

Fathers of Our Founders

It was on January 21, 1869, that seven young girls, all students at Iowa Wesleyan University in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, gathered to create “a society of our own.” This close-knit group of friends were upset that only two of their group had been invited to join a new college society, IC Sororis, so they set about quickly to establish a rival group. They met secretly in a little-used room in a college building and decided upon a name, an emblem, and a secret pledge. An initiation ritual soon followed along with the first constitution. A local jeweler was prevailed upon to quickly create seven pins in the shape of a star, and the girls worked furiously, with the help of one of their mothers, to sew special aprons to wear into the chapel gathering which announced to their college community that they were a new and special group. This was the beginning of P.E.O.

The Founders were all teenagers ranging in age from 15 to 18. Whatever teenagers do is influenced by the lives of their parents. So today you will be introduced to the fathers of these seven girls to learn a bit more about their backgrounds. Remember that the founding of P.E.O. took place only four years after the end of the American Civil War. It was a time of recovering, of building, of settling new territories. Iowa was only 23 years old, but as a gateway to the West it drew many enterprising men and their families to its soil. And Mount Pleasant, with three institutions of higher learning, termed itself the “Athens of the Midwest.”

Who were these men whose careers and fortunes brought their daughters into proximity and eventually fast friendship that led to the founding of our organization? Let us meet them now.

Harriet Jane “Hattie” Briggs Bousquet

Narrator: We first meet the father of Hattie Briggs, the one who said, “Let’s have a society of our own. Then we can stay together.”

Reverend Elias L. Briggs

I am Elias L. Briggs – the Reverend Elias L. Briggs, a Methodist Episcopal minister. My family has deep roots in the New World. My fourth great-grandfather was the first Briggs to set foot in Plymouth Colony in 1621. Originally, I worked as a carpenter, but when Hattie was about four years old, I became a reverend. I’ve served many Iowa congregations so my family has moved quite a lot. I’m here, speaking to you, because of my second daughter, Harriet Jane – you know her as “Hattie.” She is remembered as one of the founders of a club called P.E.O. “Club” is my word – the girls said it was much more than a club; they called it a “sisterhood.”

However, I want to emphasize that your founders were very typical young women and not a sedate, prim, almost saintly group of intellectuals. They whispered, they giggled, they flirted, they broke rules – and they got angry!

Getting angry turned out to be a good thing because it actually led to the founding of P.E.O. Hattie was just 16, and she and her friend Franc Roads sat perched atop a wooden stile at the entrance to Iowa Wesleyan College – and they were mad! The campus group IC Sororis had invited two of their friends to join, and this would have broken up a very close group of seven girls. So Hattie and Franc decided to counter with a group of their own. They called the rest of the seven – Suela Pearson, Alice Coffin, Allie Bird, Mary Allen and Ella Stewart – to meet in the Music Hall of Old Main. Within an hour they had drafted a constitution, administered an oath of secrecy, and selected a name.

“Didn’t seem sensible,” I said, since most of them were going to graduate in the spring. But Hattie said, “No... we have no intentions of forgetting our friendship with each other. This is going to be different... life-long.”

I remember the excitement... the discussions... the meetings – secret meetings ... whispers day and night. It’s amazing that Hattie kept up her studies. She would place my wife’s azure lamp in the upper bedroom window to signal a meeting. Never mind my anxiety that the curtains might catch fire and burn down the manse! But we could see how much her new society meant to Hattie and to the other girls.

Narrator: Hattie passed away at age 27 after only four years of marriage, leaving behind her husband, Henry Bousquet, and two small sons. She is best remembered for her radiant smile.

Frances Elizabeth “Franc” Roads Elliott

Narrator: Frances Elizabeth Roads – Franc Roads – was at 16 years of age the youngest of the seven founders.

Addison Roads

My name is Addison Roads. I’m the father of Frances Elizabeth. At some point when she was growing up, she decided to shorten her name, so she is known as “Franc” to you. Franc was born to my wife Nancy and me when we lived in Indiana where I worked as a blacksmith and a grocer. We moved to Iowa, eventually settling in Mount Pleasant. I view life from a businessman’s perspective. I’ve spent years encouraging the development of Mount Pleasant and have served on the city council, helping to promote the “Athens of the Midwest.”

Franc was intellectual and was determined to excel at everything. She enrolled at Iowa Wesleyan at age 14, graduating at age 17.

Let me share a special memory with you. I was in our kitchen. It was a cold January evening and seven girls were crowding around as my wife helped them to create a pattern and cut out their aprons. It was such a rush to complete them so they could wear them to chapel together. You might say that the girls were a bit vindictive because they were not above playing a game of one-upmanship on the rival group, the IC's. When they heard that their rivals intended to march into the chapel *en masse* wearing identical new blue uniforms, our girls were up most of that night sewing their own uniforms.

Franc eventually married her long-time escort, Simon Elliott, whose father had served as president of Iowa Wesleyan. She and Simon gave us two grandchildren, a son and a daughter.

Narrator: Art was Franc's passion. She taught art for many years and later established an art department at the University of Nebraska.

Marie Suela Pearson Penfield

Narrator: Marie Suela (Soo-EE-la) Pearson, or Suela as she was called, was the socialite of the seven.

Dr. Clement Pearson

I'm Dr. Clement Pearson, Suela's father. I was an early practitioner of the homeopathic school of medicine. I started the Hahnemann Medical Society to promote the tenets of homeopathy. Because of this involvement, our family moved several times. We were living in Iowa when Suela was born in 1851. Through my wife, Eleanor McKinley Rose Pearson, Suela was a second cousin to the 25th President of the United States, William McKinley. When we later left Iowa and moved East, we were frequent visitors to the White House.

But for our family, the move to Mount Pleasant marked the beginning of the happiest of times. We moved here when Suela was 10 years old and bought a lovely new home. My wife turned it into a showplace, with beautiful formal gardens as well as herb gardens for my work.

It was Suela who was the lookout that morning before chapel. The girls arrived early, in time to hide in a tiny janitor's closet near to the chapel. Suela's job was to tell the girls when the IC's were coming. The P.E.O.'s made their entry just ahead of their rivals, flaunting their new white ruffled aprons, one shoulder higher than the other so their gleaming gold stars would stand out. They created quite a stir, which was no doubt just what they intended!

Narrator: After her family moved to the West Coast, Suela lost touch with P.E.O. However, her daughter Rose was a charter initiate of Chapter AH in Ohio.

Alice Virginia Coffin

Narrator: Alice Virginia Coffin, sometime called a “southern belle” because she was born in Kentucky, designed our emblem.

Matthew Starbuck Coffin

I’m Matthew Starbuck Coffin, Alice’s father. It’s not well-known that the Coffins come from a long line of Quakers. One of my ancestors established the Society of Friends in Nantucket in the late 1600’s, and the Coffin families were known to be very much for freedom for slaves, always ready to assist a runaway slave. My cousin, Levi Coffin, was one of the founders and President of the Underground Railway.

We left Kentucky when Alice was still a baby and moved to Indiana. When Alice was just nine years old, her mother died, leaving behind Alice, her sister, a brother and a two-week-old baby boy who died a few months later. As you can imagine, there were challenging times for our family. I had invested in a steamship line out of New Orleans. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, I was commissioned to transport troops and supplies down the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. This was no life for young girls!

Then I heard about my distant relative, Mary Stewart, a widow who had established a boarding house in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. And there was a college for my daughters to attend. (It is well known that Quakers have long promoted women’s education!) It was a perfect solution for us all! Alice boarded with Mrs. Stewart through her college years.

It was my Alice, you know, who decided that the star would be the emblem of the group. She was so intrigued by the vastness of the sky and the universe.

At the beginning, the wearing of the pin wasn’t standardized as it is today. The pin was worn at the member’s discretion – on the collar or even attached to a hair comb. You may have seen that picture of Franc where the pin shows in her hair. There was a prohibition about loaning it to a girl not a member. However, they did like to give it to a gentleman friend – so much that periodically the chapter had to call in all pins for an accounting.

Narrator: Alice, who never married, wrote, “Let all the pages of your life be tinted with the golden deeds of truth and purity.”

Mary Alice Bird Babb

Narrator: Alice Bird, or “Allie” as she was called, remained the most active in P.E.O. of all the Founders.

Dr. Wellington Bird

Well....I'm Wellington Bird – Dr. Wellington Bird, Allie's father. I was the first regularly educated physician to practice medicine in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. A particular love of mine was working in my research laboratory at Iowa Wesleyan where I taught pharmacology.

When Allie was about three years old, I was appointed to the three-man building committee at Iowa Wesleyan. Our committee was responsible for constructing what is now known as Old Main. During the Civil War I was a commissioned officer of the 4th Iowa Volunteer Cavalry, and by the end of the war I was a Full Captain.

I tried to spend time every evening with my children – I had eight, five of whom lived to adulthood – telling them about what was happening in the “wider world.” One evening I announced to them that a “real railroad” was coming to Mount Pleasant, and I laid some rods and spools on the table to show them how railroads ran.

My! When I think of how my Allie used to follow me around. She asked so many questions about my research that I was certain she would study science. But... she developed a love for literature instead.

I do remember that wintry day when Allie dashed home, breathless, talking about some CLUB she and her friends were going to organize. It was all so secret. She wrapped an old shawl around her shoulders and slogged on out to the gazebo. In a couple of hours Allie had composed an oath. She had wanted absolute privacy!

Later, Allie was asked to compose an initiation ritual. Of course, she was the ideal one to do this with her knowledge of the classics combined with her writing skill.

Narrator: In 1873 Allie married Washington Irving Babb, a local lawyer, and they raised four children. Allie served for several years as an associate editor of The P.E.O. Record.

(Of note is the fact that Allie's sister-in-law, Bell Babb Mansfield, became the first lawyer in the country and was a charter member of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Society.)

Ella Lovenia Stewart

Narrator: Ella Stewart was the first secretary in P.E.O.

Reverend Isaac Ingersoll Stewart

I'm the Reverend Isaac Ingersoll Stewart, President Elder of the Mount Pleasant District of the Methodist Church – and Ella Stewart's father. My roots are in New Jersey. I had already lost two wives and four children before I met and married Ella's mother, the Irish-born Mary Robinson, in Iowa.

I was really involved at the very beginning of this tale, way back in 1848. It all began with a dream to start a Methodist college west of the Mississippi. Our plan was to take over Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute and rename it Iowa Wesleyan. I became the Financial Officer and promoted a BOLD scheme to raise money: \$100 paid NOW would educate all children in one family.

This \$100 policy became very important to my family because in 1864, when Ella was 16, my life on this earth ended. My poor wife was left with five children and was pregnant with a sixth – but all six were guaranteed an education.

Always resourceful, my wife bought a house near the railroad depot, ran a small store, and took in boarders (one of whom was Alice Coffin.) It was a hard life... and my daughter Ella's help was indispensable. Because she was 16, Ella was able to enroll at Iowa Wesleyan; however, she couldn't devote as much time to school as was necessary. It is my regret that she was unable to graduate.

But for Ella, the brightest spot in her life was the association with the others in P.E.O. She remained a devoted member and promoted its growth throughout her years because it meant so much to her. And how she did love her star pin! It's the only original one remaining, you know. That would please Ella greatly.

Narrator: Ella didn't care for the alphabetical lettering of chapters and would have preferred that each chapter be named for a constellation.

Conclusion

Narrator: We hope that these "father" memories have given you an appreciation of the times back in Mount Pleasant in 1869. P.E.O. was a revolutionary idea in those days. It was from these seven girls that our Sisterhood has grown. Today we number close to a quarter million members with chapters in all the states of the U.S. and all the provinces of Canada. We can be proud of these teenagers who began what is the 156* year-old history of P.E.O. as we honor the memories of our seven Founders each January.

*This number will change depending upon when the program is given.

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