



# What Trouble I Have Seen (History of Violence Against Wives)

*David PETERSON DEL MAR*

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It was 1869 and Sarah Moses, with "a very black eye," told her father: *The world will never know what trouble I have seen*. What she'd seen was violence at the hands of her husband. Does the world know any more of such things today than it did in Sarah's time?

Sarah, it so happens, lived in Oregon, that Edenic state on the Pacific Coast, and it is here that David Peterson del Mar centers his history of violence against wives. What causes such violence? Has it changed over time? How does it relate to the state of society as a whole? And how have women tried to stop it, resist it, escape it? These are the questions Peterson del Mar pursues, and the answers he finds are as fascinating as they are disturbing.

Thousands of thickly documented divorce cases from the Oregon circuit courts let us listen to voices who often go unheard. These are the people who didn't keep diaries or leave autobiographies, who sometimes could not write at all. Here they speak of a society that quietly condoned wife beating until the spread of an ethos of self-restraint in the late nineteenth century. And then, Peterson del Mar finds, the practice increased with a vengeance with the florescence of expressive individualism during the twentieth century.

*What Trouble I Have Seen* also traces a dramatic shift in wives' response to their husbands' violence. Settler and Native American women commonly fought abusive mates. Most wives of the late nineteenth century acted more cautiously and relied on others for protection. But twentieth-century privatism, Peterson del Mar discovers, often isolated modern wives from family and neighbors, casting abused women on the mercy of the police, women's shelters, and, most important, their own resources. Thus a new emphasis on self-determination, even as it stimulated violence among men, enhanced the ability of women to resist and escape violent husbands.

The first sustained history of violence toward wives, *What Trouble I Have Seen* offers remarkable testimony to the impact of social trends on the most private arrangements, and the resilience of women subject to a seemingly timeless crime.

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Reviews of this book:

Del Mar offers a history of woman battering in Oregon that is compassionate, richly detailed, [and] complex...The richness of this historical examination will be of great interest to scholars and students of gender, family life, and violence against women.

--James Ptacek, *Contemporary Sociology*

Reviews of this book:

This is a fascinating book, with a bold and clear argument and a host of insights into family life and standards...It is stimulating, often plausible, and important.

--Peter N. Stearns, *American Historical Review*

Reviews of this book:

*What Trouble I Have Seen* weaves together an extraordinary mix of contradictory threads in the histories of violence, westward expansion, race, economics, gender roles, work, attitudes about marriage and women, and changes in the economy to explain historical changes in violence against wives. It is both a local history of Oregon and a larger social analysis of changing national patterns. It is solid scholarship with an activist aim at understanding the problem in order to solve it. The complexity of Peterson Del Mar's argument is commendable. He covers the incidence and nature of male violence against wives, women's resistance to it and societal interventions in violent marriages...*What Trouble I Have Seen* is an immensely...



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