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Worth Their Salt Too

Colleen Whitley

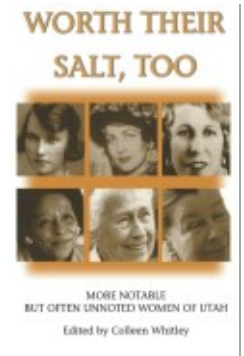
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ESTHER EGGERTSEN PETERSON
 “The Most Dangerous Thing since
 Genghis Khan”

Carma Wadley

Carma Wadley was born in Providence, Utah, and being a true Cache County resident, attended Utah State University, where she received her bachelor's degree, followed by a master of arts in communications from Brigham Young University. She has worked for the Deseret News as a writer and feature editor. Recently, readers have been delighted with her reports and photographs from her extensive travels. During the twenty years she covered consumer issues for the news, she frequently met Esther Peterson at conferences all around the country. Peterson always asked Wadley what was happening in her home state, and the two became good friends. Wadley was consistently impressed by Peterson's depth of knowledge and her commitment to the consumers of the world, and, as she also says, "You can't meet Esther and not love her."

In December 1984, at an age when many people who have devoted their lives to public service might consider taking a well-deserved rest, Esther Peterson celebrated her seventy-eighth birthday by traveling to Bangkok, Thailand, to deliver the keynote address at the annual conference of the International Organization of Consumers' Unions. It was a rather somber occasion, actually. The clouds of Bhopal had just released their deadly gases in what was the worst industrial accident in world history. More than four thousand people died outright when a venting tube at the Union Carbide chemical plant spewed out a killer cloud of methyl isocyanate; some three thousand deaths were also later attributed



Esther Peterson defended the rights of consumers around the world and originated many of the standards now expected in shopping and safety conveniences. Photo courtesy of the *Deseret News*.

to the effects of the gas. The impact of the Indian tragedy was felt strongly by the world's consumer advocates gathered in Thailand. Questions were on everyone's mind: How did this come about? Who is responsible? Is this what happens when social development is superseded by technology? The tragedy and sadness of Bhopal gave urgency and sadness to the discussions. And Esther Peterson's message: There must be no more Bhopals.

She believed strongly that the world's consumers had a right to a safe world, and if she had anything to do with it, they would get it. Setting out to change the world may seem like a monumental task to some, but not to Esther, who had spent her life to that point battling for the rights of the poor and downtrodden and the uninformed and the needy both at home and abroad. As the author of a magazine profile on her at the time pointed out, Esther Peterson had moved unions, she had moved organizations, she had moved presidents, she had moved history. It was not too much to expect that she would move the world.¹

And, indeed, as another decade has gone by, it is possible to look back and see that there are few lives—in America or around the world—that have not been touched in some way by the work of this remarkable woman. Anyone who has shopped in a supermarket or taken out a loan or purchased insurance or appliances or participated in the marketplace in countless other ways has benefited from her work. The lot of workers has improved. Consumers around the world have been protected because of her actions; there have, so far, been no more Bhopals. It is a remarkable legacy for one woman, and with characteristic modesty, she never sought a lot of credit, talking about how much help she had and speaking of only doing her duty.

"We were raised to do something more than just take care of ourselves, whatever it was," she said of her life. For her, that "whatever it was" was a long career spanning labor, government, private industry, and worldwide consumer advocacy. And through it all, she said, two songs lyrics from her youth were the music of her devotion: "Do what is right; let the consequence follow," and, "Have I done any good in the world today? Have I helped anyone in need? Have I cheered up the sad and made someone feel glad? If not, I have failed indeed."²

Esther Eggertsen was born 9 December 1906 in Provo, Utah, the fifth of six children, to Lars and Annie Eggertsen. They lived in a big brick house on North University Avenue. In many ways her childhood

was typical of that spent in any Mormon community in those days. A lot of her life centered around family and work in the home and around school and church activities. Her father was superintendent of the schools, so emphasis was placed on education.

But looking back, she remembers one episode from her early teens that seemed to have great significance in the way her life turned out: a strike by railroad workers in the Salt Lake Roundhouse. "I drove up from Provo in a car full of BYU student strikebreakers. As we drove through the picket line, which was being opened up for us by a policeman on horseback, we came practically to a stop. A woman with two children, one in her arms, caught my eye and said to me, 'Why are you doing this to us? Why?' I knew something was wrong."³ It was Esther's first contact with the labor movement. And although she did not get involved at the time, it planted seeds that would grow to maturity later on.

Esther graduated from Brigham Young University in 1927. She taught physical education and dance at the Branch Agricultural College in Cedar City for three years before deciding she needed to explore the world beyond her native Utah. In 1930, she moved to New York to obtain a master of arts degree from Columbia University's Teacher's College. And it was there that she met the person who would come to mean the most to her personally and do the most to encourage her professional development: Oliver A. Peterson. There she was, a conservative Mormon Republican from Utah who was falling in love with a socialist who drank coffee and smoked a pipe. "In the end, I trusted my heart and rejected the rules about what I was supposed to do. I can't imagine how my life would have turned out if I hadn't had the courage to accept that I had fallen in love. My Oliver gave me the strength to work for change and to disturb the peace at times."⁴

Oliver was a Depression farm boy who had grown up in poverty in Washington state and South Dakota, who had borrowed \$400 from a teacher so he could do undergraduate work at the University of North Dakota, and who had come to Columbia for further study. He also earned money as a Lutheran preacher. He didn't like banks and speculators, but he did have a deep appreciation for the work of unions. He and Esther didn't always agree, but they enjoyed debating social issues of the day, and Esther always appreciated the way he forced her to study and think so she could hold her own in their discussions. One night

they got so involved in a debate on the business practices of Henry Ford, they stayed in a park at Columbia University long past closing time and were eventually kicked out. Esther always remembered that night as the night she fell in love with Oliver.⁵

They were married in 1932 and moved to Boston, where Oliver studied at Harvard and taught at the Affiliated School for Workers, and Esther taught physical education at Winsor School for Girls, a private college-prep school. Many weekends were spent skiing and camping in Vermont, where they eventually bought a farm as a summer retreat.

It was in Boston that Esther, at Oliver's urging, started doing volunteer work at the local YWCA. It was at this time, too, that she took a summer position as recreation director at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry. In both cases she came into contact with seamstresses from the nearby mills and became concerned about their low wages and poor working conditions. She empathized with their efforts to unionize. And thus began her long association with the labor movement. She called her six summers at Bryn Mawr "the best education on workers' issues I could have experienced."⁶

For Esther, it was as much a question of fairness and value as politics, and she felt strongly that workers deserved adequate pay and good working conditions. Over the next several years, she taught at the Hudson Shore Labor School in New York, worked with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and worked for a year with the American Federation of Teachers. In 1939, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), noting that she had teaching experience in the labor field, appointed her assistant director of education, a post she held for the next five years.

While all this was going on, the Petersons also had four children: Karen, Eric, Iver, and Lars. In addition to her work outside the home, Esther was devoted to her family.

In 1944, the Petersons moved to Washington, D.C., where Oliver took a position with the State Department, and Esther continued her involvement with labor, serving as a lobbyist for ACWA. For Esther this was a chance to continue working for a cause she believed in, but it also marked an increased involvement in politics and the beginning of an association that would have long-term implications. As a lobbyist, she was assigned to work with the junior representative from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy.

In politics, timing is everything. And the time Esther spent working with Kennedy would come into play in a big way later. But first there were foreign adventures to experience. By this time, the Petersons had left the socialist arena (although some of their connections would come back to haunt them) and, in the time of FDR, had become staunch Democrats. In 1948, Oliver was offered a post as a labor attaché in Sweden. They were thrilled at the opportunity of living close to their ancestral homelands (the Eggertsens came from Denmark; the Petersons, from Norway). This was followed by an assignment in Belgium. In both cases, Esther continued her involvement with labor issues, working with the Swedish Confederation of Free Trade Unions and with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in Belgium. Of particular concern were the problems of women workers. She helped organize and was one of the teachers of the First International School for Working Women conducted by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, held at LaBreveire in France. It was attended by women from twenty-seven different nations and dealt with setting international standards for the employment of women.

Esther enjoyed these assignments and tried to get to know the local people. She also learned a lot about international diplomacy and protocol. Overall, only one thing marred this international experience: in 1953, Oliver was called back to the U.S. for a hearing on charges that he was a communist. There was no truth to the accusation, and he was formally cleared. But it was a difficult thing, for Esther, who had to stay in Belgium with the family, and for Oliver, who had to endure the congressional hearings. He was never quite the same afterward, and although he appeared outwardly calm, he smoked his pipe constantly. "He had an inner strength that I didn't have, but I think the experience took its toll. Oliver developed cancer a few years later, and I have always had the feeling the cancer developed during this time of stress."⁷

Because of Oliver's health, the family returned to Washington, D.C., in 1957, and Esther returned to work as a lobbyist for the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department. By this time that junior representative from Massachusetts was in the Senate and planning a run for the presidency. As a labor specialist, Esther was invited to work on his campaign. Because she believed in his goals and his vision for the country, she agreed to coordinate the campaign in Utah. She hadn't done it for a

reward, but after Kennedy was elected, Esther was appointed as director of the Women's Bureau in the Labor Department. Later came a promotion to assistant secretary of labor.

During this time she was involved in what she considers one of her most important contributions: the organization of the president's United States Commission on the Status of Women. Eleanor Roosevelt was appointed as chairman of the commission, with Esther as executive vice-chairman. Thus began a special friendship between the two women. The former first lady was a mentor, a role model, a friend. "It was a marvelous experience working with her during the last years of her life," said Esther. "When things get tough, I still think, 'Eleanor, stand by me, stand by me.' And I feel she is there."⁸ The commission met between December 1961 and October 1963 and published its findings and recommendations in a landmark study called *American Women*. It received widespread attention, even internationally, and is considered by many to have been a major catalyst for the women's movement.

But life would soon take Esther in a new direction—into the fledgling field of consumerism. President Kennedy, respected in consumer circles for his historic declaration of consumer rights, had talked to Esther about his desire of setting up a special advisor to the president for consumer affairs. But Kennedy's assassination left it to Lyndon Johnson to carry out the task. Under LBJ, Esther became the country's first special assistant for consumer affairs, while continuing her post in the Labor Department, and was considered the highest woman official in the Johnson administration. She was doing all of this at a time when women were not actively involved in many of these positions and is therefore regarded as one of the great pioneers of her time.

It was not always easy. Esther's support of consumer legislation and issues often put her in direct opposition to big business interests that had a powerful voice in Washington. The Advertising Federation of America went so far in one of its editorials as to call her "the most dangerous thing since Genghis Khan."⁹

But Esther persevered. And during this time many of the protections and guidelines that today's consumers take for granted came into being: truth in labeling, truth in lending, fair credit practices, care labels sewn into clothing. At the press conference announcing her appointment, someone asked Esther if people could write to her. "Tell them to write to me at the White House," she said—and it was one of

the best things that could have happened. Letters began to pour in. “I intend to use these letters,” she told UPI. “I think we can accomplish a lot by voluntary action, without new laws, once the manufacturers are aware of how the public feels about some of these practices.”¹⁰

Time and again, she called on the teaching and practices of her youth. “I got into a big squabble with one of the big canners who kept saying they could not tell the consumer how much water there was in a can of beans, how much was water and how much was beans. . . . And I remember saying to them, ‘Have you ever canned beans?’ They hadn’t. ‘Well, I have,’ I said, ‘and it can be done.’ I can’t tell you how many examples of open dating, unit pricing, all kinds of things we worked on that came from my background. I knew it from the bottom up!”¹¹

When the Republicans took office under Richard Nixon, Esther worked for a time with the AFL-CIO and was then offered a position with Giant Food Corp., a major supermarket chain in the Washington, D.C., area. There, more things that today’s consumers accept as standard procedure—especially unit pricing, open dating, nutritional labeling, generic drugs, universal product codes—first saw the light of supermarket aisles. Now hardly given second thought, most of these things were revolutionary when they were introduced. Not only did they benefit consumers, but they paid off for Giant Food in a big way.

This was also an important concept—that doing right by consumers could be good for businesses. Esther’s article for the *Harvard Business Review* on using consumerism as a marketing tool was used in business classes around the country, and she always considered her seven years at Giant among the most productive and satisfying of her career.

In 1976, President Jimmy Carter offered Esther her old job back as presidential adviser and chief consumer advocate. At age seventy, she was not sure she wanted it, but on the urging of her husband, whose health had deteriorated considerably, she moved back into government.

Her major goal was the establishment of a cabinet-level Office of Consumer Affairs, which would have the power to act in the consumer’s interest before federal agencies and in the courts. The agency failed to withstand the strong lobbying efforts by business and trade interests, but other programs were established that benefited consumers in many ways: energy-efficient labels on products, simplified language in government documents, itemized prices for funeral homes, consumer rights for

overbooked airline flights, increased competition in the trucking industry, publication of a consumer resource handbook.

Two other accomplishments made Esther especially proud. The first was the creation of a consumer affairs office in every government department, so there was at least one person in each area who would respond to consumer needs. The second was an executive order signed by Carter that forbade the export of hazardous products that had been banned in the United States—an action given impetus by the TRIS case. When TRIS, a fire-retardant chemical used to treat children's sleepwear, was shown to cause cancer and was banned from use in this country, sleepwear manufacturers threatened to simply dump TRIS-treated clothing overseas. Not that the ban was an easy accomplishment—it took Esther two years of intense lobbying and finally a direct appeal to President Carter. One of the president's aides later remembered that she had come to him and said, "Jimmy, do this for me. It's very important to do this."¹²

Carter signed the order shortly before leaving office. It was rescinded by Reagan early into his first term, becoming known as one of the shortest executive orders on record and a reminder that politics are, after all, political.

Oliver Peterson died in 1979. At age seventy-four, Esther Peterson was widowed and, when the Republicans returned to power, out of a job. But quit? Not she. When the International Organization of Consumers' Unions asked her to take a volunteer position as its lobbyist at the United Nations, she found a perfect opportunity to pick up where she had left off with the hazardous exports ban. As early as 1971 an IOCU conference had addressed the need to develop consumer guidelines for food and commodities that crossed international lines and eventually took the problem to the United Nations. But it was making slow headway, and Esther's input and energy were needed. After numerous drafts and revisions and much debate, the guidelines were finally approved by the UN in 1985. Equally important was the passage by the general assembly of a consolidated list of banned and potentially dangerous pesticides, chemicals, drugs, and consumer products. Working on these two issues—the consumer guidelines that created a world charter on consumer rights, and the consolidated list of hazardous products—was Esther's chief concern during her work with IOCU. But it was not always easy. And ironically, her chief opponent

was her own U.S. delegation, which felt the guidelines did not best serve U.S. business interests.

But if there was frustration for Esther in dealing with the Reagan administration, she also saw some humor in the situation, such as the time she was almost asked to register as a foreign agent, because IOCU, on whose behalf she was lobbying, is headquartered in the Netherlands. "I really kind of get a kick out of it," she told the *Washington Post*. "The way they talk about 'foreign agent,' I feel like I'm in a spy book."¹³

Nor did she let such opposition discourage her.

I say to opponents in this effort . . . what we want for consumers in poor countries is no less than what we take for granted ourselves in well-off countries. Basic human rights are identical. Our hearts go out to the suffering of starving people . . . and our food aid follows our hearts. But what we are calling for through these guidelines is extending not just a loaf of bread, but the ability to grow one's wheat, the assurance that the bread from that wheat will be pure and wholesome. If some multinational wants to make the bread, fine; but the protections abroad should be as good as those here at home. No, I don't think that is asking "too much" in the Twentieth century. From the Bhopal tragedy it became clear that consumer concerns are universal . . . The world is one. We have to know that.¹⁴

In 1993, one more assignment came Esther's way. She was appointed by President Clinton as an official delegate to the United Nations, one of three public delegates for the U.S. who sit in on official sessions.

Throughout her career, Esther was guided by strict principles of honor, ethics, and a desire to do what is right. She learned early on that it was important to get your facts right and then stick to them. She felt it was important for people to understand what they believed, but even more important to act in accordance with those beliefs. And she never had a hard time finding a need to be filled. Speaking at graduation at the University of Utah Law School in 1992, Esther told of a letter sent to her by the wife of a dying Utah miner. The man had spent his life working in the uranium mines, but when he developed cancer as a result, the government turned its back on him. The woman asked

Esther which state had the best compensation for a man such as her husband. "Where shall I take him to die?" the woman asked. The question haunted Esther. "It represents the cry of society's vulnerable, denied their rights." But she hoped it would also be a reminder of "the difference a determined person can make."¹⁵

Esther Peterson has made a difference. And, while she could show steely determination when she knew she was in the right, she also had a sparkle and genuine love of people that won her friends wherever she went. Her humor was a special trademark. She liked to start a speech, for example, with "People often introduce me by saying I spent fifteen years in labor." With her distinctive braids, wrapped like a corona around her head, she became a familiar figure in Washington, the advisor of presidents, a force to be reckoned with.

She also made some foes, acknowledged President Jimmy Carter when he presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor the government bestows on civilians. "And I would guess, knowing her, that she's prouder of the foes she has made . . . than even some of the friends she has. She has never been afraid to address difficult issues even at the expense on occasion of personal harmony with those about whom she cares. She serves others with her entire dedicated life."¹⁶

Always politically astute, she never let politics become the final goal. She believed in equality for women, equal pay for equal work, and also felt deeply about traditional family values. "When I consider all the important jobs I have had and things I have done, one accomplishment overshadows all others: the fact that Oliver and I raised four wonderful children."¹⁷ That is saying something from a woman who has received countless awards and recognitions, including the Medal of Freedom and the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for "profound contributions to humanity," and who has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. She was, says Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith, "one of the most diversely useful persons of our time. . . . The situation of the consumer into which Esther Peterson ventured a half century back and more was very different from what we know today. . . . A goodly part of that change—the heightened awareness of consumers, their greater protection from mistruth and defective and hurtful products—has resulted from the efforts of Esther and those with whom she has worked and who she has guided and led."¹⁸

Esther's remarkable career came to an end 20 December 1997, when she died at her home in Maryland at the age of ninety-one. How would she like to be remembered?

As a nice old grandma. I would like to be remembered as Esther. I would like to be remembered as a kindly, loving person who loved my family and people very much. I would like to be remembered as somebody who did what they liked to do and found satisfaction in doing it. That makes for a great deal of happiness in the end. Living is the thing that's important. It is the doing of things. I learned that from Mrs. Roosevelt. You don't do things because of the rewards or because someone may remember you after you are gone. The satisfaction is in the doing. Whether or not someone remembers does not really matter.¹⁹

Robert F. Kennedy, one of Esther's early mentors and friends, said, "Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope." If that is true, then Esther Peterson, a native of Provo, Utah, who grew up to become a spokeswoman for the world, created oceans of hope that will not be forgotten.