

**MABEL LUELLA  
BOURNE  
BASSETT  
1876-1953**



**RAISED  
STANDARDS  
OF  
INSTITUTIONS**

In 1977, the Mabel Bassett Correctional Center was opened on a hill outside McLoud, named for the former Commissioner of Charities and Corrections noted for her promotion of fair living conditions and opportunities for prison inmates. The facility houses female minimum and medium-security inmates, and serves as the reception and assessment center for all females incarcerated in Oklahoma.

Mabel Luella Bourne was in August 1876 in Chicago. Her mother established the newspaper *The Balance* to champion women's interests and suffrage. Mabel first found fame at ten when she gave stirring readings on the Chautauqua circuit. Family members originally hoped for a stage career for the prodigy.

Mabel graduated from the Missouri School of Social Economy (now School of Social Work) in St. Louis. At sixteen, she married railroad conductor Joseph Bassett in Billings, Montana and moved to Sapulpa, Indian Territory in 1902. They established one of Oklahoma's first charitable organizations in 1910 for orphaned and neglected children, the Creek County Humane Society, and organized the first home for children in the new state.

For the next decade, Bassett advocated for needed legislation and urgent requirements for social reforms. For her Red Cross work during World War I, Bassett was awarded the highest honor in the state by the National Red Cross, a service medal for 3,200 hours of dedicated Red Cross work. In 1921, she played a vital role in the passage of legislation making wife and child desertion a felony.

After two unsuccessful attempts, Bassett became the third Commissioner of Charities and Corrections in 1922. The only female-led state office had been started by Kate Barnard in 1907. In the 1926 election, she carried 73 of the 77 counties in the primary and led the entire state ticket in the general election. A vigorous and forceful campaigner, Bassett held the position for 24 years (six terms) through 1947.

Bassett drastically improved prison conditions, expanded probation services, outlawed inhumane treatment, built a women's prison at McAlester, and established a more suitable home for delinquent African American boys at Boley. She investigated neglect reports in every state orphanage, mental institution, or penal and correctional institutions, and was untiring in her work to raise the standards of every institution. She was a vociferous advocate, arguing mere incarceration would not protect society – only inmate rehabilitation would. She often fought against a wall of prejudice to educate the public in more enlightened treatment of its wards. Bassett also established the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board in 1944.

In 1946, called the upset of the statewide election season, Bassett lost to Buck Cook in the runoff election. His 20-year uninspired career was limited to routine inspections of jails and other institutions. After she again lost to Cook in 1950, she retired to her Guthrie dairy farm to raise registered Guernseys. For her outstanding services for the betterment of mankind, Bassett was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame on Statehood Day 1937. When she died in August 1953 at age 77 in Guthrie, her body lay in state at the State Capitol Blue Room so the public could mourn her passing. The Department of Corrections proudly named one of three female prisons in her honor.

A tribute to Bassett described one of Oklahoma's great humanitarians. "For twenty years, she led a heroic fight for the safeguarding of human welfare, a woman of great initiative and vision. The physically handicapped were allowed to live independently, the mentally challenged received sympathetic supervision and medical care, and the delinquent needed competent, understanding assistance to help them reform their lives. Her sincere desire was to serve the underprivileged."