

Remembering Our Founders

"Life is a heritage handed down from one generation to another, with each one adding a bit of beauty, courage and faith to the heritage, so that it is not so much reverence for the past as a creative power to beautify the moment"

This line from Bess Streeter Aldrich was not written about P.E.O., but it might have been. We are the generation currently holding the heritage so lovingly fashioned by our seven founders. The generations in between have kept alive that heritage, lived up to the high ideals of P.E.O., and improved the quality of life for countless women. We will do the same for those who come after us.

Why has P.E.O. been so durable? Because the little group of seven felt privileged to be receiving an education and privileged to have each other as friends. They wished to preserve what they had and share it with others. And their ideals and aspirations were so worthwhile that thousands of women have wanted to identify with them.

Our sisterhood began when Hattie Briggs and Franc Roads sat upon a fence stile at the edge of the Iowa Wesleyan campus and pondered a predicament. Of their group of seven close friends, six had been invited to join a campus sorority. Those six did not wish to affiliate with any organization without the other one, so Hattie suggested, "Let's have a society of our own." It is important to understand that P.E.O. was founded out of the strong friendship of seven young women. They envisioned great things and good works in the future of their organization, but the original and abiding purpose was to preserve their friendship. The original intent was to have only the seven as members; but they soon began to sense their responsibility toward something larger than themselves and their own precious friendship. The needs of all women gave them purpose, and in their girlish idealism, they were anxious to get to work and revolutionize the world.

It was inevitable that education for women would be a cherished goal. It was a rare woman who went to college in those days. Few of the now well-known colleges for women had yet been founded. To the seven, college had been a unique and joyous experience. They had been taught to think and had become recognized leaders in campus and community activities. Each was aware of how fortunate she was to be receiving an education.

Not only did our founders appreciate their education, they studied such intimidating courses as Greek, Latin, German, French, calculus, physics, astronomy and rhetoric, and managed to keep their grade point averages above 90 most of the time. It is not surprising that four of the seven - Alice Bird, Alice Coffin, Franc Roads and Ella Stewart - became teachers. Education for women was and still is one of the most important facets of P.E.O.

Some of the original seven were more active than others in P.E.O. after their college years. Suela Pearson lived in Cleveland most of her married life, and since there were no P.E.O. chapters there until after her death, she was not able to be active. However, she loved P.E.O. dearly and sent this message to the Iowa Grand Chapter Convention in 1900:

"Although many years have passed since my hand last clasped a sister P.E.O.'s in good fellowship, my heart has retained the true metal, which rings in progress, advancement, loyalty to the past, the present and the memory of the days when our little band first threw its scintillating rays to the world. I now look back with profound admiration to you who have followed in our plans laid down in that happy yesterday, so long ago, and trust that each succeeding year may find you recording a living monument to be handed down to our daughters throughout all time."

Hattie Briggs- affiliation was the shortest. To her belongs the honor of naming P.E.O., but after marrying and having two sons, she died when she was only 28.

Two of the founders never married. Alice Coffin and Ella Stewart were spinster teachers. Ella, the only one of the seven who did not graduate from college, chose our colors, white and yellow. She taught piano for years in Mount Pleasant and then at a boys industrial school. She died at 46, after a long illness. Hers is the only one of the seven original pins still in existence; she bequeathed it to Alice Bird who wore it with her own.

Alice Coffin, a tall willowy blond, had a sparkling personality, loved to dance and was engaged for a time to the brother of Suela Pearson. She was a devoted and conscientious teacher. One student wrote of her, "She was the kind of teacher that the girls copy and the boys silently worship?. She lived only 40 years and was buried in Newton, Iowa, just as the sun was setting, according to her wish.

It was Alice Coffin who chose the emblem of our sisterhood."The girls had studied astronomy and had been intrigued by the vastness of the universe presented to them. The star symbolized for them their own search for the highest and best things that life could give"

Frances Roads, who wished to be called Franc, was the youngest founder and had the most varied life. She chose the scientific course at college (though the rest of her life followed her artistic bent) and studied and taught painting, especially china painting. When her family suffered financial reverses in the panic of 1933, she set out to earn money - a rare thing for a married woman to do in those days - in order to keep a son in medical school. She was an art supervisor in Aurora, Illinois and at Rowland Hall School in Salt Lake City. She helped with the work of organizing Chapter A, Utah, in January 1900.

Mary Allen lived a long and happy life in the role of the traditional homemaker. Her husband was a Methodist minister, and for nine years was president of Iowa Wesleyan where our story began. She maintained an active association with P.E.O. and belonged to five chapters while making her home in many different towns in Iowa. One of the highlights of the 1900 Iowa State Convention was her appearance, described as follows in THE P.E.O. RECORD: "The greatest event of the day was the coming of one of the original seven who had never attended a convention of P.E.O. before. She was at once called to the platform, and it was with immense satisfaction and applause that the P.E.O.s saw her. She is a fine looking woman with a kindly glance, a pleasing voice and warm handclasp. She bore her part well throughout the meetings and read a paper that we hope to print in THE RECORD soon.

A poignant story is told of Mary Allen's pin. While living in Washington, Iowa, she lost her pin while visiting her aunt. She replaced the pin and wore the new one for many years. In June, 1924, Chapter J in Washington planned a luncheon in her honor - and presented her with her original pin which had recently been found by the current owner of her aunt's house. The owner had been cleaning the dirt out of her porch flower boxes and was astonished to find the P.E.O. star with the name Mary Allen on the back. It had been missing more than 40 years. The pin disappeared again after Mary died, in 1927, the last surviving founder, and is believed to be in the possession of a relative.

Of all the founders whose names and words appear in the history of P.E.O., those of Alice Bird appear most frequently. Alice was enthusiastically active in P.E.O. throughout her long life. It was she who composed the original oath, a simple pledge of secrecy containing only 35 words. It was used in its original form until 1877. It was eventually incorporated with a few changes into the ceremony we use now.

She wrote the original constitution, many of the laws, resolutions, ceremonies and many eloquent letters. She had a brilliant mind, a wide knowledge of literature and was expert in Latin and Greek, which she taught at Iowa Wesleyan. With these credentials in mind, it is difficult to believe Alice when she wrote of the founders, "we were ordinary girls."

At the time of founding, soon after the Civil War, the climate was ripe for change. Alice wrote, "If there is any virtue in the founding of P.E.O., it is not on account of the Founders, for we were ordinary girls, but on account of the time of founding. It was the age of reconstruction of thought, minds, and souls. Women's Clubs were in demand; P.E.O. came just at the right time. It was strange soil for them to grow in, our lives were rigid, our paths were straight. Economy was the order of the day, but like Alpine flowers blooming in the snow, they bloom all the more luxuriantly because of the rigidity of the atmosphere."

Since its early days, P.E.O. has changed and remained the same. The extreme and total secrecy began subsiding many years ago. We have come a long way since the days when members followed circuitous routes to each others' homes so no one would know where they were going. And we no longer read the constitution and bylaws at every meeting. In most cases change has been improvement, but there are a few rules of order from the days of yesteryear to which we might return: that is "while the president is addressing the society, no member shall carry on a private conversation." Also, "no sister shall be allowed to speak more than twice upon the same subject unless by permission of the president." And it might be a good idea to go back to calling the roll at the end of a meeting.

P.E.O. in our modern times has a keen spiritual awareness and a deep social consciousness. The (Judeo) Christian ethic touches P.E.O. in every phase of its endeavor.

The founders, with their pioneer spirit, and deeply religious backgrounds, their love of each other, their natural bent for work with an altruistic purpose, and their beautiful dream of finding a worthy project for P.E.O. carried out hundreds of projects. Libraries were recipients of money and books. Chapter Original A had sidewalks laid to the city cemetery, built a fountain on the town square and paid for shingles for a new roof on the home of a needy family. Hospitals, orphans' homes and homes for the aged were beneficiaries of P.E.O. generosity as was the

kindergarten movement, flood and cyclone victims, even famine sufferers in Russia. Our philanthropies are less varied now, but it can be truly said that the world is a better place because of P.E.O. We pause each year to remember and honor the founders and to rejoice in their spirit and vision. And we promise to faithfully uphold their ideals into the future.

In closing, this greeting seems appropriate, it was sent to the Grand Chapter Convention of 1887 by Alice Coffin: "I greet you as true sisters. May you raise the standard of true womanhood, elevate the fallen, scatter sunshine as the June winds scatter rose blossoms, make light the burden of the oppressed. And may our badge of sincerity and friendship ?our star? be emblematic of the star of Bethlehem - a guide to Heaven. May we indeed be stars among women, in whatever vocation we are called to fill."

Source: Chapter K, Utah for the Salt Lake Area Founders? Day Celebration, March 12, .1983.