

**AMELIA ELIZABETH
“BESSIE” SIMISON
McCOLGIN
1875-1972**



**FIRST WOMAN
ELECTED TO
OKLAHOMA
HOUSE**

In 1920, the 19th Amendment allowed women the right to vote. Oklahoma sent Lamar Looney to the Oklahoma Senate and Bessie McColgin to the Oklahoma House of Representatives. While serving, McColgin worked to promote health and safety legislation.

Amelia Elizabeth Simison was born in January 1875 in Minneapolis, Kansas. Both of his parents died when she was three so “Bessie” was raised by relatives in Earlville, Illinois, where she married Grant McColgin in August 1895. She attended Teachers Normal College and Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois as well as the School of Oratory and Georgian Academy in Georgia, Vermont.

The family came to Grant County, Oklahoma Territory in 1901, where Grant bought a “relinquishment” in Roger Mills County near Rankin at the Texas border in 1903. “We found a terrific prairie fire had swept the country, burning everything for miles including the little home and contents set up for us in February. So, we began all over again, and the money saved for seed had to go for lumber to build a new home.”

McColgin taught school in her home and was appointed Ridgeton Postmaster in 1904. The family moved to Rankin in 1909, where the couple alternated teaching school and delivering mail. In 1913 they began operating the Rankin Telephone Company in their home. McColgin also organized the county’s first home demonstration club and a Women’s Christian Temperance Union chapter while teaching in Rankin’s first public school. Rankin became a ghost town in 1928 when the railroad was built along Rush Creek, causing merchants to relocate to nearby Reydon. Rankin is now part of the Black Kettle National Grassland.

After the 19th Amendment was ratified in August 1920 – and the state constitution amended – women could be elected to the state legislature, but not most state offices. Male politicians hustled to get ready for the November election. Legend says the men in McColgin’s family stuck her name on the Republican ballot without consulting her. She defeated the incumbent because many considered her a superior orator and believed her election was due to her popularity in western Oklahoma. She claimed not to be a suffragette nor a feminist, saying women of western Oklahoma were merely of independent mind.

In January 1921 at age 45, she left her month-old tenth child Franklin, who would later become a commercial pilot, with her sister while Grant stayed home with the rest of the children when she moved to Oklahoma City to become the only female state representative. She took an active interest in the soldiers’ relief programs and helped establish the Tuberculosis Sanatorium at Clinton. Her few pieces of legislation included a Bureau of Child Hygiene and a public nursing board.

Her main focus was assisting with House passage of bills that female Democratic Senator Lamar Looney had sponsored. Looney, also elected in 1920, was the only other woman to serve in the 8th Legislature. Unfortunately for the women, little of their public health agenda passed into law.

On the last day of McColgin’s term, her male colleagues told her that women legislators need to be “watched”. She was puzzled by their comment until they presented her with a wristwatch to commemorate her service. Although not re-elected to a second term, McColgin led the way for the election of three female members to the Oklahoma House of Representatives in 1923.

She lived the rest of her life in Rankin. Forty years after she left office, her son Sterling was elected to the same House seat she had occupied. McColgin died in July 1972 at age 97 in Sayre. On March 30, 2005, her portrait was placed at the State Capitol on the fourth floor near the Rotunda, sponsored by U. S. Representative Frank Lucas, a Roger Mills County neighbor. The next day, McColgin was posthumously inducted into the Oklahoma Women’s Hall of Fame.