

On January 21, 1869, P.E.O. was founded by a group of teenagers.

This is not to speak disparagingly of either teenagers or of our seven Founders, but to emphasize that our Founders were very normal, young women - not a sedate, prim, almost saintly group of intellectuals. I'm sure some of them had freckles, maybe crooked teeth and straight hair, and one or two may have been plump. They whispered, giggled, flirted and broke rules.

They had some very human traits.

They could, for one thing, get angry. And this was a good thing, because it actually led to the founding of P.E.O. Hattie Briggs and Franc Roads, then 16 and 17 years old, were perched atop a wooden stile at the entrance to Iowa Wesleyan College, and were angry that the campus IC Sorosis had invited two of their friends to join. This would have broken up a very close group of seven young women. So Hattie and Franc decided to counter with a group of their own. They called the rest of the seven (Mary Allen, Ella Stewart, Alice Coffin, Allie Bird and Suela Pearson) to meet in the music Hall of Old Main, and within an hour they had drafted a constitution, administered an oath of secrecy and selected a name. Anger can be an incentive!

They were also a bit selfish, at first. Franc wrote, "We wanted to band together so we might have a relationship through all time." They actually wanted no other members.

They might be called vindictive. They were not above playing a game of one-upmanship on the IC's. When they heard that their rivals intended marching in to chapel en masse in identical new blue uniforms, all seven stayed up most of the night at Franc's home making their own uniforms. Next morning, they got to chapel in time to hide in a tiny janitor's closet near chapel, with Suela as lookout to tell them when the IC's were coming. They made their entry just ahead of their rivals, flaunting their new white ruffled aprons dotted with black stars, one shoulder higher than the other so their gleaming gold stars would stand out. They created quite a stir, which was no doubt what they had intended.

At first, they were a bit unorganized. There are no minutes of the first 15 meetings, and what records there are were poorly done. Other things like fun intervened.

Then they were devious. In going to meetings, they would all take different routes, detour, and backtrack, so their destination could not be found out.

And they were mischievous, very mischievous. Witness the famous Butterscotch Party. Remember, in those days dating was strictly forbidden, and songs had to be of a high moral tone. One evening, the seven "accidentally" met at Mary Allen's house and made a huge batch of butterscotch, much more than they could eat. Soon seven male students walked in and Mary received them cordially, when by college rules, she should have put them out at once. The candy vanished quickly and the rest of the evening was filled with songs, like "No One to Love", and "Meet Me By the Moonlight Alone", and a declamation by Suela, "Captain, Our Captain".

Next day the girls were called up by the faculty and pleaded, "What could seven weak females do when charged upon by seven husky men, some just home from the Civil War?"

They were rebellious. At a time when it was a little risqué even to wear flowers on a hat, the girls concocted a surprise. For commencement, it was ordained that girls wear practical, gloomy black silk dresses. These were appropriate for postwar times, and would wear a long time. But, led by Suela who was the beauty of the group, they decided they wanted something different, even if they had to earn money and make dresses out of the cheapest material. They decided on colored tarlatan - really just stiff cheesecloth - lined with muslin. The morning of graduation, they sat on the platform, a rainbow of colors - Mary in heliotrope with a beautiful fan to cover a jaw swollen from a toothache, Alice in white, Suela in canary, Hattie in pink, Franc in light green, and Alice Bird in rose. The material cost \$.75 a yard and it took many yards for the huge skirts. They had to pick a lot of gooseberries to pay for them, but they shed a radiance over somber times.

They were nonconformists. In a day when women hardly dared to speak out loud, the Seven weren't above breaking a few rules. It was a night when falling stars were to be seen. They asked their astronomy professor if they could stay up all night and watch. Allie Bird wrote later, "He told us we could watch from home and report the next day. We told him this was not what we wanted, but wished to come to the college and be together - but we did not tell him this: and have a regular old time of it." The evening progressed with boys arriving. A wood fire was built and a substantial lunch brought out. Allie continues, "One boy suggested singing, and the most popular song was 'Weevily Wheat,' and while dancing was not approved (this would be wicked) we just had to dance the Virginia Reel. We danced so long and saw so many stars in each other's eyes that to this day not one of us knows whether the stars fell from the sky or not." Their report the next day was a shambles and didn't fool the professor.

In case you're wondering, "Weevily Wheat" went like this ?

It's step her to your weevily wheat,
It's step her to your barley,
It's step her to your weevily wheat,
To bake a cake for Charley.

O Charley, he's a fine young man,
O Charley he's a dandy.
He loves to hug and kiss the girls,
And feed 'em on good candy.

The higher up the cherry tree,
The riper grow the cherries.
The more you hug and kiss the girls,
The sooner they will marry.

They might be called vain, if attention to looks is vain. Long hair was the standard then, but

when the seven went to a lecture by a popular woman and saw her cropped or shingled hair, they dared each other to cut their long tresses. They wore it that way through college. It was said that curls from Mary Allen and Hattie could be found in many a man's pocket, gleaned from the barber shop floor.

They were casual. The wearing of the pin wasn't standardized then. A picture of Franc shows it in her hair. It was worn at a member's discretion - a decoration on the collar or attached to a comb. There was a prohibition about loaning it to a woman not a member, but they did like to give it to a gentleman friend, so much so that periodically, a chapter had to call in all pins for an accounting.

They were, at times, frivolous. Their parties were elegant and famous with invitations, formal receiving lines, programs and extensive gold and white decorations. The men usually wore yellow silk ties. The first and most famous was the Sidereal Soiree, held in a hotel ballroom. One hundred tickets at \$2.00 each were sold, grand "gentlemen escorts" were selected, appropriate toasts made, and a large banquet served. Then followed a literary program with orations by Mary Allen on "The Beauties of Nature", and by Franc on "The Emancipation of Women". A musical duet by Alice Coffin and Ella Stewart was followed by a declamation of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Suela and Alice Bird. If by chance, during the evening, a gentleman became too insistent, a woman could signal for help from her sisters by touching her pin.

Taken on the surface, these traits aren't great qualifications for history-making, but when looked at in context they appear different: anger with justification, selfishness for friends, vindictiveness to right a wrong, disorganization because there was so much living to get done; mischief, rebellion, frivolousness, and humor to lighten a somber world. These were just what was needed to accomplish their purpose, especially when these traits were combined with other characteristics they all had, like:

Loyalty - They were one for all and all for one, even to all wearing the same kind of sunbonnet with pink lining. Mary and Hattie and Franc were so close they were called the Triamese Twins.

Creativity - Alice Coffin needed little time to decide that the star would be their emblem because she was so intrigued by the vastness of the sky and the universe.

Intelligence - They had to be exceptional if they were to enroll in college in a day when many of their peers barely finished grammar school.

Farsighted - It was not long before they knew they did not want their organization to be just another college club, but something that would last.

Energetic - Going to college, forming an original club with all its needs, and having a full social life took a lot of vitality, but it took Allie Bird only a few hours to write the oath, and she did it in the dead of winter in her outdoor summer house to have the quiet she needed.

Unafraid to break barriers. P.E.O. was a revolutionary idea in those times.

Though each woman had a little of all these traits, they brought to their task, a richness of diversity that made it possible for their plans to appeal to thousands of lives in a personal way.

Three became homemakers: Mary Allen Stafford, Hattie Briggs Bousquet, and Suela Pearson Penfield. Two were career women; Ella Stewart and Alice Coffin were teachers. Two were strong activists: Alice Bird Babb and Franc Roads Elliott. Franc became nationally known for her advocacy of women's rights, and was a friend of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton, and Frances Willard.

In the ensuing years, we have become approximately 300,000 strong. No one was more surprised at the growth than the Founders themselves. Allie Bird wrote, "The growth of this society will always fill me with wonder and amazement, for truly tall oaks have grown from very small acorns. I try to think sometimes in my sober moments that we original seven foresaw all this greatness and built accordingly, but not so. We were no wiser than any chance seven you may select from any P.E.O. society. Only the soil was ripe for just such an organization."

There are strong correlations between the adventuresome spirit of our seven P.E.O. founding sisters and our seven Columbia astronauts. They were diverse, loyal, creative, intelligent, far-sighted, energetic, and unafraid to break barriers.

Astronaut Laurel Clark, 41, was a medical doctor, and mother, as well as a commander in the US Navy. She joined NASA in 1996, and the Columbia flight was her first shuttle mission.

It was the wonder of life that inspired her most during the space trip, making note of the silkworm cocoon that she had seen hatch in orbit as part of an experiment.

She told a reporter, "There was a moth in there, and it was just starting to pump its wings up. Life continues in lots of places, and life is a magical thing."

Our astronauts, and our P.E.O. Sisters were pioneers, charting a new way for us all. They were pushing the limits of their time, and they saw life as a magical thing. We remember them with amazement. We are indebted to them all for their leadership, their vision, and their sacrifice.

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