

## Domestic Challenges and Disputes

Due to high mortality rates for both children and adults in the 19th Century, it was common for a woman to birth many children, from one or more marriages. As well, women lacked for opportunities to acquire an education or gainful employment, and their right to vote and participate in democracy would not appear for forty more years. For many women it was assumed that they would marry early – nearly six out of every ten emigrant women were married before their twentieth birthday, and by age twenty five, only one in ten women remained unmarried. A man's first marriage came at an appreciably higher age, with sixty percent being married by age 25, and eighty percent wedded by age thirty. Many women were blessed to find a respectable man among the droves of pioneers, but other women were not so fortunate.

One of these young brides in early Oregon was Elvina Apperson Fellows, a girl of ten when she came across the plains with her family in 1847. Her father passed away during their journey, and upon arrival in Portland, her mother struggled to care for nine hungry children as a widow. Elvina recounts the challenges she endured even after surviving the Oregon Trail:

In 1851 Mother was pretty hard run to earn enough money for us to live on, so when a man named Julius Thomas, a cook in a restaurant, offered to marry me, Mother thought I had better take him, so I did. He was 44 and I was 14.

Back in 1851...we had slavery of Negroes in the South, and we had slavery of wives all over the United States, and saloons wherever there were enough people to make running one pay.

What could a girl of 14 do to protect herself from a man of 44, particularly if he drank most of the time, as my husband did? I still shudder when I think of the years of my girlhood, when I had to live with that husband. When he was drunk and often wanted to kill me, and he used to beat me until I couldn't stand it.

One time he came to my mother's house, where I had taken refuge. I locked the door. He tried to climb in at the window, but I held it down. This enraged him so, he took out his pistol and shot at me. The bullet passed just above my head. The glass fell on me and scared me so I dropped to the floor. He looked in, saw me lying on the floor and, thinking he had killed me, put the end of the pistol barrel into his mouth and pulled the trigger and I was a widow.

Elvina's story represents an situation of extreme domestic distress, but graphically illustrates a time when more marriages ended because of death than divorce. Obtaining a divorce in the Oregon Territory required an act of the legislature, and women who were economically dependent upon their husbands found it difficult to manage this. But there were a few women who did successfully petition the legislature to grant their requests. Nancy Judson was one of these women, and in her 1858 letter requesting the dissolution she writes:

I humbly beg of the legislator of Oregon to grant me a bill of divorcement for I cannot live with Mr. Judson. He misuses me in every shape he is capable of doing, he has knocked me down and scolded me and does not provide for me nor the family as he ought to do. But had squandered al that father has given mee and has squandered every thing wee have in the world and has mortgaged my land and his and it is all gone... [my son and daughter] are down at Clatsap where he keeps them half starved and half naked. My children has never been to school of any consequence and he never will send them.... Now if it will please your honorable boddy to give me a bill and give me the Children I will pray ever. I ever remain your humble friend,  
Mrs. Nancy Judson

Sources: Fellows: *Conversations with pioneer women*, Lockley P. 65; Judson: Oregon State Archives