THE WORLD OF OUR FOUNDERS

A Tribute to the Seven Founders of the P.E.O. Sisterhood, presented on April 11, 1987, Cleveland Reciprocity Founders' Day.

Narrator: The story of P.E.O. is a familiar one to most of us: seven young college women, the youngest but 17 years of age, formalized their bonds of friendship and shared ideals with the founding of their own society. This took place, we know, on the college campus of Iowa Wesleyan, during a wintry January afternoon, over 137 years ago.

The birthplace of P.E.O., Mount Pleasant, Iowa, was a cultural center for the sturdy pioneers who settled that part of the Midwest. Firmly grounded in the values of education, religion, and family, our founders responded to that heritage and to that environment.

But that is not all. A vast amount of P.E.O. lore has flowed from the pen of founder Alice Bird, and she stressed the special significance of the historic era associated with our founding.

> "If there is any virtue in the founding of P.E.O., it is not on account of the founders, for we were all ordinary girls, but on account of the time of founding. It was the age of vision and reconstruction – not only along national lines, but reconstruction of thought, minds, souls."

What then was the world of these not quite "ordinary girls" – our founders? To share the rich panorama of the era in which the seven grew to maturity, indulge your imagination and move back with us in time. Share in our portrayal of life in 1869. Like Shakespeare, believe that "All the world's a stage," as we recreate the setting for that historic period. For, as Alice Bird exclaimed, the time was right for our founding.

I. News of the Day

(Part I cast enters)

Narrator: The Midwest had experienced scarcely a generation of settlement following a great surge of expansion. The massive upheaval of the Civil War, with Lee surrendering at Appomattox just four years previous, had accelerated change. The Republican National Convention gathered in 1868 in a bustling new cattle town, Chicago, and nominated the popular General Grant on the first ballot. In the same year, a treaty brought an end to the First Sioux Indian War, and there was an earthquake in San Francisco. Memorial Day was first observed when the Commander of the Grand Army of the Republic asked that flowers be strewn on the graves of comrades who died during the late rebellion. And the purchase of Alaska was still bitterly attacked.

We look in on a family scene in the year we commemorate, 1869.

(*Grandmother and grandfather sit around lamp table, he reading newspaper, she doing embroidery)*

Grandfather: I see they've opened the Suez Canal in Egypt finally. An amazing feat. Well, we just drove the golden spike in our transcontinental railroad – I expect that was just about as big a job. *(Reads silently for a moment*) Hmmm..The last survivor of the Revolutionary War died – 109 years old. The passing of an era.

Grandmother: Yes, the world is certainly changing. Did you read about Julia Ward Howe addressing that new national Woman's Suffrage Association? They're meeting in Cleveland, I believe. I wonder if we'll live to see a constitutional amendment allowing the female vote?

Grandfather: I'm not so sure it makes much sense. Of course, our granddaughter has learned to think. She's not your average girl, mind you. Still, if more and more young women get the same education as the boys, they may rightly feel it's their privilege.

Grandmother: After all, Queen Victoria has ruled an empire for 33 years. Surely a woman ought to be able to cast a ballot.

Grandfather: Maybe so,- maybe so. Ah, here's an item; the editor of the *NY Herald* is sending Henry Stanley, - he's that explorer and newspaperman - to look for a missionary fellow from Scotland, David Livingstone. It seems he's lost somewhere in Africa. I expect we'll be hearing more about that trip!

Narrator: And so a quiet evening is spent by the light of the oil lamp. The household, if budget permitted, might have subscribed to the *Saturday Evening Post*, or *Atlantic Monthly*. Of particular interest to women were *Peterson's Magazine* and *The Ladies Repository*. Later, the arrival of *St. Nicholas*, the children's magazine, came to be an important event in many families.

(*Part 1 cast exit during closing paragraph.)*

II. Keeping House

(Part II cast enter during opening paragraphs)

Narrator: Early Monday morning, and the laundry must be out on the line. Housekeeping was laborious, especially in winter when the grime of coal dust and ashes was a constant challenge. Streets were unpaved, window screens were not to appear until 1870, and most women continued to pump or haul water. The Victorian parlor was crowded with heavily carved furniture, brocade draperies, and Oriental carpeting. Henry Ward Beecher's wife, Eunice preached the gospel of good housekeeping: Cleanliness is next to godliness, and anything worth doing is worth doing well. Most middle-class families did have much-needed household help, in the Midwest generally referred to as the "hired girl."

Child-rearing commonly fell on the shoulders of the mother, for as father ventured out into a harsh world, women and children were to be sheltered at home. Advice books on raising children proliferated, but their emphasis on physical care, manners and salvation gave little heed to everyday problems of management. The late Victorian mother was told simply that hers was an exalted mission. In many ways, it was a Golden Age for children, and small town family life provided a joyous freedom with an anchor and a deep sense of belonging.

We pause in a wainscoted kitchen where a homemaker is discussing plans for the day with her daughter, a young woman just finishing college studies.

(*Mother is carrying a filled laundry basket, while daughter is peeling apples at a kitchen table.)*

Mother: What a busy day! *(Mother sets basket down and sits on nearby chair.)* Betsy was up extra early to scrape and boil the laundry soap, - I see she has the flat irons heating on the stove, but I don't know how on earth she'll get to the extra ironing – father has several white shirts to be done up, and the linen collar and cuffs for my wool dress take so much time.

Daughter: You did take to that new pattern I saw in *Gody's Lady's Book* – all those pleats! But you look so handsome with the pretty trim.

Mother: You're a sweet daughter to say that. Now remember, when your friends come, Father will be in his study working on his sermon. *(Rising from chair)* Goodness, there is a bit to do yet this morning!

Daughter: We'll get it all done, Mother. I'll start the bread-making after the apple pies are in the oven – the girls aren't coming until after one and we're so happy that we can get together here – they all think you're marvelous to have us!

(Part II cast exits during closing paragraph)

Narrator: Woman's work is never done" was an axiom for the times. In a world without a telephone, cookbook, phonograph, diphtheria vaccination, or refrigeration, women were responsible for the smooth and orderly running of a home. Wonderful new inventions, such as the vacuum cleaner and typewriter, even Campbell's tomato soup, were first seen in the year 1869; but most people still did things "the old-fashioned way."

III. "True Womanhood"

(Part III cast enter during opening paragraphs)

Narrator: The phrase "true womanhood" is found repeatedly in writings describing woman's role during the 19th century, when it was rare for a married woman to work outside the home except in desperate economic situations. Nursing and teaching were

among the few professions considered suitable for those whose circumstances required that they be self-supporting.

The majority of women continued to work hard within their homes, but those with a measure of leisure began to form associations with a variety of benevolent purposes beyond their backyards. They were laying the groundwork for social change.

We observe two Victorian ladies as they share afternoon tea in the parlor.

(Two matronly women sit on either side of the lamp table, with Mrs. Allen pouring from a porcelain tea service arranged on a nearby tea cart.)

Mrs. Bertram: Thank you, just lemon, please. I do need your suggestions, Agnes, for the literary society next year. By the way, I hear that your daughter has joined the one at the college.

Mrs. Allen: Oh, yes, she enjoys it very much. It is so important for our girls to have opportunities for friendship and to cultivate their thinking. Keeping house and raising children come soon enough!

Mrs. Bertram: We don't like to think about it, naturally, but some young women may never marry. With an education they can become teachers – although I was brought up to believe that a proper young lady should be supported by her family….(*Thoughtfully)* Of course, some may become widowed, and left with a family to take care of.

Mrs. Allen: Oh, I know. Our daughter has a good friend whose father died young, ..a minister, he was, and her mother's been taking in boarders for years.

Mrs. Bertram: It's true; we never know what the good Lord has in store.

Mrs. Allen: Well I, for one, am grateful these young college girls are prepared to use their minds. And we can be happy that we have the Tuesday Literary Society here in town. It does fall on the women to maintain the cultural level of a community, and of course, uphold its moral standards. By the way, have you talked with Mrs. Stanhope about the box social we're planning for the Library Fund?

Mrs. Bertram: Yes, the invitations have been delivered. I know you would agree that Mrs. Whittier should be included.

Mrs. Allen: My, yes! Mr. Whittier firmly supports our efforts in education. They're a wonderful addition to our community!

Mrs. Bertram: Oh, indeed they are. She left her calling card yesterday when I was visiting my neighbor's mother, Mrs. Mott.

Mrs. Allen: Adeline, dear, please have a molasses wafer. they're fresh-baked. How is old Mrs. Mott doing? I hear she's been ailing for a long time…such a trial for the family….bedfast and all.

Mrs. Bertram: I know the doctor is prescribing laudanum. Personally, I think Mrs. Mott's problems started when she tried to put up all those jars of fruit last fall after her apoplexy attack. Too, poor ventilation leads to a lot of illness – I know she disliked having the bedroom windows open.

Mrs. Allen: The dear soul. Well, back to Tuesday Literary ….my suggestion would be to study the American poets this year. Though, please…not Walt Whitman…he is so..ahem..indelicate.

Mrs. Bertram: Oh, I agree….I agree. *(Rising)* Well, I really must be going. It has been most pleasant*….(Voices subside as Mrs. Allen escorts her guest offstage during closing paragraphs.)*

Narrator: We see that "true womanhood" in the 19th century translated into a variety of expectations. Care of the sick remained within the home, for hospitals were charitable institutions populated by the destitute. Nursing of a loved one often became an enormous burden in time, effort, and emotion. Besides running the household, making social calls, teaching Sunday School, and performing acts of charity, women were further expected to make their homes into religious and cultural havens.

However slowly concepts of role and place evolve, women dedicated to home and family were broadening their vision to include self-improvement, socializing and community service. With changing definitions of womanhood, the time was ripe for our founding.

IV. To Educate a Daughter

(Part IV cast enters during opening paragraphs)

Narrator: In the Victorian era, skepticism lingered about the worth of educating women. For centuries, objections centered on their educability, and later, on the issue of their health. A Harvard medical school professor insisted that the female brain and body could not survive book learning. His stand was vigorously attacked, and the development of women's colleges accelerated in the post-Civil War period. Co-education was still highly suspect, but in many communities economy necessitated joint instruction. Small religious colleges continued to take root, especially in the Midwest. Significantly, Iowa Wesleyan had been founded over a quarter century earlier, and Mt. Pleasant was considered the "Athens of Iowa."

But in that decade, less than 1% of college age women were students in higher education. Clearly these few defied convention. Nothing was more crucial than family support, and the decision to educate a daughter was a major one for most families.

We share in the conversation of one such family group.

(Mother and Maiden Aunt are preparing the table for supper, laying a linen cloth and placing dishes)

Mother: It doesn't seem possible, Charlotte, that our Mary will be completing the classical course this spring. Father and I can be very proud of her when she gives her oration at commencement.

Aunt: Mary has worked hard, and it doesn't seem to have done her harm. Though many folks still wonder what good it can do for a female to study Astronomy and Tacitus, or Botany or Political Economy for that matter.

(The two women seat themselves on either side of the table after completing the table setting)

Mother: Her professors tell her that it is important to develop a critical mind, And her friend Charles says a minister's wife who is educated can be "a great helpmeet*"… (leaning across the table.)* I think he's decided to be a preacher.

Aunt: Charles has been escorting Mary to a lot of socials lately…do you think they may have plans? By the way, Mary better watch her step, or she'll scare the boys away. You know, she's calling her commencement oration "Fervor and Firmness!"

Mother: Don't worry about your niece. Her ambitions are within the bounds of womanhood. I wish more young ladies could develop her traits of independence and strength.

Aunt: Though don't forget, Clara, that college costs a lot of money. I hear the University of Illinois charges $20 for tuition alone!

Mother: I'm glad we could educate Mary near our home.

Aunt: It's still impossible for most families. While some folks do consider educating a daughter important, the problem is the average family income last year was only $680.00. I read that in the Chicago Daily Tribune yesterday.

Mother: George and I are fortunate to have the means. And it has been wonderful to see her and her friends sharing and growing together. Whether they're making plans for their new society, or preparing Welsh rarebit or a tea party…those rituals of female friendship are very important ..I envy them and their opportunities.

(Young women's voices and giggles heard offstage)

Mary: Oh, it's beautiful Suela! I'm making mine in lavender for the Exhibition.

Suela: Oh, that suits you, Mary. I'm glad we're not wearing plain old black silk. (*laughter*) Shall I show your mother my new gown?

Mary: Oh yes, do!

Suela: (*enters, with a playful curtsy*). We wanted you to see the dress I'm wearing at Ruthean literary. *(twirls around in her beribboned gown of pastel muslin or lace)*

Mother: You look lovely, Suela.

Aunt: Sing your musical number for us…just a little preview!

Suela: (*with a shrug and a smile, sings "Beautiful Dreamer.")*

(Suela curtsies at conclusion while Mother and Aunt applause; all exit during following paragraph)

Narrator: And so it was in the year 1869, against this backdrop of history and human events, seven exuberant and talented young women founded our P.E.O. The organization flourished, as thousands of women today enjoy a community of shared purpose, tradition, and feeling.

On Founders' Day we remember. Our P.E.O. educational projects symbolize the trials of Ella Stewart, whose widowed mother struggled to help her continue in college. General improvement in the advancement of women was held as a lifelong challenge by Franc Roads Elliott, who counted as her friends Susan B. Anthony and Frances Willard. Through the exercise of her talent for writing, Alice Bird Babb has perpetuated much of our P.E.O. history. To seek growth in knowledge, and transmit that to the young, was Alice Coffin's mission as a teacher. Mary Allen Stafford's symmetry of character helped to shape early P.E.O. laws and activities, and she shared fifty-six years as "helpmeet" to her husband, a Methodist minister and, later, president of Iowa Wesleyan. Although but a young woman of twenty-seven when she died, Hattie Briggs Bousquet surely radiated "all light possible" as she taught music and art before her brief marriage. And a loving concern for each sister, the joys of friendship and loyalty, a happy regard for hospitality – these were expressed in lovely Suela Pearson Penfield.

In understanding the world of our founders, where on the stage of history each played her part with grace and eloquence, we more truly honor their memory.

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