

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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MAUD SWETT

1879-1965

City: Green Lake, Milwaukee, Madison

County: Green Lake, Milwaukee, Dane

As director of the Woman and Child Labor Division within the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, Maud Swett enforced labor laws, improving working conditions for women and children.

Maud Swett was born on January 17, 1879, in Green Lake, Wisconsin. After high school, she attended the Milwaukee State Normal School (now the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), where she took teacher-training courses and graduated in 1901. After graduation, she taught in New London, WI, and Escanaba, Michigan, before returning to study economics at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. While there, she was mentored by economist and academic John R. Commons, who was a strong supporter of women studying economics at the university. She graduated in 1910 with a bachelor's degree in economics. In her academic thesis, *The Summary of Labor Laws in Force, 1909: Woman's Work*, Swett explained updates to labor laws state-by-state. On the back of the pamphlet she wrote: "Permanent industrial progress cannot be built upon the physical exhaustion of women."

Swett was working as a statistician in the Bureau of Labor Statistics when the Wisconsin Industrial Commission (now the Department of Workforce Development) was created in 1911. She was promoted to assistant secretary in the new Commission. Swett quickly rose through the ranks and five years later became a field deputy, investigating workplaces where women and minors were employed. Because the department was based in Milwaukee, she and other deputies would travel the state to complete workplace inspections. In 1920, Swett became the director of the Woman and Child Labor Division within the Commission, a role she held for 36 years until her retirement. During this time, she advised people drafting labor legislation, advocated for raising the minimum wage for women and children, and helped re-draft the Child Labor Law to make it easier to understand and enforce.

Swett was recognized nationally and globally. In 1929, she was elected president of the Association of Governmental Officials in Industry of the United States and Canada (now the National Association of Government Labor Officials), an organization focused on helping leaders in labor law communicate across state and national lines. Because of her experience, she also advised others on how to best enforce labor laws, including training international visitors and speaking in different cities across the country. The US Department of Labor recognized her outstanding work with an award in 1963.

Swett was also involved in local organizations. In 1947, she received the Caroline Bigelow McGeoch Award for Distinguished Citizenship, presented by the Milwaukee County League of Women Voters, an organization of which she had been a dedicated member for over 20 years. Swett also served on the boards of the Milwaukee branch of the YWCA and the City Club, a local civic organization. She also served as a delegate for the Legal Aid Society. In 1960, Zonta International, a group dedicated to empowering women, gave her an honorary membership.

Maud Swett died on October 16, 1965, at age 86.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/maud-swett