MATTIE BOST BELL CASTNER

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The Mother of Belt

MATTIE CASTNER'S CAREER epitomizes the *pioneer spirit* on which the state of Montana has built in the twentieth century. Born into slavery in Newton, North Carolina, on April 10, 1848, Mattie worked on the Settser plantation as a child's nurse. After the Emancipation Proclamation freed her family, she traveled to St Louis where, for a decade, she worked as a house domestic, a nanny, and a hotel maid.

IN 1876 MATTIE TRAVELED from St Louis to Fort Benton, where she soon became the owner of a successful laundry. At Fort Benton she met John K. Castner, a young Pennsylvania freighter who ran several mule teams from the Missouri River terminus. Castner had scouted the country and filed mineral claims along Belt Creek, east of the Great Falls. Mattie and John married in Helena in 1879 and settled in a log cabin at the Belt Creek ford.

FOR FORTY YEARS the Castners pursued separate commercial endeavors, while offering hospitality and support to the people in the Belt area. Their generosity became legend. Their kindness flourished unchecked. As the founder and the first mayor of the town of Belt, John became known as *the Father of Belt*

MATTIE DESERVEDLY EARNED THE TITLE of *the Mother of Belt,* for - while John developed mercantile, freighting and coal-mining prospects - Mattie opened the Castner Hotel, around which the town grew. She also ran a dining room whose reputation for hospitality, elegance, and excellence spread across the Territory. Mattie Castner's generosity was rivalled only by her exquisite cooking.

AS THE COAL-MINING TOWN of Belt grew, Mattie helped many families get established and survive during hard times. Her selfless donations to civic causes were notorious. Mattie Castner died on April 2, 1920 - the largest single landowner in Belt. She donated most of her estate - nearly $25,000 - to local charities. Montana lost more than a leading citizen with Mattie's passing, it lost the sense of community spirit that th*e Mother of Belt* personified.