

Mount Pleasant - The Athens of Iowa

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Have you ever wondered why PEO was founded
at a crossroads called Mount Pleasant
in the midst of the Iowa cornfields? I have!

Doesn't it make more sense that a progressive woman's organization like PEO should have risen up in
Boston or New York or Philadelphia
or some other cultural Mecca of higher learning and liberal thinking?

What was it about Mount Pleasant and this small Methodist College called Iowa Wesleyan University
that fostered the founding of an international sisterhood devoted to promoting women's higher
education?

I'd like to explore this with you today.

Just to put this into historical context, let's review a few important dates:

Iowa land - part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 from France

Iowa became a state in 1846

Civil War raged in the early 1860s

Trans-continental railroad completed in 1869 –
the same year PEO was founded

171 years ago - in the spring of 1835 – before Iowa was state -
Presley Saunders began clearing and staking out an area of
Henry County in South-East Iowa;
he named the town: Mount Pleasant.

Two years later, construction began on the courthouse –
the first courthouse in the state.

In the census of 1850, the town's population was listed as 758.

The first railroad reached Mount Pleasant in 1865.

By 1870, the town had grown to more than 45 hundred residents,
819 houses and 840 voters.

The ethnic makeup of Mount Pleasant was quite diverse.
There was a large group of Irish who mainly worked for the railroad.
North of the town was a large Swedish settlement.

There was a small group of German immigrants.
Most of the residents had come to Mt Pleasant by way of Ohio and PA.

The Negro population came from nearby Missouri.
They were provided with night classes in schools.

In 1868, one of the best scholars at Iowa Wesleyan was a former slave.

According to the 1870 census,
the Black worker had a net worth of less than \$2,000;
the average economic worth of a white worker was \$3,500.
Some families were definitely prospering:
7 families could claim a worth of over \$50,000;
two more than \$90,000.
(and that's a good sized chunk of change, even by today's standards!)

In 1870, Mount Pleasant had 4 boot stores, 5 hardware stores, 1 lumber yard, 3 livery stables, 2 furniture stores, 5 druggists, 3 insurance agents, 3 real estate agents, 2 banks and **4 book stores**.

Professionals included 12 physicians, 2 dentists, 1 veterinarian, 6 legal offices and **50 preachers** better than one out of every 100 citizens of Mt. Pleasant was a clergyman and it should be noted that the clergy were usually well educated

There were 14 churches including - Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Congregational, Presbyterian, Lutheran and 7th Day Adventist.

Now here is the distinguishing characteristic about the city of Mt. Pleasant -
Lecture Halls dotted the Public Square....

Lecturing was a popular attraction in Mount Pleasant.
There were lectures on Shakespeare.
There were lectures on Reconstruction of the South.

There was a lecture entitled:
Remove and Impeach the Rebel in the White House—
(sound familiar???)

Frederick Douglas addressed a large crowd in 1867.

Other notables who lectured in Mount Pleasant were:
P.T.Barnum, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mark Twain.

Politics, reform and entertainment kept the city stimulated.

When the cost of these lectures threatened their demise,
the Mount Pleasant ladies Reading Club stepped in and
took up the challenge of continuing the lectures.

In 1866, Miss Anna Dickinson stated as part of her lecture that:
*Women are in every way equal to
and in many ways superior to men.*

In 1868, Mt. Pleasant's own – Miss Mattie Griffith – lectured on the subject:

Should Women Vote?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton lectured in 1869

Susan B. Anthony lectured in 1871.

2,000 newspapers from other cities were brought into Mount Pleasant every week to keep the citizens well-informed.

Should a candidate running for office show a leaning toward repealing Prohibition,
a dozen or so ladies would stand all day at the polls,
wearing badges proclaiming:

*Prohibition, Temperance and Virtue,
NOT License, Drunkenness and Crime*

Education was a hallmark of the Mount Pleasant community. In 1842, Samuel Howe opened his academy to between 100 to 200 students.

Howe was ahead of his time in educational methods.

There were no examinations or no time limits governing promotions –

a student could progress as his abilities permitted.

Students could enter and leave at their convenience.

The reputation of Howe's school was known far and wide.

Iowa School boards preferred teachers educated by Howe.

Before coming to Mount Pleasant, Howe had operated a similar academy in Ohio attended by William T. Sherman. During Sherman's famous march through Georgia, he told General Stone:

I consider Professor Howe to be the best teacher in the United States. I am more indebted to him for whatever success I may have achieved than to any other man in America.

Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute was established in 1842.

In 1855, James Harlan acquired a charter from the state legislature
to change the name to: Iowa Wesleyan University.

The annual enrollment of the college was about 75 students,
drawn largely from Mount Pleasant and the adjacent communities in Iowa and western Illinois.

There were no dormitories. Students from outside the area roomed and boarded with private families.

Students' social life centered around Literary Societies which met to prepare public programs in elocution, oratory, debate and music.

On January 21, 1869, seven women students at Iowa Wesleyan University established the PEO Society, later known as the PEO Sisterhood.

Social activity has always been an important part of PEO.

The PEO Society would stage
rather elaborate evening receptions in the fall for all women students. These receptions had

formal receiving lines, periods of conversation,
programs of music and elocution and games of a guessing nature.

Refreshments – still a hallmark of PEO – included PEO salad, PEO cake, ices, nuts and sandwiches.

The decorations were always very extensive –
With much décor done in gold and white with vases of marguerites.

The PEO Society's parties were reported in the college magazine thusly:

*PEO musical talent furnished some delightful selections for entertainment and the hours
flew by filled with music and pleasant
conversation*

*Several of the pledged young ladies were in evening costumes which were especially
appropriate, being unique, yet beautiful combinations of gold and white.*

*Gentlemen guests ordinarily complimented the Sisterhood
by wearing yellow silk ties.*

The college magazine also included speculations as to what PEO stood for. Some of the
names put forward were:

Pie Eating Outfit

Previously Enjoyed Opportunity

Perfectly Entertaining Organization

Phemale Enchantress Organization

There is good reason why PEO was founded in Mount Pleasant, Iowa!

Mount Pleasant, Iowa, was far from being
“a cross-road lost in the cornfields”

It was actually a *fertile intellectual cross-road* ...
A center of debate and discussion
of the political and social issues of the time.

Indeed, because of its lecture forums,
Mount Pleasant was known as "The Athens of Iowa"
....a fitting birthplace for the PEO Sisterhood.

Of the seven PEO founders,
5 were seniors and 1 was a sophomore at Iowa Wesleyan University.

The six founders who graduated all later received master's degrees.

19 initiates joined the newly formed society in 1869.

And thousands of women have been
inspired to reach toward higher ideals
and have been supported in their effort to attain higher education

because of the PEO sisterhood.....
born in Mount Pleasant.....
"The Athens of Iowa"