MATTIE BOST BELL CASTNER

MATTIE CASTNER'S CAREER epitomizes the pioneer spirit of 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 Setser 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, 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 freighting who ran several mail trains from the Missouri River terminus. Castner had counted the country and laid 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 flourished unchecked. As the founder and first mayor of the town of Belt, John became known as the Father of Belt.

MATTIE DESERVESLY BEARDED 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 where reputation for hospitality, dignity, and excellence spread across the Territory. Mattie Castner's generosity was credited 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 notable donations to civic causes were universal. Mattie Castner died on April 2, 1920—the largest single landowner in Belt. She donated more of her estate—nearly $25,000—to local charities. Montana lost more than a leading citizen with Mattie's passing, but the sense of community spirit that the Mother of Belt personified.