

P.E.O. was born January 21, 1869, at Iowa Wesleyan College, in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

THE SITUATION:

It was four years after the civil war, President Lincoln had been shot, the veterans had returned, the country was unstable and unsure, and the first generation of college educated woman were seeing the dawning of a wonderful new day. A new woman's college fraternity, I. C. Sorosis, later known as Pi Beta Phi, had just formed in nearby Monmouth College, Illinois, just 58 miles away, and a member from Monmouth had transferred to Iowa Wesleyan. Her intent was to start a second chapter, and six of seven close friends had been invited to join.

THE GATHERING:

It was a clear, sunny, crisp January day. HATTIE BRIGGS and FRANC ROADS sat on a stile on the southeast corner of the campus of Iowa Wesleyan College and talked. Then HATTIE BRIGGS said, "Let US start an order of our own."

HATTIE BRIGGS:

Was the ONE WHO GOT THE IDEA and GAVE US OUR NAME -"P.E.O.."Qualities: Wit, gaiety, joyous friendship, enthusiasm for living, kind hearted, "calm, serene and useful." "The best hearted girl that ever lived. None knew her but to love her."

Appearance: Above average size, light hair, fair complexion, large expressive eyes, a beautiful unforgettable smile.

Born in Troy, Iowa, Oct. 10, 1849, her father was a minister.

She wore the star only seven years.

Married five years to a banker and business man, Henry L. Bousquet, they had two sons, she died at age 28 in Pella, Iowa, and is buried there in Oakwood Cemetery.

FRANC ROADS quickly embraced Hattie's suggestion.

FRANC ROADS (Frances Elizabeth Roads):

Was the YOUNGEST FOUNDER, the artist.

The APRONS the women wore into assembly to announce their sisterhood were designed and made in Franc's kitchen, with the help of her mother.

Qualities: Energetic, a visionary, way ahead of her time, entered Iowa Wesleyan at age 14, graduated at 17. She had faith in women's destiny to shape the world, was always interested in women's rights, chose a scientific course in college but followed her artistic bent thereafter, always in search of learning, called a statesman, an artist and a teacher.

Appearance: Lovely, not tall but well proportioned with dark hair and eyes that fairly danced with the fullness of life and merriment. She looked artistic enough for a painting.

Born in 1852 in Marshall, Iowa, her father was a business man, her mother supported her P.E.O. activities.

She taught in the Mt. Pleasant high school and in 1872 she received an honorary MS from Iowa Wesleyan, and married Simon Charles Elliott, a long time beau, whose father was an Iowa Wesleyan president. They moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he ran a small china store. They had two children, she practiced and taught art, particularly china painting. When the family suffered financial reverses 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 died in 1927 at age 75 at her son's home in Chicago. Her body was cremated and later a memorial marker was placed in the Elliott lot in Forest Home Cemetery, Mt. Pleasant.

HATTIE AND FRANC raced to find MARY ALLEN.

MARY ALLEN:

Much of EARLY P.E.O. activity happened in the ALLEN home. It was at an evening of candy making at her house that the seven were visited by seven young men. College rules forbid them to stay, but they all did, and sang and ate and had a lovely time. They were called before the President and told to repent. They did, but, not for long.

She STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPER PROCEDURE IN CONDUCTING THE BUSINESS MEETINGS. At one time stated, "We are but undisciplined if we cannot endure the quiet restraint of listening."

Qualities: Poised and quiet, "wholesome and gracious," a delightful sense of humor, a deep and abiding faith in God, held the firm belief that Christianity is the practical solution to life's problems, a total concern for other people, treasured her friends, loved her fellow man.

Appearance: Tall, slender, graceful and poised with an innate dignity of bearing. Later described as a "fine looking woman with a kindly glance, a pleasing voice and warm handclasp."

Born in 1848 in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, her father was a business man.

Married 56 years to a Methodist minister, Charles Stafford, (who was president of Iowa Wesleyan for nine years), they had four children, she was a member of five different Iowa chapters throughout the state, lived a long and happy life, died in 1927 at 79, buried in Forest Home Cemetery at Mt. Pleasant.

ALICE BIRD ("ALLIE"):

Suggested a pledge ceremony, WROTE the original CONSTITUTION, COMPOSED THE ORIGINAL OATH, (now incorporated into our ceremony of initiation) and later wrote many of the LAWS, RESOLUTIONS AND CEREMONIES. It was she who also later wrote of the founders, "we were all ordinary girls." SERVED AS THE FIRST PRESIDENT. WAS GIVEN THE FIRST PLEDGE BY ELLA STEWART,~ AND SHE THEN READ THE WORDS INITIATING THE OTHER SIX.

Allie later wrote, "How well I recall the day ~I wrote the primitive constitution...I went into...the spare bedroom in father's house, to write it. I recall the figures in the carpet, the high feather bed covered with the big log-cabin quilt, and fluted pillow shams. After I got into the line of work...I could scarcely stop; the needs of all women, it seemed to me, must be embodied in that document and such as it was, it has served as a nucleus for our needs ever since.? (The Constitution Allie Bird wrote THAT day is today our Objects and Aims.)

Qualities: Brilliant mind, wide knowledge of literature and an expert in Latin and Greek, eloquent writer, a forceful reader and singer and member of a lively and entertaining College Quartet.

"When any bold or daring adventure was incubating, Allie was there in the midst."

Appearance: Medium height, dark hair, dark eyes, and wore" tailor-made clothes, with sleeves probably rolled up. ready for work."

Born in Mt. Pleasant in 1850, the daughter of Dr. Wellington Bird.

Married to W. S. Babb, a law professor at Iowa Wesleyan University, and had four children.

Taught Latin and Greek at Iowa Wesleyan. Made many contributions to the P.E.O. RECORD

and was its associate editor. She died Nov. 21, 1926 at 76 and is buried in Forest Home Cemetery at Mt. Pleasant.

The final three, ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN, SUELA PEARSON and ELLA STEWART were contacted.

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN:

SUGGESTED THE STAR and designed our emblem.

Qualities: A sparkling personality, loved to dance and sing, known for her kindness, tact and poise, courage and heart.

Appearance: A tall willowy, beautiful blond who carried herself with an air of distinction, "like a goddess, stately and dignified."

Born of Quaker heritage in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1848. Her mother died nine years later, and the family moved to Iowa. This left a permanent note of sadness in her life, but she continued her education and became a school teacher. She was involved in a singing group with Ella.

Alice loved to dance, which was not done by the Methodists, so she left them and joined the Episcopalians. At one time she was engaged to the brother of Suela Pearson. She had many sad romances but never married.

She devoted her life to teaching and helping those less fortunate. A student wrote of her, "She was the kind of teacher that the girls copy and the boys silently worship." She died at 40 at the home of her sisters in Newton, Iowa, and was buried there as the sun was setting, according to her wishes. Her jeweled pin (given to her by Chapter Original A in 1902 - not her original pin), is on display at the Centennial Center in Des Moines.

SUELA PEARSON:

The FIRST to present the P.E.O. TRADITION which judges ONLY by the soul and character of the bearer, and not the outward signs of age, class or circumstances.

Qualities: Gracious and cultured, with charm, talent and virtue, and adored by everyone. She chose music and dramatics for her college major and graduated with honors.

Appearance: Brown eyes, pink cheeks and curls, ?lovely as a primrose or a wood violet.? * The other Founders took pride in saying that Suela was the most popular of the seven.

Born in 1851 in Cleveland, Ohio, daughter of a physician. The family moved to Mt. Pleasant while she was in grade school.

Married to Frank Penfield, who was with Standard Oil, they had two children. They had a beautiful family life for a time but her husband died following surgery, then she lost her father, brother and one son, and her mother was an invalid for many years. After a long illness Suela died in 1920 at 69, and is buried in Lake View Cemetery, in Cleveland, Ohio.

ELLA STEWART:

CHOSE THE COLORS. GAVE THE FIRST PLEDGE TO ALICE BIRD.

Qualities: Devotion and service to others, "vivacious, interested in all good works and ready to do them."

Appearance: A small woman of Irish descent, curly auburn hair, deep blue eyes.

Born in Pittsburg, Iowa in 1848, her father was a Methodist minister and also a major in the U.S. Army. While still an infant they moved to Mt. Pleasant and lived on campus in what became

Pioneer Hall, while her father served as presiding elder and later financial agent for the college. Her father died when she was 16, leaving 5 small children. Her mother started a boarding house for students and Ella assumed much responsibility. She was the only founder who did not graduate from college, due to lack of money and because she was needed at home. She continued her association with the college activities and audited many classes. Ella never married, taught music in Mt. Pleasant for many years and later at a boys' industrial school. She died at 46, in 1894 from a lung disorder after a long illness. She is buried in old Cemetery at Mt. Pleasant. Her original pin, the only one of the original seven in existence, is on display in the Centennial Center in Des Moines.

THE EVENT:

On January 21, 1869, with great excitement, these seven gathered in secret in the Music Room of Main Hall, to form their "secret society." They decided what sort of a society they would form and what their aims would be. They were well versed in parliamentary law and quickly decided what needed to be done and by whom. And finally, they agreed to announce their new society by marching together into assembly, wearing identical aprons and gold stars.

The seven never told which of their group had not been asked to join the Monmouth group. In the first year of the founding of P.E.O., nineteen new members were initiated. Many parties were planned. Soiree's with elaborate invitation and decorations were held at the Hotel Brazelton in Mt. Pleasant, as well as ice skating gatherings on the Skunk River. There were picnics in the woods when the spring flowers began to bloom. The custom was that the young men provided the buggies and the women the baskets of food. The seven were intelligent and serious students, studying such intimidating courses as Greek, Latin, German, French, calculus, physics, astronomy and rhetoric. But they were also fun loving.

The founders never believed that their society would remain a campus organization. Alice ("Allie") Bird remembered, "We desired something broad and substantial. We did not for one moment wish our organization to be a mere college fraternity, but a society of more lasting name and reputation we knew our organization was going to endure for many generations to come and we wanted a strong foundation."

So, that is how P.E.O. came to be, and those are the seven ORDINARY women who were the founders.

* From a letter written by Alice Bird on April 23, 1913.

Source: Sallyanna R. Yntema, AG, P.S.P., GA., 1997.

The Birth of P.E.O.