

BLEST BE THE TIE THAT BINDS

“A Tribute to the P.E.O. Founders”

The presentation was staged with seven members in a row who took turns with two microphones, which were passed. A large display board on an easel featured enlarged pictures of the founders mounted on gold stars surrounding the words “The Tie That Binds” connected by a ribbon. Also mounted was a P.E.O. star at the center top.

Alice Coffin: Good afternoon. My name is Alice Virginia Coffin. With me are Mary Allen, Ella Stewart, Alice Bird, Hattie Briggs, Suella Pearson, and Franc Roads. We bring you greetings from Chapter Eternal. At a recent meeting, we were granted to break the barrier between time and eternity so that we could join you today to reflect, reminisce, and celebrate (years) of the formation of our dear P.E.O. The seven of us were attending Iowa Wesleyan University at Mount Pleasant, Iowa, in the late 1860s and had formed a special bond of friendship. College was a unique and joyous experience to us. Each of us was well aware of how fortunate we were to be receiving an education. Before we continue, will the rest of you please introduce yourselves to our sisters here?

Mary Allen: Hello! I am Mary Allen. I was born in Mt. Pleasant on December 30, 1848. Tall and slender, I’ve been told that I am graceful, poised and dignified. I entered Iowa Wesleyan in 1865, choosing the classical course and four years later, received my A.B. degree. I love the country dance and was popular with the student body. In 1871, I married Charles Stafford, who graduated from Iowa Wesleyan and was ordained to the Methodist ministry. He was president of Iowa Wesleyan from 1891 to 1899. We had four children.

Ella Stewart: I am Ella Lovina Stewart. I was born in Pittsburg, Iowa, on May 8, 1848, and one of six children. My father, who was a Methodist minister died in 1864, so my mother started a boarding house for students. Tuition was only \$10 a semester at that time, so I still entered Iowa Wesleyan in 1865, specializing in music, but did not graduate as I was needed at home to help the family. Even so, my friends always included me in their activities. They refer to me as vivacious with a keen wit and quick repartee. I continued my studies by taking courses over time. I love to sing and play the piano and for many years I gave piano lessons, plus taught at the Iowa Boys’ Industrial School in Eldora. Instead of marrying, I dedicated my life to others, involving myself with social work.

Alice Bird: I am Mary Alice Bird, but prefer to be called Alice. I was born in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, on May 8, 1850. My father was the first physician in Henry County, Iowa. I entered Iowa Wesleyan in 1865, at the age of 15, studying the classical course, graduating in 1869 with an A.B. degree. Called an intellectual, I am very literary – an avid reader as well as writer – and am proficient in Latin and Greek. I also enjoy singing and was a member of the University Quartet. But daring adventure also appeals to me. For four years I taught Latin, Greek, and elocution at Iowa Wesleyan. I married Washington Irving Babb, a judge, in 1873. We had four children and two of our sons graduated from Iowa Wesleyan.

Hattie Briggs: I am Harriett Briggs, but everyone calls me Hattie. I was born in Troy, Iowa, on October 10, 1849. My father also was a minister. I am rather tall, a modest and retiring person and considered calm, serene and useful. In 1865, I entered the university in the scientific course and received my B.S. degree in 1869. After graduating, I taught music and art in several towns in Iowa. In 1873, I married Henri Bousquet (*pronounced Bus-kef*). My father performed the ceremony. We had two sons.

Suela Pearson: I am Marie Suela Pearson. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on August 24, 1851. My father was a physician. I go by my second name, which is pronounced with a long "e". Our family moved to Mt. Pleasant in 1860. My friends say that I am charming, gay, and gracious. I entered Iowa Wesleyan just after my 15th birthday, enrolling in the comprehensive classical course, and graduated with my A.B. degree in 1871. Soon after, our family moved to Washington, D.C., where I had more educational and cultural advantages. In 1876, I married Frank Harold Penfield of Cleveland, Ohio, where we settled. I regretted that distance prevented my attending P.E.O. meetings, but my daughter Rose was a charter member of Chapter AH in Cleveland.

Franc Roads: I am Frances Elizabeth Roads. Everyone calls me Franc. I was born February 10, 1852, at Marshall, Iowa, a town near Mt. Pleasant. I am considered energetic, and artistic, to possess a sense of humor, and be a progressive thinker. I love both contemporary and classical literature. The youngest of my friends, I entered Iowa Wesleyan in 1866 at the age of 14 in the scientific course and graduated three years later with my B.S. degree. Most of my life I practiced art as a profession. I continued my studies at a number of schools including the Rookwood Potteries in Cincinnati, the Chicago Art Institute, and in Europe. I married Simon Charles Elliott in 1872 living in Lincoln, Nebraska, where we had two children. I became quite a crusader for the advancement of women, working closely with Susan B. Anthony, Julia Ward Howe, and Frances Willard.

Alice Coffin: And I was born in Louisville, Kentucky on March 29, 1848. We also lived in Indiana and then Iowa. My mother died when I was nine. They say that I have a good sense of humor, am stately, dignified and personable. I love to dance, which was one reason I changed from the Methodist to the Episcopal Church, since it permits dancing, which I love. I entered Iowa Wesleyan in 1865, graduating with a B.S. degree in 1869. I was engaged to Will Pearson, Suela's brother, but later broke the engagement. Even though there were other offers of marriage, I did not accept them. I devoted my life to teaching where I was deeply conscious of the needs of my students. Mary, would you like to remind everyone how P.E.O. came about?

Mary Allen: Certainly Allie. With the passing of each year while in college, our friendship deepened and we wanted it to be a lasting thing. Our friendship stood the test when a small chapter of I.C.Sorosis (the first women's fraternity, which later became Pi Beta Phi) was organized in Mount Pleasant in December, 1868. Not all of us were asked to join and those who were would not join without the others. As a result, it was Hattie who said, "Let's have a society of our own." (*Look at Hattie*)

Ella Stewart: Active plans for organization began to emerge on the morning of January 21, 1869, as Hattie and Franc sat together on the stile at the southeast corner of the campus. They were gravely discussing the fraternity system in general, and more specifically, their own responsibility for organizational life of the campus. They found the rest of us and we made hasty plans to organize our society that very day. Allie Bird composed our oath of allegiance, and pledge of secrecy which was only 35 words. (*Look at Alice Bird*).

Alice Bird: It was an honor, Ella. The organization of P.E.O. took place in the music room on the second floor of Main Hall. We recognized the need for some kind of ceremony. We borrowed the Bible from the chapel. "There we stood with the old college Bible on the table, old-fashioned girls, old-fashioned Bible, ready, anxious to subscribe to the old-fashioned principles which dignify our order. Ella read the oath first to me and then I read it in turn to each of the other six. This was our initiation."

Hattie Briggs: As members went out into new communities, permission was granted to organize new chapters. That is how Chapter C came into being at Jacksonville Female Academy in Jacksonville, Illinois. So continued the alphabetical designations in chronological order of organization until about 1890 when growth was such that it became necessary for each state to have its own alphabetical sequence, to include also the name of the state. By 1893, there were 67 chapters in ten states. The magic we originally felt had caught on far beyond our wildest dreams.

Suella Pearson: Although education and social concerns were the focal points of the P.E.O.s, we also had parties including both elegant and casual affairs. I remember our first elegant party in 1870. We called it "Siderial Soiree" (Latin relating to "stars" and French for "evening party"). Since it took 27 yards of material to make a dress, we made our dresses out of "tarleton", a cheesecloth type netting, which was less expensive than most materials – only \$.75 a yard. Although the dresses were from the same patterns, each of us chose a different color. The dresses were worn over a hoop, crinoline and petticoats. We sent invitations to more than 100 guests with our gold stars imprinted on them. Each girl was taxed 15 cents for pay for the invitations.

Franc Roads: The party began at 7:30 pm and ended at midnight. Mary Allen read an essay on the "Beauties of Nature" and I read one on "The Emancipation of Women." Hattie and Ella played an instrumental duet. Then Allie Coffin and Ella sang one of their famous duets "In the Starlight." Other parties included a Calico Party on valentine's Day of 1872 and a Strawberry Party in June of 1880. It was a success even though oranges had to be substituted for strawberries which were out of season. Plus, we had such events as picnics, croquet parties, taffy pulls and sleigh rides. This socializing brought us closer together. Those were the days!

Alice Coffin: This reminiscing has been wonderful, but our departure is at hand. Before we go, we would like to share some final thoughts with you. Mary?

Mary Allen: “I am not extravagant enough to claim for the founders the credit for what P.E.O. has become. It is honor and credit enough that we were so wisely and fortunately guided that we were able to lay a foundation broad and strong enough that others, following after us, could build such a structure as P.E.O. has become. Our one absorbing, and dominating purpose was to perpetuate a most beautiful and unselfish schoolgirl friendship that would continue after schooldays were over...Our love and friendship bound us together in ties so strong that I am confident that any one of the seven would have sacrificed, and, if need be, suffered, for any one of the seven in case of need. I am possibly giving you in this the key to what has made our Sisterhood what it is today.”

Ella Stewart: It seems so strange when I think of our birthday and how we seven so unknowingly lighted so great a light. May we but feel that God’s hand was surely in it and He has helped us to keep the star shining...where can we find a better chance to use our influence for good than P.E.O. association?”

Alice Bird: “I have feared sometime, from our wonderful growth, that the Sisterhood might become a club, and that I would greatly deplore...Continue to read over and over our objects and aims, learn to be small and modest, rather than haughty and great, and above all – be kind to all.”

Hattie Briggs: Following our initiation, we chose P.E.O. as the name of our society. Alice Coffin suggested that we choose the star as our emblem, symbolizing unity. She said that it has been an inspiration, shedding radiance and light through the centuries. Alice Bird agreed to prepare a constitution and bring it to the next meeting, which was set for the following Saturday evening, January 23, 1869, at Mary’s home.

Suella Pearson: The first pins were made by the Crane Jewelry Store at Mt. Pleasant. Gold and black enamel, they were flat and larger than those made a few years later. They cost \$2 each and were marked with our name, date, and chapter, which we designated as A. We wanted a dramatic and dignified way to announce P.E.O. to the campus and call attention to our new star pins.

Franc Roads: Yes, and since it was customary to wear aprons to class, Suella, we chose to make them and fasten the pins to them. Aprons were extremely fashionable in the 1860s and were more decorative than protective. My mother designed the aprons made of white calico dotted with tiny black stars, and helped each of use to make ours. Do you remember the excitement when the seven of us marched into the chapel wearing our new aprons, the bib of which was pinned on the left shoulder with the beautiful new stars? All eyes were on us!

Alice Coffin: And how the students tried to guess what P.E.O. meant! We still keep people guessing! (*Knowing look at audience*) Alice Bird served as our first president for 3 years. We had no gavel. We used a large wooden crochet hook to bring meetings to order. Voting was done by slips of paper, pro or con. We had much business to

conduct, but we still had time for literary programs. Roll call was answered with quotations for a long time.

Mary Allen: To go to a P.E.O. meeting was not a simple process, was it Allie? The fact that a meeting was in session was a deep dark secret and we would go by roundabout ways to throw curious observers off the track. University activities were governed by strict disciplinary rules at that time. Even the hour for societies was carefully arranged – young women must meet in the afternoon and men’s societies were held in the evening. Young ladies and gentlemen even had to obtain permission to walk or talk together!

Ella Stewart: We soon realized that we wanted to be more than just a social club or college sorority – but a group with greater meaning. What we had begun was too precious not to be shared, and we envisioned a permanent society that would perpetuate itself. Although our friend Carrie Woolsen had gone to another school the previous year, we invited her to membership and arranged to initiate her as a member when she came home for spring break.

Alice Bird: By the close of 1869, we had initiated 16 young women into the ranks of what was to be called Chapter A. We had to use artful means to get some of the girls from Belden Seminary in Mt. Pleasant out of the dormitory for initiation and similar furtive moves to get them back in after the ceremony. Other girls slipped away from a church social at Town Hall for their initiation. By the spring of 1871, the Seminary had its own chapter and so developed Chapter B.

Hattie Briggs: While the first work of P.E.O. was purely social, we have seen it become philanthropic with the eventual establishment of six funds and a college. In 1869, when I said “Why not have a society of our own, then we can stay together,” little did we know that P.E.O. would grow from seven to over 250,000 active members in more than 5,890 local chapters in the United States and Canada in 138 years. We meet in P.E.O. conventions and “the tie that binds is very strong – I am glad that P.E.O. stands for the so-called old-fashioned principle. We come back with renewed strength to the principles which strengthen and help life because she stands for these.”

Suella Pearson: “Looking over the yesterdays I can find no hour in which my heart has not turned to all in loyal devotion and a proud thrill of enthusiasm at the onward advancement of God’s starry dwellers. To each and all my good wishes; may your sojourn here be long and ever crowned with bright hopes fulfilled.”

Franc Roads: “Do not try to preserve precedents because of sentiment, for new times demand new needs. Evolution and growth mean life to organizations as well as individuals. Please remember that true loyalty to those gone before you in P.E.O., to us your founders, if you will, lie in improving the unfinished structure we bequeathed to you, for P.E.O. is only yet in its beginning.”

Alice Coffin: “May we always unconsciously attempt to raise the standards of those with whom we associate; may we strength the weak in purpose, lift the burden from a

troubled heart and may we always be stars among women in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.” And now, would everyone please stand, join hands and sign together “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” printed on your program. Good-bye and God Bless You!

BLEST BE THE TIE THAT BINDS

Blest be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love;
The fel-low-ship of kin-dred minds
is like to that a-bove

From sor-row, toil and pain,
and sin, we shall be free;
and per-fect love and friend-ship reign
through all e-ter-ni-ty.

Composed by Ann Moore, AN
From Sources Including
Out of the Heart and The P.E.O. RECORD

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