

New Nonfiction: “One Woman’s History of Sexual Abuse in Prison” by Patty Prewitt

Missouri inmate Patty Prewitt has been in prison for almost 40 years. She is serving a life sentence for the murder of her husband, Bill, in 1984. The conviction, however, is problematic. The prosecution’s case relied upon slut-shaming Prewitt and questioning her fitness as a mother based on relationships that took place five and more years before the murder, a time when the Prewitts were separated. The prosecutor did not share with the defense evidence that established a strange car was seen parked around the corner, a significant omission. A pathologist, brought on only weeks before trial was discredited in a number of trials where he served as a witness for the prosecution.

Prewitt is not eligible for parole until 2036, when she will be 86 years old. Maintaining her innocence, she declined a plea bargain that would have made her eligible for parole after just seven years. Had she taken the deal, she would have been released many years ago.

As the longest-serving inmate at the women’s prison in Vandalia, Prewitt has been a model prisoner. Former Missouri Department of Corrections Director George Lombardi who, during his 41 years in corrections, has never recommended anyone for clemency supports Prewitt’s release. In light of “the long sentence she has already served, the total support of her children and grandchildren, and her unprecedented contribution to the culture of the prison and to her fellow offenders,” he recommends that “Missouri Gov. Parson take the just, responsible and compassionate action and grant Patty Prewitt clemency.” Warden Brian Goeke identifies Prewitt as a woman best suited for release.

In May of '86, 20 days after I first came to the prison near Jefferson City, I was shackled, chained, cuffed and shoved on a state bus to the prison in Chillicothe. Upon arrival, a male corrections officer caught me alone in my cell and strongly suggested, threatened, that I would be his sex slave with no choice in the matter. His words and manner were horrifying to this newbie, but his prediction did not come to fruition, because my new guardian angel cellmate, Theresa, made it her business to protect me. She was a large no-nonsense heroin-addict biker chick who had done serious time in Florida where she acquired absolutely no love from prison staff. She also teased me about being a scrawny country gal, a rube, but we both agreed that the perv was not going to get his hands on me, so help us, God.

In August of that year, after Theresa was paroled, word came down the prison grapevine that a federal court declared that male and female corrections officers are to be treated equally with the very same duties and rights. That sounded only fair until we realized that it meant that male guards could frisk and strip search us. A bit of panic ensued, but the officers I spoke with swore they didn't plan to jump into that trick bag fraught with unforeseen and seen problems. But it only takes one.

As Carol and I exited the chow hall, this particular guard, a stout big-bellied greasy man, motioned for Carol to turn around and assume the position with feet apart, arms outstretched. Prior to this we'd only been patted down by females. To our shock and surprise, that man stepped close on Carol's backside with his face buried in her hair, then reached around to cup and squeeze her breasts. I stood frozen—the next in line. The color drained from her face as he roughly moved his beefy hands over her buttocks, then reached between her legs to feel her pubic mound. Color came back to

her visage with a scarlet vengeance, while he retraced his steps from buttocks to breasts. I couldn't stay to witness the rest because fear kicked my rabbit legs into gear, and I found myself running, racing up the stairs to hide in my cell.

After I calmed down, felt safe to come out since he hadn't come after me, and shift change was over, I found poor Carol, a tall, handsome lady with considerable intellect and two teenage daughters who adored her. But her husband was abusive. During one violent event, as she attempted to leave, he chased after her like the maniac he was. He yanked open the car door but slipped while grabbing at her. She inadvertently ran over him. To ensure he wouldn't kill her and the girls as he had promised, she slammed it in reverse and backed over him which earned her 25 years for second degree murder. After 20 years of horror at her husband's hand, she did not deserve this guard's sexual assault in the name of penal security. From that day on, if that guard was on post, we'd miss a meal. Sometimes the chow hall would be nearly empty except for a handful of masculine inmates whom he never bothered.

A few months later, on December 14, I was called to the visiting room to see my parents and five kids. To my dismay that guard stepped from the side and in front of the female officer as he motioned for me to assume the position. (In those days we weren't strip searched prior to a visit, just frisked. They rightly reasoned that we wouldn't be bringing drugs *out* of prison to our visitors.) I quietly appealed to his inner gentleman, "Please, sir, I'm a rape victim. I beg you. Please allow the female officer to search me." Trembling in trepidation, I saw and felt his rage explode like atom bombs within his gray eyes.

My five young children and parents watched this exchange while trying to figure out exactly what the hold up was. The pat search prior to a visit had always been quick, so to them this was suspect foot-dragging, but my protective father got the picture, narrowed his eyes and set his jaw. Attempting to

sound like a grownup who's in charge, I sternly advised the officers, "If you're not going to allow me to visit, give my family the big box of Christmas gifts I made for them." Both stared blankly at me, so I bravely added, "Do you understand?"

By this time every husband in the visiting area was asking his wife if that particular greasy-headed fat man had run his hands over her. I was not alone in my indignation and could feel the energy shift. The guards exchanged looks and silently decided the female would frisk me and allow me to visit. But the moment all the visitors left the area, I was escorted to the hole for "creating a disturbance and disobeying a direct order."

In May of '87, that same man sent me to the hole again for the same transgression—refusing to submit to his sweaty hands on my body while huffing his sour breath on my neck. This was the last straw. A group of us dug around in the law library and successfully sued the Missouri Department of Corrections in federal court. On September 30 of that year, seven of us rabble-rousers found ourselves shackled, chained and sitting in court testifying to not only the abuse of officers, but, for some, the years of abuse by husbands and boyfriends. The kindly older federal judge was visibly shaken to hear a lady tearfully explain that a male guard had felt her sanitary napkin and interrogated her about it. Another lady had a double mastectomy, the result of cancer, and was torturously embarrassed when a man made fun of her "flat-as-a-pancake" chest. We and the officers also explained that the searches were targeted to find cookies—cookies that were served to us on our trays at chow. That particular guard stumbled through his testimony as to why he must thoroughly search our breasts, buttocks and inner thighs to keep America safe, while his fuming wife glared from the gallery. Because of the fuss we caused, the Missouri Department of Corrections was mandated by the federal court to create a method for officers to cross-gender pat search without fondling and grabbing certain body

parts, but of course no one can make rules by which everyone abides. I've had issues since with both male and female guards who can't help but take liberties.

In December of '89, a large group of us trouble makers were shipped back to the prison north of Jefferson City. While there I ran into several minor sexual skirmishes and wrestling matches, but nothing I couldn't handle until a new education supervisor was hired. Unfortunately I was his clerk. This persistent little man thought it was his duty and right to have sex with me, so he literally chased me around his desk. Our warden got wind of this problem and asked me if it were true. I explained, "If I tell you that he is inappropriate, I will go to the hole under investigation. Right? Well, I will not do that and miss visits with my kids." And I didn't. But I had another plan. My lecherous boss was friends with a recreation officer, and I let it be known that my brother would do bodily harm if I told him that a black man was abusive to me. Everyone had seen my big handsome brother visit, and evidently my boss believed my lie, because he nearly ignored me after that. The truth is my sweet brother was a peaceful preacher and never fought anyone in his life, but these people didn't know that.

The Great Flood of '93 ruined our prison and sent us packing to a men's prison called Church Farm. I was so accustomed to unsolicited, unwanted sexual encounters that those years seemed pretty mild—nearly peaceful. For example, one maintenance man quickly lost interest in me when I harshly kneed his groin. Then in January of '98, we were transferred to a brand new prison in Vandalia with all new guards. During a count time, one COI, who resembled a bloated Elvis impersonator, knelt at my chair in front of my other three cellmates and sincerely inquired, "What do I have to do to get you to suck my big ole dick?" My friends inhaled in shock, but after he disappeared, Donna remarked that the reason he jumped up and exited quickly was the lightning quick drop-dead look I

shot at him. As if!

During the next couple of years, more than several staff persons were caught with their pants down and lost their jobs. One sergeant in particular had a type: petite, pretty, young, white. One of his targets, a lovely twenty-year-old with a soft bootheel accent, asked me for advice as to what to do. I counseled her that if she tells what he's up to, she will go to the hole. Her only safe recourse is to never get caught alone around him. But this panicked kid confided in a grandma-like officer who slammed her in the hole just as I predicted. The girl rotted down there for months until she "admitted" she lied and then was transferred to another prison. Standard operating procedure.

Years of his terrorism passed by until this sergeant met his match. His final victim, who was beautiful in a mean way, spit his semen on her sheets and called her lawyer who called the cops. I never found out what became of the sergeant, but this gal sued and settled for millions and freedom. I thanked her while telling her that we'd been trying to get rid of him for years. With her hands on her slim hips, she leaned back, cocked her head and plainly told me, "Ya weren't tryin' too hard." With a chuckle, I had to agree.

For years we were terrorized by a guard who loved to grope us and call it a routine pat search. Not only did he pull up close on a butt, he'd grind his hard little penis on the butt and whisper nasty words in an ear. If you protested in the slightest, he cuffed you and hauled you to the hole, the original walk of shame. Everyone, including staff, knew about him, but staff turned a blind eye. Every hour he was on shift was torture. My friends and I were repeatedly in trouble over him, and he took down too many good women. He would still be employed here, except he was arrested for a pervert-related crime in the free world.

In 2010 I heard about a federal law called the Prison Rape

Elimination Act, which was designed to prevent vulnerable prisoners from being sexually assaulted by either staff or inmates. A few years later, as I exited the chow hall, a male lieutenant called me over to assume the position for a pat search. In my smart-ass way I casually commented, "So much for PREA." PREA must have been a sore subject, because he yelled at me a long tirade about how they don't have to follow laws and can do anything they want with us and to us because we have no rights and nobody knows what goes on in here because we are hidden and nobody cares about whores. He was so angry that he didn't even see that a crowd had gathered around us. That's how crazed he was with neck veins bulging and snot and spittle flying. He finally noticed his audience and gruffly ordered us to disperse. A few more years passed before our prison was forced to abide by PREA and stop cross-gender pat searches, but by that time I had grown old and gray, so guards and other staff ignore me as an object of desirability. I may be the only woman ever who is thankful for wrinkles and white hair. Prison staff still yell at me and treat me like a stupid slave, but none want to have sex with my scrawny old body. Praise the Lord.