He saw all of those dollars coming in from the Land and Water Conservation Fund for the development of a variety of parks in Lewiston,” Shinn says. “He understood that the city would be able to use his land as a match to get LWCF funds for park development.”

Hubler and Moss credit John “Buzz” Nanniga, a former Lewiston-based member of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands, for introducing Modie to the Foundation and explaining the benefits of donating land to a non-profit organization for park and conservation purposes.

When Modie made the land gift, it was land-locked with no access. “It laid there for 10 years,” he says, “the city couldn’t do anything with it.”

In 1992, a group of neighbors, including Shinn and Garry Bush, formed the nonprofit Modie Conservancy in hopes of growing the park. It took them a year or so to get official nonprofit status.

“We saw the potential to add additional land to the Modie property, and we knew it would be a valuable neighborhood and community asset to have a natural park inside the City of Lewiston,” Shinn says. “It would complement the parks that were developed in Lewiston for ball sports.”

Anabel Osborn leverages Eaves property donation to expand Modie Park

The City of Lewiston owned land to the north of Modie Park, and there were some properties on the east side of the park that could be added as well. One of them was a 2.5-acre vineyard known as the Eaves property, occupied by Anabel Osborn and her husband, Ralph. This property was the location of the first licensed and bonded winery in the state of Idaho by “tree-lover” Gregory Eaves.



Anabel Osborn

A former Lewiston Parks Director, Eaves had created an arboretum-like feel on his property by planting exotic trees on the property that were native to the desert Southwest, Japan and China to see if they would survive in the warm Lewiston climate. They did.



A rooftop garden featuring native plants was incorporated into the rest room facility at Modie Park (courtesy Modie Conservancy).

Like Ruth Modie, Osborn was a highly educated woman. Raised in Southern Idaho farming communities, she taught music, speech, debate and drama in Montana and Idaho schools during her teaching career. In 1968, she joined Lewis Clark State College as an assistant professor of speech and coached the LCSC debate team. She was friends with Ruth Modie, too, through educational and social circles.

“They were buds,” notes Garry Bush. “Anabel had the leverage with the donation of her property, and she was not going to donate unless the city committed to donating their eight acres of land to the park as well. She was like, you’re going to do this or you won’t get my land. She was the key in putting the pieces together.”

Working with a land developer named Douglas Randall, the state of Idaho, and local land swap brought all of the pieces of the park into a larger whole. A 10-acre parcel where the State Veterans Home was built on a portion of the Eaves property contributed to the open space. Douglas and Susan Randall donated 1.2 acres to the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands in 1995 as part of the deal, and one acre of Osborn’s land, including some outbuildings, were donated to the Foundation in 1996. Both were eventually donated by the Foundation to the City of Lewiston as additions to Ruth Rowell Modie Wildlife Park.

“I would feel that I have wasted my life if I didn’t have the opportunity to see that these trees survive,” Osborn told the Lewiston Morning Tribune in a 1994 article about the impending land donation. “It should be preserved for the people of Lewiston to enjoy.

“I have always felt that this property that belonged to Greg Eaves had historical value,” she said in the article. “I don’t want these trees and rare plants chopped down.”

After years of ground work by the Modie Conservancy, the Foundation and Lewiston Parks and Recreation, Ruth Rowell Modie Wildlife Park and the properties surrounding it were donated to the City of Lewiston by the Foundation in 2005. Leveraging the land gift from the Foundation, the City of Lewiston applied for and received a federal LWCF grant of \$211,000 and matched that with a \$244,000 in-kind contributions.

LWCF grant provides key funds for Modie Park
Moss remembers putting together the LWCF grant as the Director of Lewiston Parks and Recreation at the time. He didn’t need any convincing about the park’s value, having grown up next to the Modie Farm and the Eaves property. “We used to play around on those twin towers, made bamboo forts and had dirt clog fights on the farm till the cows came home,” he says with a laugh.

Plus he knew the Osborns. “Anabel was my speech teacher in college,” Moss says. “The Osborns were friends of the family. Both of my parents worked at the college.”

Landing the LWCF grant brought a significant boost of funds to Modie Park for park development.

The grant paid for a cutting-edge parking area with permeable pavers, a rest room with a dirt roof (for growing plants), xeriscaping areas, three picnic shelters, an irrigation system that could be controlled remotely via the Internet, and hundreds of new trees. Regence BlueShield donated funds for a paved pathway



Pollinator garden at Ruth Rowell Modie Wildlife Park (courtesy Modie Conservancy).

that runs the length of the park property from north end to the south end.

A grand opening was held in April 2007.

Janie Modie spoke at the dedication, saying her parents would be proud to see what the park would become. “Now it’s a place for the whole city to enjoy, but it also is a place in the middle of a city where a person can find quiet,” she said.

“It’s great to see what the park has become,” Moss says. “It’s been a tremendous community resource. Kids walk by it and through it to school. It’s a research center for kids. It’s a high valued asset in the Lewiston park system.”

The Modie Conservancy began concept planning for the nature park as early as 1993. The mission statement for Modie Wildlife Park said, “It is envisioned that in the next 50 years, the park will become an outdoor classroom for students of the Lewiston School District,” colleges and others. “The educational activities will use the park’s unique setting to provide positive experiences for all age groups about their relationship to nature (ecosystem). The board educational theme will be to teach people how to think, not what to think about ecosystems, interdependencies, and sustained development. As a community cultural center, the park will be a source of community pride.”

Over time, the Modie Conservancy and Lewiston Parks & Recreation have fulfilled the mission and

they continue to expand it. They plant new trees every Arbor Day, among many other volunteer activities.

“We have probably \$100,000 worth of in-kind work done each year by our volunteers,” Bush says.

Former Lewiston greenhouse owner and nursery owner, Margaret Burman, donated funds to create a grove of trees commemorating her family prior to her passing in June 2001. The grove of 24 trees is located next to the Regence BlueShield of Idaho walking pathway.

There’s also a pollinator garden that’s been established to attract butterflies.

The nearby Jenifer Middle School has created a community vegetable garden in the park. At harvest time, some of the vegetables are donated to the local food bank. There are eight kiosks in the park that provide educational information about different aspects of nature represented in the park. Some small wetland ponds have been created inside the park as well.

Kelly Norwood, a 7th grade science teacher at Jenifer Middle School, brings his classes to the park to collect pond water samples, learn about invasive species, and work on the community garden.

“I made a little learning booklet so the kids can go from kiosk to kiosk to learn more details about the information presented,” Norwood said. “Anytime there’s an opportunity to get kids outside is a good thing. So many of my kids don’t spend time outside, so they don’t have a connection to nature. Modie Park is place where they can learn that connection first-hand.”

Churches and schools located nearby also use the park on a regular basis. The Modie Conservancy has applied for a grant to build an educational and interpretive pavilion in the park to replace an aging house that can not accommodate modern building code requirements.

Wildlife that can be viewed in the park at different times of the year include deer, coyote, fox, skunks, hawks and other birds of prey, and song birds.

There are plans to restore one of the twin towers to its original stature.

“We have a lot going on in the park,” Bush says. “We have a lot of dedicated people contributing to its success.”

But ultimately, if it hadn’t been for Don and Ruth

Modie, Anabel Osborn, the Modie Conservancy, the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands, the City of Lewiston, Lewiston Parks and Recreation, among others, the park would not be what it is today.

“Those two ladies, Ruth and Anabel, were great, great ladies,” Bush says.

The Foundation played a significant role by holding onto the property until it was ready to be conveyed to the City of Lewiston for park development, which took almost 25 years.

“I think It’s important to remember the value that the Foundation has played in being a conduit to hold onto gifts of land for many years forward until the time is right,” Hubler said. “By doing so, the Foundation can bridge those years waiting for the budget and funds to come along to make property acquisitions flexible and possible.”



A girl watches a butterfly in action at Modie Park (courtesy Modie Conservancy).

Ruth Rowell Modie Wildlife Park is a community treasure, Janie Modie notes.

“It truly is an oasis in the middle of the city,” she says. “It’s this wonderful nature park surrounded by houses and businesses. People walk in there and see the trees, butterflies and birds. It truly is a walk into nature’s beauty.

“If it hadn’t been for the Foundation for Parks and Lands, it may never have gotten off the ground.”

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