

## RECIPROCITY FOUNDERS' DAY PROGRAM AKRON, OHIO 1987

*This program contains historical information about the era in which our organization was founded and general information about the founders.*

Mary Allen, Alice Bird, Hattie Briggs, Alice Coffin, Franc Roads, Suela Pearson, Ella Stewart – what can one say about them on this, the 138<sup>th</sup> (update) anniversary of their founding of P.E.O.? Millions of words have already been spoken, skits presented and innovative Founders' Day programs created in this year alone. Add this year's production to those of all the previous years and you would have an astounding number of words of tribute and praise.

January, 1869, was when it all happened, less than two months before the inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant as president of the recently and bloodily restored United States. In 1869, the country would be drawn even closer together by the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. Citizens of the thirty-seven states in the union hoped for a period of tranquility and business opportunity after the twin upheavals of the Civil War and 1868 impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson.

It would surely be wrong to deify these seven young women – or girls, as they were called then – for in many ways, they were quite ordinary. Each of them lived in the small town of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, and the small town was still the norm in 1869 America. Mt. Pleasant, unlike many towns west of the Mississippi River, had clearly passed beyond its frontier stage of development, the stage during which settlers had sought to recreate the life they had left behind, some in the South, most in the East. Photographs of Mt. Pleasant reveal a settled community, with some large, commodious homes and well-planned gardens. Citizens pointed with pride to three institutions of higher education in their community which seemed to fulfill their aspiration to be known as the Athens of the West.

One can surely sense the existence in Mt. Pleasant of prosperity, civic pride and a rudimentary social structure. As ministers, physicians and businessmen, the fathers of our founders were clearly among the leading citizens of Mt. Pleasant. If not affluent, they had at least attained prominent positions in the life of the town.

Our founders were typical, if not ordinary, in another way: they pursued no extraordinary educational goals, such as preparation for a profession. Rather, they sought what most other girls of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sought – to marry and establish homes and families of their own, which five of them ultimately did. We must remind ourselves that marriage provided the only road to security and respectability for a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman. She had no status and few legal rights of her own, but derived her position from the two important men in her life – first, her father, and later, her husband.

Perhaps the pursuit of this goal was the reason our founders attended coeducational Iowa Wesleyan, rather than Belden's Female Seminary. Iowa Wesleyan was unusual in

being the first coeducational institution founded to the west of the Mississippi River. Incidentally, it is interesting that the University of Iowa was the first state university to admit women, which it began to do in 1858. The town girls of Mt. Pleasant must have found Iowa Wesleyan even more than usually attractive due to the presence in its male ranks of Civil War veterans. Their travels and experiences, far from the life of Mt. Pleasant, must have provided a kind of romantic intrigue. Alice Bird later recalled that “the soldiers were back home doing more mischief than they did in the war, making love to their girls in college.” That her statement is literally true is very doubtful, but there is no question that the presence of these veterans forced the administration of the college to reevaluate and revise its rules, which earlier had prohibited the men and the women even from talking to each other without permission.

When marriage did not immediately follow the completion of their schooling, six of our founders did what the custom of the time permitted them to do: they taught school. Teaching the young was the only respectable occupation for single women of good background, for the classroom was thought to provide the same sheltered environment as the home, an atmosphere in which women would not be subjected to the competitiveness of the world of business but could instead express their talents for loving and nurturing. The rewards of teaching were thus thought to be those most attractive and appropriate to women: low pay, the opportunity to mold young minds and to exert every good and useful influence on the next generation.

Six of the young women were seniors in 1869, within one month of completing their work at Iowa Wesleyan. After years of friendship in preparatory school – all of them had attended either Howe’s Academy or the preparatory department at Iowa Wesleyan – and continued closeness at college, they now faced a future of separation, when they would be without the support of their mutual friendship. Formation of their own society would be a tribute to their past friendship as well as the foundation of a perpetual bond. Why else did they march together into chapel on that January day, wearing distinctive aprons and their star emblem, barely one month before the end of the semester in March? Why else but to underscore their special relationship to each other did they emphasize secrecy, not only of the oath and the meaning of their letters, but of the very place of their meetings? In later years the founders wrote of taking round-about routes and of criss-crossing their paths so that no one would know where they were assembling. Can you not imagine the giggling that erupted when each was able to report that she had arrived at the meeting undetected?

For these were ordinary girls in another sense: they loved to have fun, to sing, to give dramatic presentations, to eat (refreshments of some kind accompanied every meeting), to sew and to share secrets of all kinds with each other. None had a single, all-consuming talent, but each had something she could do better than the others, and all possessed a wide range of abilities.

So let us not speak in hushed, reverential tones of our founders. But let us remember also that in many ways they were extraordinary. Their families were unusual in valuing an academic education for their daughters, rather than the standard training in what

were called the womanly skills. Country-wide, according to a contemporary report of the United States Commissioner of Education, there were only 11,126 women enrolled in degree credit courses in 1869, this of a total population in the 18-21 age range of over three million. Of these, fewer than ten per cent actually received their degrees, whereas six of our seven founders graduated with either an A.B. or a B.S. degree.

Further, these young women were engaged in true coeducation, and you may be surprised to learn that half of the students at Iowa Wesleyan were female. These were the pioneering days of coeducation, when there was far from general agreement that girls should be educated in the same way as boys. Such an authority as Dr. Edward H. Clarke, a member of the Massachusetts Medical Society and professor of medicine at Harvard, asserted in 1873 that "physiology protests against coeducation." Dr. Clarke contended that, if girls pursued the same educational regimen as boys, which he defined as over-developing their minds and studying and reciting during all four weeks of the month instead of only during those three weeks when females were deemed to be healthy, they would emerge from the experience with flat chests, undeveloped ovaries, barren wombs and damaged nervous systems. It occurs to me that, had the renowned Dr. Clarke followed his logic to its conclusion, he might have promoted coeducation as an effective method of birth control. Our pioneering coeds did not fulfill Dr. Clarke's expectations, for the five who married gave birth to fourteen children.

The seven girls we honor today did not intend their special friendship to be cliquish and exclusive, for in the first year, they administered the oath of membership to at least sixteen other girls. They chose to share the bond of their friendship with others like themselves, who shared their interest in self-improvement and mutual support. Our founders were perceptive enough to realize that the world they were about to enter offered little opportunity and encouragement for women and that they must thus provide these affirmations of value for themselves. They would find strength in a community of women. The suffragist movement had given rise to the concept of sisterhood, and while our founders at no time in their lives expressed any interest in obtaining the vote, they surely understood the value of sisterhood.

Our seven founders left nothing to chance but were methodical (not a strange thing for Methodists to be!) in writing a simple but meaningful oath and an equally simple constitution and in their insistence that the constitution be read in full near the beginning of every meeting. They planned for the future of their sisterhood. We P.E.O.s continue to use phrases from their original oath in our statement of objects and aims; the constitution has grown in length and complexity as our sisterhood has grown, so that it would be unthinkable to read it at every meeting. Like the founders, we acknowledge our faith in God and open each meeting with a prayer.

Friendship and the encouragement of personal growth remain the nucleus of our sisterhood, as our founders intended they should. Is that not what we gather today to celebrate, the friendship of like-minded women that crosses chapter lines, even state and national lines? When we propose a woman for membership in our sisterhood, are we not seeking as our founders did to form a very special and long lasting bond with

one who is already our friend – and to share that friendship with our other sisters? And finally, do we not value the same qualities in each other that bound our founders together and prompted them to establish P.E.O. on that long-ago day in January, 1869?

So in keeping with our theme of the day, we tip our hats in gratitude to you Mary Allen, Alice Bird, Hattie Briggs, Alice Coffin, Franc Roads, Suela Pearson, and Ella Stewart, for your legacy to us.

Written and presented by Karen Sinclair, AJ  
Akron Reciprocity Founders' Day Luncheon, 1987