

## Reflecting on the Vision of Our Seven Founders

**Narrator:** Seven girls at Iowa Wesleyan College, Mount Pleasant, Iowa, had become a very close knit group by January of 1869. With the passing of each year their friendship deepened. Their friendship was so dear to them that they wanted it to be a lasting thing. It stood the test when a small chapter of I. C. Sorosis was organized in Mount Pleasant on December 12, 1868. Not all of the seven girls had been asked to join I.C. and those who were would not join without the others. All seven were clearly intelligent, academically inclined, artistic, very social, gracious hosts, and definitely creative. They had been taught to think and had become recognized as leaders in campus and community activities. It was the age of vision and reconstruction not only along national lines but reconstruction of thought, minds, and souls. It was a strange soil for these girls to grow in. Their lives were rigid but their paths were straight and, like Alpine flowers blooming in the snow, they bloomed more luxuriantly because of the rigidity of the atmosphere. One might say that it was ordained these seven would organize a lasting society.

You are about to meet these seven who founded the P.E.O. Sisterhood.

Scene 1 Pictures of all seven are arranged in a row on a table.

*(Mary Jane Allen enters and stands behind her picture)*

**Mary Allen:** I am Mary Allen and known as one of the triamese twins. I prefer to be called Mame. They tell me that I have a delightful sense of humor but it is hard for me to judge. Some of the girls say I have good taste in clothes. I have a reputation for being popular with the boys in college. I love to entertain. When I claim that I stand very well in my classes, I hope you do not think that I never sit down.

I have always stressed the importance of proper procedures in conducting meetings and the necessity for good order. I once said, "We are but undisciplined if we cannot endure the quiet restraint of listening." *(Mary Allen exits)*

*(Alice Bird enters and stands behind her picture)*

**Alice Bird:** I am Alice Bird. I entered Iowa Wesleyan in 1865 at age 15. Because I have gained a tremendous knowledge of literature and Latin, it has been said that I must have the power of total recall. I wrote the original oath and the original constitution for P.E.O. *(Alice B. exits)*

*(Harriet Briggs enters and stands behind her picture)*

**Hattie Briggs:** I am Harriet Briggs and known as one of the triamese twins. I prefer to be called Hattie. My friends have said that my best quality is that of making everyone around me feel comfortable. I love people and they seem to love me. My classmates call me "Mother Superior" and "Patron Saint". They come to me in all their troubles and I give help and consolation. *(Hattie exits)*

*(Alice Virginia Coffin enters and stands behind her picture)*

**Alice Coffin:** I am Alice Virginia Coffin. I am called Alice, a queen in the drawing room and a first lady in the ballroom. I am sometimes quick to anger but I am always quick to forgive. The reason people think of me as being a bit aloof may be because I tend to carry myself with an air of distinction. Those who know me know me to be cheerful, kind, and generous. I enjoy a party and I love to dance. I became a member of the Episcopal Church because my Methodist Church did not approve of dancing.

By the way, I dated Suela Pearson's brother, Will, during our college years and we were engaged for a time. The reasons for the broken engagement were personal as were the reasons I never accepted other proposals. *(Alice C. exits)*

*(Suela Pearson enters and stands behind her picture)*

**Suela Pearson:** I am Suela Pearson. I am considered a fine musician and I'm also known for my dramatic ability. The other founders take pride and pleasure in telling that I am the most beautiful and popular one of the seven. I have been called a planet with a ring of boys around me. However, the other founders are never jealous of me. I entered Iowa Wesleyan in the fall of 1866 and received my AB degree in June of 1871. *(Suela exits)*

*(Frances Elizabeth Roads enters and stands behind her picture)*

**Franc Roads:** I am Frances Elizabeth Roads and known as one of the triamese twins. I prefer to be called Franc. I entered Iowa Wesleyan in 1866 at the age of 14 and graduated in 1869. I am the youngest of the founders. I am the serious type and I am always deeply concerned with social conditions, especially the advancement of women. I am considered the intellectual one of the bunch. *(Franc exits)*

*(Ella Lovina Stewart enters and stands behind her picture)*

**Ella Stewart:** I am Ella Lovina Stewart, of Irish descent with strong likes and dislikes. I'm the oldest in a family of six children. They call me Ella. I did not graduate from Iowa Wesleyan, not for academic reasons, but because my father passed away when I was sixteen leaving my mother with five children and one on the way. The need for my help in running the boarding house at home became so great that I found it impossible to carry a full assignment or to attend classes during certain hours. I continued to keep my place in the group entertainment.

Dillon Payne, a campus leader and classmate of all seven for four years, wrote about the personality of each of the seven. He said that I always wore ear rings and smelled like violets. He told of many activities, for example the winter skating parties on Skunk River and the woods picnics when the spring flowers began to bloom. The custom was for the boys to furnish the buggies and the girls the lunch baskets. No cut flowers or taxis were required for town affairs. There were more heart thrills in a slow stroll homeward, gazing at the stars in the milky-way while having an earthly one on one's arm, exchanging mutual confidences. *(Ella exits)*

*Civil War music while scene changes*

**Narrator:** You will now hear about the beginning of P.E.O. It was January 21, 1869. The earth was snow laden as a chill wind blew across the campus of Iowa Wesleyan. Active plans for organization of P.E.O. began to emerge that morning as Hattie Briggs and Franc Roads, two of the three triamese twins, sat together on the stile at the southeast corner of the IW campus. They were gravely discussing the fraternity system in general, and more specifically, their own responsibility for organizational life on the campus.

**Scene 2 Frank and Hattie are sitting on the stile, dressed in warm shawls.**

**Hattie Briggs:** Franc, do you remember that girl from Monmouth, Illinois, who enrolled at IW last fall?

**Franc Roads:** Yes, she wore a real neat pin bearing letters that stood for I. C. Sorosis, that secret society formed at Monmouth College.

**Hattie Briggs:** And you remember that she invited some of our group to join her society that formed here in December.

**Franc Roads:** I understand they did not accept the invitation because all seven of us were not invited. And you know we seven have always been foremost in any plans which had to do with the social life of IW.

**Hattie Briggs:** I have an idea! Let's start an order of our own, one which will commemorate our cherished friendship!

**Franc Roads:** I second your suggestion. It sounds so exciting. We must find our other triamese twin, Mary Allen, immediately and confide in her.

*The two start to rush off as Mary Allen approaches.*

**Franc Roads:** And here she comes. Oh, Mame, you will be so excited when you hear what Hattie has suggested.

**Hattie Briggs:** Organizing a society of our own would be a logical solution to the problem created by the I.C. Sorosis charter.

**Mary Allen:** What a grand idea, and it sounds so revolutionary. We must find the others and get started right away.

**Scene 3 The three enter building (or stage) and greet the other four as they enter from another entrance.**

**Hattie Briggs:** Guess what? We're going to organize our own society.

*(All talk excitedly at once)*

**All:** How exciting! It will be such fun. (*adlib*)

**Hattie Briggs:** The time is right for the creation of a feminist movement. There is such a desire for culture and intellect in this place, perhaps in part as a result of the industrial and mechanical revolutions, westward expansion with the transcontinental railroad nearing completion, the Mississippi River nearby, the Civil War over, acceptance of education for women, Louisa May Alcott's book, *Little Women*, the changing status of women in the world, and the beginnings of the fraternity system.

**Alice Coffin:** Secrecy is so exhilarating! We must pledge the closest secrecy and set up code words to pass from one of us to another in order to schedule a time and place for meeting.

**All:** We pledge secrecy.

**Ella Stewart:** I'll work on the codes.

**Alice Coffin:** The first thing we should decide is where we can meet.

**Suela Pearson:** The Music Room is the obvious place for our meeting. We have all participated in musical events there and attended meetings there. Who will arrange for the use of the Music room?

**Ella Stewart:** I will, but who will carry the old college Bible from the Chapel on the 3rd floor of Main Hall?

**Alice Coffin:** I will carry the bible from the 3rd floor down to the 2nd floor, but someone will have to keep watch while I transport the Bible so that no outsiders can see this unusual procedure and wonder what is going on.

**Suela Pearson:** I'll watch while Alice C. transports the Bible.

**Ella Stewart:** Don't you all think we need a bit of pageantry, some kind of ceremony, or an oath of allegiance?

**All:** We agree.

**Hattie Briggs:** Alice Bird, you are the best suited to the task of composing an oath, something wherein each can participate.

**All:** Now, let's all get busy. See you in the Music Room.

*(All appear to rush out to do assigned tasks.)*

*Civil War Music while scene change.*

**Scene 4**

**Narrator:** The seven are together again later that day in the music room where pledging allegiance to the oath is their initiation.

**Alice Bird:** (*Holding up a copy of the oath*), you have all read the oath. The wording finally occurred to me in the summer house, wintry though it was, near our "crooked tree" croquet ground. I was so full of great thoughts that the confusion of the children annoyed me, so I wrapped myself in a shawl and went there to compose this oath.

Ella, you read the oath to me; I will pledge allegiance; I will read the oath to you for your pledge and then to each of the other five for their pledges.

*Music while pledge of allegiance to the oath appears to take place.*

**Mary Allen:** With that dramatic but simple, restrained, precious moment as each girl searched her heart and made her vow, P.E.O. was born. Now we have more work to do.

**Alice Coffin:** We must have an emblem. I think the star should be our emblem.

**Franc Roads:** Can we all agree on the star for our emblem?

**All:** Yes.

**Suela:** Don't we need a constitution?

**All:** Yes.

**Alice Coffin:** I think Alice Bird should write the constitution.

**Mary Allen:** All of you come to my house for a meeting Saturday evening. Alice Bird, will you have the constitution to bring to the meeting?

**Alice Bird:** I'll do my best.

*(All exit)*

*(Civil War music while scene changes)*

**Narrator:** Two days later, the seven are in a meeting at Mary Allen's house. They are all still excited but business is the order of the day. They have already learned much about conducting business

**Scene 5 All are comfortably situated in the living room of Mary Allen's home.**

**Mary Allen:** We have talked, we have thought, we have planned over and over how to be.

**Alice Bird:** We do not for one moment want it to be a mere college society. We are earnest and desire something broad and substantial. We wish for a society of more lasting name and

reputation. I went into the holy of holies, the spare bedroom in father's house to write the constitution. I saw: the figures in the carpet, the high feather bed covered with the big log-cabin quilt, and fluted pillow shams. I selected a white paper and blue ribbon to tie it. Words failed me until my father came to my aid with the "whereas" and "therefore resolved". As I got into the writing of the document, I thought the needs of all women must be embodied in the document. You all have read the constitution. Can we adopt it?

**All:** Yes. (*with hands held high*)

**Ella Stewart:** Now girls, we must decide on a dignified way to announce P.E.O.

**Alice Bird:** It should be something dramatic.

**Alice Coffin:** Let's think of some way to call attention to the new star pins.

**Mary Allen:** We could make fancy aprons and fasten the pins to them.

**Franc Roads:** Then we could march into chapel some morning.

**Suela Pearson:** But that would just be copying the Betas.

**Hattie Briggs:** Yes, but the Betas didn't wear aprons.

**Narrator:** The meeting at Mary Allen's house was adjourned after electing four officers who were: President, Alice Bird; Vice President, Alice Coffin; Secretary, Ella Stewart; and Treasurer, Hattie Briggs

The P.E.O.s' march into chapel was a success. The I. C. Sorosis girls had announced their march into chapel on a given day during the last week in January, 1869. The P.E.O.s surprised the I. C.s by filing in ahead of them.

The P.E.O. Sisterhood did not celebrate its organization until December 26, 1870 with their Sidereal Soiree. The dinner menu was roast turkey, escalloped oysters, mashed potatoes, cole slaw, and marble cake with ice cream for dessert. The program consisted of essays read by P.E.O. members, an instrumental duet by P.E.O.s, and a duet sung by P.E.O.s.

*(The seven wearing aprons and smiling march out.)*

*Civil War music*

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