

TRIBUTE TO MRS. MABEL BASSETT

By Jessie Randolph Moore*

"In as much as you have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me."

This tribute is written to honor the memory of Mrs. Mabel Bassett, one of the great humanitarians of Oklahoma. For twenty years she served Oklahoma as Commissioner of Charities and Corrections in an heroic fight for the safe-guarding of human welfare. She was a woman of great initiative and vision. She was assured that God was actively present in the world and had full knowledge of the collective needs of all of His Children who came under her jurisdiction as Commissioner of Charities and Corrections and would hold her responsible for any neglect of the sacred obligations of her office.

The inequalities of life were grave problems and a matter of deep concern to Mrs. Bassett. She had a "charge to keep." The aged, who have built the bridges of the past over which we have traveled to the benefits of today. The neglected and dependent children had her compassionate interest. She believed the destiny of our nation lies in the hands of our children and that it is our duty today to conserve these resources that made the generation of tomorrow. The physically handicapped should be given the opportunity to live an independent life. The mentally incompetent wherever found should have sympathetic competent supervision and medical care. The delinquent should have competent, understanding assistance if they were to reform their lives.

In so many of her investigations on the negative side of life she found the prisons of Oklahoma were filled with delinquents who had never had a chance to become good citizens because of environment. Mrs. Bassett had a sympathetic understanding for the needs of all of "the charges", who came under the jurisdiction of her office.

One of her other numerous official duties included the inspection of City, County, and State Institutions. She was especially interested in the supervision and welfare of the inmates of these institutions, also the sanitation of the buildings and seldom had any trouble in having carried out any corrections she recommended.

The Commissioner considered all of the under-privileged citizens to be a sacred obligation to State and Nation. She endorsed Governor Marland's great Social Security Petition. She regarded it as a won-

* This tribute was delivered by Mrs. Jessie E. Moore at the funeral of her friend, Mabel Bourn Bassett.—Ed.

derful safeguard for most of the important Social Welfare problems and used her influence over the state to promote its adoption by the people.

Mrs. Mabel Bassett served Oklahoma as Commissioner of Charities and Corrections for a quarter of a century, and during that period it was always her sincere desire to serve the under-privileged. This benevolent purpose constitutes an essential part of the whole life of this great humanitarian.

She was an Apostle of Hope to the "Little children of the poor," and day by day faithfulness to her "charge" through many years merged into the fragrance of Alabaster Ministration.

—OUR LADY OF MERCY—

Our Lady of Mercy has gone away
Beyond the Sunset Gates,
In her home she left behind
The fragrance of her presence lingers
Like that immortal perfume
From the Alabaster Box
That Mary broke.
We who know her like to ponder
On her kindly deeds,
Long to hear again
The tramp of many weary feet and
See her cheerful binding up
The wounds of all humbly
Who passed her door.

J. R. M.

MABEL BOURNE BASSETT*

1876—1953

Mabel Bourne Bassett was State Commissioner of Charities and Corrections from 1923 to 1947. Perhaps few people realize the unique place she will fill in the final writing of Oklahoma History. Certainly, few know how fortunate the young state was to have in her so capable a "friend to the friendless", for it is ironical that Mrs. Bassett's work was better known outside the borders of her own state.

Mabel Bourne was born in Chicago, Illinois, August 16, 1876. Her father was Stephen Bourne, a merchant, and a veteran of Company B, Eighth Regiment, Missouri Infantry. Her mother was Martha Ellen Tomlin, daughter of Judge Levi Preston Tomlin of Charleston, Illinois; and it would seem that her crusading spirit was a fitting heritage for a crusading daughter.

Martha Ellen Tomlin, with her sisters, Mary and Margaret Tomlin, were the first women in the United States to edit a newspaper. This was *The Balance* established in 1870, in Chicago,

*This brief biographical sketch on Mrs. Bassett has been contributed by her friend, Mrs. Elsie D. Hand, Librarian, Oklahoma Historical Society.



MABEL BOURNE BASSETT

burned in the great fire, re-established and used to champion women's interests and further woman's suffrage. Martha Ellen Bourne, mother of Mabel Bassett, used the *nom de plume* of "Capitola", and her strong pen moved tirelessly in an effort to free women of that day from servitude to citizenship. Martha Foulin trained her young daughter, Mabel, as a public speaker. So successful was she that Mabel, at ten years of age, spent the summer in Chautauqua with the humorist, Bill Nye. Mabel Bourne's education was a practical one in social service. She completed her formal education in St. Louis, Missouri, at the Missouri School of Social Economy.

At an early age, Mabel Bourne married Joseph Bassett in Billings, Montana. She and her young husband moved to Sapulpa, Indian Territory, in 1902. Three children were born to Mabel and Joseph Bassett: William Clyde, Mabel Claire (wife of Fleming Warren Abshire), and Herbert Norval. Only William Clyde survived his mother. Also surviving are four granddaughters, Mary E. Abshire, Jean Bassett Harr, Phylis Bassett and Karen Bassett; one great granddaughter, Sharon Harr.

In 1910, Creek County organized the first humane society, out of which grew the first home for children established in the new state of Oklahoma, the Creek County Children's Home. Mabel Bassett headed the organization from the beginning, first as a part time voluntary worker, and as the work grew, organization became a model relief and child welfare agency.

During these twelve years, Mrs. Bassett gained experience. She became aware of needed legislation, comprehended the urgent requirements of social reforms, and was singularly prepared to take over the office of Commissioner of Charities and Corrections, to which she was elected in 1922. Mrs. Bassett was unprecedented in the state as a vote getter. In the 1926 elections she carried 73 of the 77 counties in the primary and lead the entire state ticket in the general election. A vigorous and forceful campaigner, her loyal supporters were dedicated to her service.

Among her great accomplishments for Oklahoma, Mrs. Bassett fought for the statute, making wife and child desertion a felony enacted by the Eighth Legislature. She was the first to promote the establishment of a State Pardon and Parole Board. She was responsible for the Industrial School for Negro boys at Boley, Oklahoma. She recommended and pushed through to completion a building for women prisoners at the State Penitentiary at McAlester.

Mrs. Bassett was untiring in her work to raise the standards of every institution in the state, whether orphanage, mental institution, or penal and correctional institution, often with woefully inadequate appropriations. She often fought against a wall of prejudice to educate the public in more enlightened treatment of its wards. She held offices in or was a member of the following organizations: Vice

President of the American Prison Association; member of the Police Officer's Association; Big Sisters Organization; Women's Auxiliary of the International Railroad Conductors Union, Farmer's Union, and many Labor organizations. In addition, she was affiliated with Eastern Star—White Shrine, the Ruth Bryan Owen Club, Jeffersonian Club, Women's Democratic Council, and Daughters of Democracy.

For her Red Cross work during World War I, Mrs. Bassett was awarded the highest honor in the state by the National Red Cross, a service medal for 3200 hours of dedicated Red Cross work. The club women of Oklahoma recognized her usefulness by appointing her to the Fourth District Legislative Committee of the State Federation of Women's Clubs, and were staunch in their support of her for many years. For her outstanding services for the betterment of mankind, she was inducted into Oklahoma's "Hall of Fame" by the Oklahoma Memorial Association, on Statehood Day, November 16, 1937.

Mabel Bassett was replaced in office January of 1943. She re-entered the race for her old office of Commissioner of Charities and Corrections but was defeated, and retired once and for all, relieved to be free of the strenuous duties of office.

Until her death August 2, 1953, Mrs. Bassett enjoyed a full and pleasant life. She spent much time at her farm about seven miles west of Guthrie on State Highway # 33, where she established a model dairy farm with registered Guernseys.

Possessing rare ability of mind and heart, Mrs. Bassett also had a fine sense of humor. She lived to the fullness of years for her life abounded in the greatness of things accomplished.

On August 3, 1953, by direction of Acting Governor James E. Berry, Mabel Bourns Bassett returned to the Capitol where she served so faithfully, there to lie in state in the Blue Room. It was the last honor the State could pay her. Christian Science services were held for her the following day with burial in Memorial Park Cemetery.

—Blaise D. Hand.

IN
COMMEMORATION
OF
MRS. MABEL BASSETT
FORMER
COMMISSIONER OF CHARITIES AND CORRECTIONS OF OKLAHOMA

September 14, 1953

Dear Mrs. Bassett:

In compliance with requests from so many of your most ardent friends, I will try, in my humble way, to pay you a worthy tribute, in the form of a letter addressed to you in commemoration of your most faithful and devoted life.

I earnestly feel that in your passing, the underprivileged of our State and Nation lost one of their most devoted friends, and that the Nation lost one of its truly great American women.

Your unflinching, courageous, and truly affectionate devotion to the poor, and deserving-underprivileged men, women, and children of our State, will stand out as an inspiring inspiration to all of our fine people in those more humble walks of life. Your courageous, humble, and sincere devotion to the daily tasks of worthy humane endeavor will live inspiring in the memory of your friends forever; and the smiling, complacent, and heroic courage which you so beautifully displayed through the closing years of your life will, no doubt, supply all of your loved ones with their most comforting bit of consolation when they, too, come face to face with the grim realities of the inevitable.

One of the finest tributes to your long life of fruitful service is your unflinching and affectionate devotion to the so-called forgotten men. The poor and down-trodden could always look to you for a helping hand. Through your many years as Commissioner of Charities and Corrections you reflected the charm, ability, and devotion to duty that will command the respect of the people of the great State of Oklahoma forever. And all through your many fruitful years, both in public office and private life, you have always reflected these more beautiful and intellectual elements of aesthetic composition of heart. And for this I wish to quote these lines from my favorite poem, as a tribute, which, to me, is so beautifully characteristic of you.

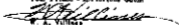
"He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things - both great and small,
For the Dear God who maketh them
Made and loveth all."

And now, that the Great God of Heaven has spoken - softly and tenderly - with assurance of Eternal Forgiveness - "Well done thou good and faithful servant" your life are ended with a touching farewell smile for all the fine people throughout the world - that you loved and knew - and like an enchanting echo there comes back the words of eternal admiration from all the fine people, that know you.

And now, in the Name of Him who giveth and taketh away, let me say on behalf of all your fine friends everywhere - Goodby, Mrs. Bassett - and may you never rest the grave for it is just a simple passing from this beloved old earth -- with its sunshine and its rain -- TO YOUR ETERNAL DESTINATION, IN GOD'S IMMORTAL HALL OF FAME.

Most respectfully,

Your Friend - E. Pluribus Unum


W. A. Villars