

(NEED 7 CANDLES)

We read their names and see the bright yellow P.E.O. stars in front and we wonder. . . .who were these seven courageous, remarkable women who left such a powerful legacy of friendship and service? We read their names and we remember

They were all born within barely a five year span, but their deaths were separated by nearly fifty years! Some lived not long enough to see the impact of their humble beginnings in the mid 1800's on an Iowa college campus and some lived to see remarkable opportunities for women unfold from a circle of seven loyal friends.

We begin with Hattie Briggs. (Light first candle.) Hattie was a minister's daughter and was known as the quiet one, mild tempered and sweet mannered. Someone said of her, "Hattie was the best-hearted girl that ever lived." Those who knew her best said she had luminous eyes....a rather important observation it seems to me, especially considering her short life on this earth. Many saints of the faith have been described as having luminous eyes...eyes that see the things of God, eyes that see beyond this earthly life. It is perhaps, then, no accident that Hattie should be the one who proposed to Franc Roads that they have a society of their own! God, indeed, works in mysterious ways!

Hattie may have been quiet and spiritual, but she did not lack for talent and creativity and spunk! She took courses in painting and drawing and was married in a most remarkable way. At the end of one of her father's worship services, she and Henri Bousquet (a native of Holland) walked down the center aisle and asked to be married! I~ would imagine that that never happened again to Hattie's father in his entire ministry!

Hattie and Henri had two sons, one whom she lost even before her short life ended. On June 22, 1877 Hattie Briggs died at age 28 of a mysterious illness. Perhaps her luminous eyes foreshadowed a life short in years...how much more precious, then, is the seed she planted to begin P.E.O.!

Next we light the candle of Alice Coffin. (Light second candle.) Alice's young life was difficult. She was the fourth of six children and lost her mother when she was nine years old. She was raised by the housekeeper and there is no history of abuse or neglect, but some felt that Alice lived under a cloud of sadness because of the lack of a mother's love. She was not one, though, to let these losses consume her and she emerged from childhood a self-reliant, capable and resourceful young woman.

Alice was a tall, regal blond and dated Will Pearson (Suela's brother). Everyone said they made quite the handsome couple! To quote Dillon Payne (a friend of all the founders):

"Perhaps the most striking couple in our public festivities was Alice Coffin and Will Pearson. They were tall, courtly, handsome, and up-to-date dressers. Will had black hair, blue eyes and a woman's complexion. Alice was a typical blonde, with elegant grace and costume in the latest style...they were a well-mated couple."

Alice and Will enjoyed a fun-filled courtship. Alice loved to dance so much so that she left the Methodist Church and joined the Episcopal Church so she could enjoy a favorite activity! She could lay aside her dignity and become (as Dillon Payne notes): "a hilarious romp!" A falling-out occurred between them and although Alice could have married several suitors after Will, she remained unmarried, lavishing her affections on her sister's and brother's children.

Alice designed the first P.E.O. badge and always wore it with flair...on her shoulder or in her hair! She was the society's first Vice-President and is remembered as strong and independent. When asked why she did not marry, Alice's reply was: "It is impossible for me to marry for a home where my inclination does not lead me. It has always been that way. So I am resigned to my fate."

Alice had many years of ill health suffering from Bright's disease. She died at her sister's home in Newton Iowa, July 28, 1888. She was just 40 years old. She was buried at sunset next to her mother and father in Newton.

Ella Stewart was also the daughter of a Methodist minister. (Light third candle.) Like Alice Coffin, Ella's family life when young was difficult. Her father died when she was 16 leaving her the oldest of five children with one on the way. Being an industrious and loyal daughter, Ella dug in to help her mother raise her brothers and sisters. She was small in stature, but mighty in spirit!

Ella and Alice Bird were fast friends from grade school and even exchanged pins. Before Alice died, she sent Ella's pin to Chapter A for safe keeping. Ella was the first secretary and often kept the meetings from breaking down into "idle" conversation! She was known to say: "Girls, we must go to work and not sit here loafing!" There were no wasted meetings when Ella was present!

Ella is also one who seemed to have a heartache in her life that no one could readily identify. Most thought it was the loss of Dillon Payne who was her beau throughout her three years of college (Ella was the only one of the founders not to graduate). She never talked about the breakup, but many thought she felt responsible for the end of their relationship-perhaps we will never know the significance of the diamond ring given to Ella by Dillon Payne which she treasured until her death.

Ella stayed involved in P.E.O. throughout her life and helped organize both Grand Chapter and Supreme Chapter. She was a tireless worker for P.E.O. throughout her too short life.

Ella taught school for many years which brought her great satisfaction until 1891 when she had to return to Mount Pleasant to care for her ailing mother. Ella's own health was not good and she suffered a long illness with a lung disorder. She was observed as one who in the midst of her suffering, never lost her courage or her faith. Her friend Effie Rogers said of her: "Ella was one of the most intensely earnest Christians I have ever known." She died December 12, 1894 at the age of 46.

Suela Pearson was the youngest member of the founders. (Light fourth candle.) Her father had read a spanish novel before Suela's birth where the heroine was named Suela (pronounced

"Sue-eel-ah") so he thought it appropriate for his beautiful new daughter! Suela's father was a physician and her mother was related to President McKinley and they lived in a beautiful home complete with well-kept gardens and grand furnishings. Suela was beautiful and vivacious, but was not wrapped up in her own beauty, which made her more beautiful, indeed!

She and Alice Bird were good friends and did short little speeches or "pieces" as they were called then. Alice says of the two of them:

"I have often thought what a picture we made; Suela with her beautiful curls and furbelows. I with my bobbed, thick hair and plain appearance, but we were a success! Our fathers were very proud of us!"

One of their favorite pieces was: "The curfew shall not ring tonight!" The two of them must have been a sight to see!

Her family moved to Washington, D.C. where she met and married Mr. Frank Harold Penfield. They had two children, a daughter Rose who remained very close to her mother throughout her life, and a son Frank, who died from a football injury during his freshman year of college. The beautiful young woman who had grown up with so much privilege had a humiliating and difficult adult life. She divorced her husband and ultimately had to file for bankruptcy when funds from the divorce settlement ran out.

She also had not kept alive her P.E.O. friendships when she moved east and for twenty years did not affiliate with any sisters. She was thrilled to re-establish ties around 1891 when two P.E.O.s came to her home for tea. She hoped that someday her daughter Rose would be a P.E.O....she must have smiled from heaven when her daughter was initiated in 1938 into Chapter AH, Cleveland!

Suela's beloved daughter was with her when she died in Cleveland, Ohio, September 20, 1920. She was 69.

Many P.E.O.s feel Elizabeth Frances Roads is the most interesting of the P.E.O. founders. (Light fifth candle.)

And perhaps that is because from early on Frances was fiercely independent. She changed her name to Franc and was never thereafter called anything else...later she changed her last name to Rhodes and always signed her name Franc Rhodes Elliott...she certainly lived out her life as one who made a name for herself!

Franc's life was indeed more varied than any of her founding sisters. She was the youngest and perhaps the most brilliant. She entered Iowa Wesleyan at age 14 and graduated three years later in 1869. She dated Simon Elliott throughout college and married him in 1872. Sam's father was the President of Iowa Wesleyan and a forward thinking man who edited the first women's magazine, The Ladies' Repository. He received great criticism for this endeavor with comments like the following:

"Women hadn't the brain to study mathematics and if they studied Greek and Latin, it would surely unfit them for housekeeping and the care of families."

Such thinking must have seemed humorously ignorant to Franc who was able to work as an art supervisor in the public schools to help finance her son's medical education while maintaining a home. She is credited with creating a model school room which attracted wide attention. It was painted attractively and was light and airy in great contrast to the standard classrooms of the day which tended to be stuffy and dingy. Such ideas helped revolutionize the public school classroom.

She was a crusader for education and the arts and was a driving force in the growth of P.E.O. throughout her lifetime. Her speeches were inspiring and challenging, encouraging chapters to continue to grow and be innovative in creating better opportunities for women's education. At the 1919 convention she gave these important words:

"I plead with you to limit the worship of old traditions, flattering as the worship may be to a few of us that are still with you, and forge ahead to newer, better things for only in doing so will our efforts live to bless our memories and immortalize our order.

Let us not be too afraid to help push along the great world movements, especially those of peace, and national education problems, because vital interests of the country depend upon the help of all women as never before and in this, P.E.O. should assume its full responsibility."

You can almost feel the excitement her words created on the convention floor as she challenged P.E.O. to continue the important, world changing work of educating and empowering women!

While strolling through the gardens of her son's home in Chicago, Franc Rhodes died of a heart attack, August 9, 1924. She was 72. Perhaps the greatest thing said about her was that when you were with her and were enlightened with her wisdom and intelligence, you were already looking forward to when you would see her again.

Alice Bird was the most active in P.E.O. all her life (light sixth candle). Her father was a physician from Pennsylvania who moved to Mount Pleasant to set up practice. She dove into college life with gusto! Dillon Payne made these observations about Alice:

"Fresh from the Academy she bolted into our class. She was a town girl, of medium height, black hair thrown back like the boys comb their hair now, dark, piercing eyes, tailor made clothes, taking long and bold strides as she passed through the college campus.

She was not a man worshipper but met boys like brothers. She was generous in her attention to all....it was foreordained that that she should be a founder of P.E.O."

Alice was the first President of P.E.O., composed the oath and wrote the first constitution. This is not surprising considering her love for words...she is said to have parsed Greek and Latin sentences as a past-time! After the oath was composed, Ella Stewart read it to Alice and she was the first initiated...P.E.O. had officially begun!

Even though Alice was educated, intelligent and independent, she believed in the sanctity of marriage and family and felt strongly about women's place in public affairs. She said: "Married women have no business with public affairs...God never made a man who could run a home." In

spite of this, Alice was a superb speaker and after a memorial address in 1897, a reporter supposedly said, "Mrs. Babb can make a better speech than any man."

At age 63 Alice was stricken with a terrible disease that bared the nerves of her fingers and was excruciatingly painful. She was not an easy believer as her friend Dr. John Holland reported and struggled with questions of the "why" of human suffering, especially as it relates to the death of children. (She had already lost her beloved daughter, seven-year-old Clarabelle several years earlier.) With her intensity and dry wit, she must have been a challenge to any clergyman worth his salt who came to visit during her illness! She used to say: "If I could only trust God as those birds outside the window do; but then they haven't the brains to ask why. Sometime I'm going to know."

Alice died in Aurora, Illinois, November 21, 1926, and was buried in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. She was 76.

Closest to Alice Bird was Mary Allen (light seventh candle). They had almost a "siamese" attraction to each other according to their friends as witnessed by the fact that at age 77 Mary went to Illinois to visit her beloved friend "Allie" just two weeks prior to Alice's death.

She lived her entire life in Iowa and married Charles Stafford who was studying for the Methodist ministry. Several of Charles' friends were concerned about his choice of Mary and commented to him: "Charles, Mary Allen is not the girl for a poor struggling preacher to marry! She's too fond of parties and clothes!" He married her anyway and together they had four children. They lost a daughter at age four to scarlet fever, and a son one year after he graduated from college.

Like Alice, she believed strongly in the importance of the role of the woman in the home and was quoted as saying:

"Woman's chief contribution is a homemaker. No one cares even to be for any time a guest in a home kept by a man...man may be the house maker, or builder, but he is not the homemaker...that is woman's work."

In light of such comments, it is not surprising for Mary's relationship to P.E.O. to have somewhat of a maternal influence. She placed high accountability on every woman who became a P.E.O. expecting everyone to measure up to its highest standards. She had a strong sense of honesty and would always ask in any decision, "Is it right?" She appreciated good order and procedure and was especially proud of the P.E.O. Record which she felt was a "uniting agency...it disseminates P.E.O. news and unites our interests, our thoughts, and our policies."

She died at her home in Muscatine, Iowa, July 10, 1927. She was 78.

We see the candles burn in front of us...we think about their lives and their marvelous varied experiences...and we ask...who were these women?

Two were daughters of Methodist preachers

Two were daughters of businessmen

Two were daughters of physicians  
Five were married and between them had fourteen children  
Four of these lost one or more children to death  
Two never married and appear to have lost loves  
Three died young (ages 27, 40, 46)  
One was divorced and suffered bankruptcy  
Two lost their husbands to death  
Five suffered from serious physical illnesses  
Four were school teachers in Mount Pleasant, Iowa (Ella, Franc, Mary, and Alice Bird)  
Mary Allen and Alice Bird remained the closest to P.E.O. throughout their lives.  
These seven...these women with remarkable and yet common lives...who are they and what did they leave us?

They left us a legacy of friendship...women's friendship. And they gave us a way of maintaining and organizing those friendships so that all these generations later we still meet together in sisterhood and love! Oh, the power of the love of our women friends! They sustain us, help us keep our feet on the ground, they encourage us, share our joys, understand our frustrations and fears, cry our tears of loss and sadness?and the list goes on and on!

What an amazing thing for all these young women to be in college together in the late 1800's....to study and read and question and challenge...to believe that they had minds worth expanding and using! Such female explorations of academia were not well-accepted and I am sure their friendship was a powerful sustaining force as they continued in their studies despite prejudice and resistance. What a witness of courage and strength they are to us as we continue to find ways to empower women in the 21st century! Yes...a legacy of women's friendship...a gracious and bountiful gift, indeed!

They left us also a vehicle for promoting the education of women which empowers them to be all they can be. Alice Bird said in 1903: "We builded better than we knew." How amazed she would be to see the myriad opportunities for education that P.E.O. has developed for women!

The Educational Loan Fund  
The International Peace Scholarship Fund  
Cotter College for Women  
The Program for Continuing Education  
The Scholar Awards

When women are educated to have control over their own lives and have the tools and means to make their dreams and aspirations come true, there is nothing they cannot do! Our P.E.O. founders must have believed this with their whole beings, for they risked social acceptance to pursue education and enlightenment. Some followed traditional roles, but they were never the same after their education! And they were never the same after the founding of their P.E.O. sisterhood. P.E.O. changed their lives and their legacy inspires us to continue to change women's lives through the power of education.

Perhaps most importantly, the founders leave us a legacy of living in the "not yet" with courage and hope. Women are still yearning to be heard....still hoping for liberation and power to make their lives meaningful and purposeful. And we still need women friends and mentors to help us along the path to independence! P.E.O. has brought hope to so many thousands of women throughout its history, but the work is far from done!

Franc Rhodes in her inspiring and challenging way, says it best:

"I wonder if we realize the potential power which is possessed by an organization of 35,000 women. (How we have grown since then!) Such tremendous power, if properly directed and properly supported by its members, would accomplish things of which we do not dream today. Are we making the best use of this power?"

Should we be proud of what has been accomplished thus far? Of course! Should we believe that the work is done and that women have equal opportunity throughout the world for education and influence? Of course not! Our sisterhood gives us comfort and confidence for the living of our lives and inspires us to support those women living in the "not yet." Indeed, there are things to accomplish of which we can only dream, but our sisterhood and the legacy of our founders give us the courage and hope to make these dreams come true!

Source: Dede Leetch, AX, GA.

Quotes taken from "The Founders--A Summing Up" by: Frances Cooper Thompson, BJ, MN., Historian, International Chapter, January, 1984.