

**EXCERPTS FROM THEIR DIARIES**  
**FOUNDER'S DAY TRIBUTE**

*Diary excerpts from our seven founders regarding the beginning of P.E.O.*

Today, here and now, we honor our seven founders, who gave us P.E.O. as a symbol of their love and friendship for each other.

These girls were college students, attending Iowa Wesleyan in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa in 1869. They were unusual in their religious and pioneer heritage, for all of their families were deeply religious people who made Christian ethics part of their everyday lives. These sturdy people had come to this community, known as "The Athens of Iowa" during the wave of midwestern expansion and had brought to it a desire for culture and intellect. These girls shared a joy and awareness of their education as well as a realization of the changing status of women in the world.

The time was right for the creation of P.E.O. The industrial and mechanical revolutions, the Feminist Movement, western expansion, Civil War, the beginnings of the fraternity system, and acceptance of education for women all caused an impact on the minds of these seven women. Their response was a desire to form a society of their own.

Let us pretend to look over the shoulders of these seven girls as each wrote in her diary during these momentous days in early 1869.

**MARY ALLEN'S DIARY**

January 23, 1869

Dear Diary:

I must transcribe this entry hurriedly, but carefully. So much to do but I must ensure that my penmanship remains precise for future reminiscence. I believe that today was a notable occasion in the lives of my finest friends. Dearest college chums, Franc Roads, Hattie Briggs, Allie or Alice Bird, Ella Stewart, Suela Pearson and Alice Coffin have just left my humble home. We gathered tonight for our first P.E.O. Society meeting, and we are filled with the joy of a special closeness, the exhilaration of secrecy, the excitement of these revolutionary ideas.

Our giggles almost brought Mama as each described her efforts to avoid detection in coming to my home tonight. Each wandered our village streets, seemingly carefree and undirected, but calculated to mislead any curious eyes as to our destination. Our meetings must be kept secret! We want no unwelcome young men to ascertain the location of our damask-covered tables laden with choice refreshments, to overhear our proceedings, to discover our chosen goals.

Tonight we practiced our code, which we will use to write to one another, our secret handclasp, and our Call for Help sign, which will be to touch our star with the

right forefinger signaling “Lady in Distress.” Franc proposed that I would use that signal most frequently to be rescued from my frequent male companions. We shall see!

Now I must finish translating Virgil; then I will commence reading the new discourse by Mr. Charles Darwin. I have been called “Victorian,” a new term evidently meaning conservative, but I think I am really quite modern! I find Mr. Darwin’s theories on evolution stimulating, and I look forward to sharing these revelations with my friends.

Oh, my friends and our splendid new Society! We really are special girls and we have created so unique a Society.

### **ALICE BIRD’S DIARY**

Thursday, January 21, 1869

Dear Diary:

Such an important day in my college life. So much has happened; I hardly know where to begin.

Early this morning, as I prepared to enter Greek class, the “Triamese”, Hattie, Franc and Mary found me in the hall of Old Main and related their plan for organizing a secret society for the seven of us who are dearest to each other. They are so glad that I refused to join the I.C. Sorosis in December when that new student, Libbie and her sister, began a chapter with five of her friends. I just couldn’t, when some of my dearest friends were overlooked for invitation. We will have our own society, and I was charged with creating an oath. They tell me I am the most literary!

After College Quartette practice of “Hiawatha,” I wrapped myself in a shawl and went to the summer house near our Crooked Tree croquet ground where sounds of the children would not interfere with my great thoughts. There I composed our oath. These 35 words are our pledge of secrecy, and this afternoon when we seven girls met in the music room with the door locked, I was pleased that the girls said, “Just splendid.” They insisted that I be the first to take our vow, which Ella Stewart administered. Our Society will be named P.E.O. I have been honored to be our first president and am designated to prepare a constitution for our next meeting on Saturday. It is all so thrilling, and I feel such a oneness with each dear friend.

So much to do, I could hardly pay attention at the Literary Society meeting tonight. I shouldn’t have worn my brown silk; it makes my skin look yellow. But no mind! The lamp wicks were low and no one noticed as I performed my dramatization of Lady Macbeth from perfect memory. There was stark silence from first to final soliloquy.

Father has just returned from the doctor’s conference in Philadelphia, a hard trip by stage. He brought much news. Everyone is talking about Cabinet Member Seward’s foolish purchase of Alaskan territory. We have paid Russia two cents per acre and there is nothing in that land but glaciers and polar bears. Mrs. Lincoln has finally been

granted a pension of \$5,000. The Transcontinental Rail line is complete. Maybe now there won't be so many homesteaders streaming through Mt. Pleasant in their covered wagons. Thank goodness we know nothing of sod houses and windblown plains. The trains, Father heard, are frequently stopped for hours by herds of buffalo on the tracks, but Buffalo Bill Cody has killed more than 4,000 this year. Indians should be no more a problem out west. Father says General Custer has them under control.

An important day for me, I am sure! Maybe we have begun something larger than we realize. We must hold it close, not grow too fast or carelessly. We are living in an age of vision, a time of reconstruction not only along national lines after this dreadful Civil War, but reconstruction of thought. Lives are beginning to flower. Women are awakening to their capabilities, and I am so glad to be living at this time with the love and friendship of these dear six near-sisters.

### **HARRIET BRIGGS' DIARY**

Now you know Hattie suits me better!!

Dear Diary:

There is so much to do! I shouldn't stop to write. I feel driven to hurry with so many things to accomplish. I have a feeling of time running out!

"Let's have a Society of our own," I whispered to Franc this morning as we sat on the stile at the entrance of Iowa Wesleyan, our long skirts blowing. We shared the red cape (wish I weren't so tall) and watched for Mary to arrive so that we could share our idea. Then we had whispered conferences with Alice, Ella, Allie and Suela, all of whom are enthusiastic. The closet secrecy was pledged, and we proceeded to plan for our dramatic announcement to the student body. Franc has suggested marching into chapel some morning. Mary wants us to wear special aprons to call attention to the new star pins we shall wear. So much to do, so little time, I fear.

I need to help Father in his ministerial work and his position as trustee of the College. I must help Mother and the hired girl. There are my courses at school I must finish. I love science best. I never have enough time.

I have suggested the meaning for the letters of our Society's name. It was true inspiration. It will be the most solemn secret of our lives, never told to anyone, even husbands who no doubt will tease. I have the responsibility of being treasurer and will attempt to create a simple method of handling our monies.

I must close to put a tubful of clothes to soak before I finish the ironing and can then rest my head.

**ALICE COFFIN'S DIARY**

January 23, 1869

Dear Diary:

What responsibility my friends have given me! I am to be vice president of our new P.E.O. Society. I am indeed blessed with my group of good friends. What a remarkable Society we shall have.

It was such a solemn ceremony on Thursday, beautiful but simple. We seven agreed to meet in the second floor music room of Old Main following afternoon classes. With one of us on guard to assure we were not seen, the college Bible was carried from the Chapel on the third floor. The door was locked, the round table moved to the center of the room, our hoop skirts taking up the empty spaces between us as we stood around the table. Here each of us made her vow, and P.E.O. was born.

How I wish I could share this joyful event with my mother. As I was nine when she died, I can still hear her admonitions for me to curb my temper and to stay out of mischief. But, how I love to dance! Since dancing is taboo in Mother's church, I may have to join another. But I will try to be more sedate. It helps if I carry her Bible in the beige velvet case that was hers.

I am working hard to become a teacher since my friends say I am a born teacher whom girls will copy and boys secretly adore. Since I broke my engagement to Will Pearson, dear Suela's brother, I have decided I will never marry. I shall teach instead.

When I am with the other six, I feel surrounded by sunshine! I am glad that they approve of my choice of our Society's symbol, the star, although I don't believe they approve of my wearing it in my hair. But it looks pretty there. My hair is so long and golden.

**SUELA PEARSON'S DIARY**

February 1869

Dear Diary:

I have just returned from the Ruthean Literary Society. I sang rather nicely considering a certain special person was sitting in the first row. My selections were "Her Bright Smile Haunts Me Still" and "Leaf by Leaf the Roses Fall, Drop by Drop the Spring Runs Dry." He was not allowed to walk me home. These silly college rules about escorting young ladies by young gentlemen or even talking in the halls are a nuisance. But no mind! I have more beaux than I could ever want. I hear that I am called a flirt, a butterfly, but I am not. I just smile at the boys. I can understand, however, why Iowa Wesleyan is dubbed the "Match Factory."

Our P.E.O. society met this afternoon, secretly, of course, to practice our yell"  
"Who are – Who are – Who are we?"

We are – We are – We are the  
P.E.O. People! P.E.O. People.”

We talked about our rivalry with the I.C.s. The college president told us today we must give up our pins to be deposited in the vault for a while. We decided we just would not be able to find our pins! We will not wear them in sight for several days, but pin them on our underwaists, because we are pledged to wear them at all times. Glad our pins are not large as dinner plates as the I.C.'s are!

I am so proud that the girls took me into P.E.O. I am only a sophomore, but how I love them! I will try to be a serious member. I hope that our Society will endure for a long time, perhaps grow so that women of all ages, all positions in life can be members, chosen only for the worth and dignity of their character.

### **FRANCES ROADS' DIARY**

Now, you know me as Franc. Isn't that better?

Dear Diary:

I am such a crusader! With my pantaloons and bloomers, I can run from one cause to another and will, as long as I have breath, especially for the Feminist Movement, for liberation of women.

Inflation is bad. Everything is expensive and wages are low. Textile mill workers make \$2.00 for a ten-hour day. Of course, women and children make less. Susan B. Anthony is forming a Woman's Protective Association. I do admire her, as well as Frances Willard and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Worked again today on my study of causes of war. Our hearts flutter when we see the boys returning, though their handsome uniforms are a symbol of the war that I deplore. Women bear the great burden of war. We should have a voice in decisions. If we had the vote, war would be no more, along with saloons, cigars, and cuspidors. Perhaps P.E.O. could grow to be a force for peace. We must take in new members to carry on after we graduate, or maybe we can take P.E.O. with us and form new societies wherever we go to live.

The girls were here tonight. Mother helped us design aprons, and we cut them out for sewing. They are ruffled all around, of white percale with a design of a small black star. The left shoulders are high to display our stars, which were ordered by Mr. Harvey Crane from his jewelry store. We have heard the I.C.'s have plans to march into Chapel tomorrow wearing blue calico dresses. But, how late it is now. The girls stayed past midnight so that we could finish our aprons. We have such a special Society. I plan to work for greater things for P.E.O.! I would love to raise a fund to help girls go to college. Maybe found a college of our own. P.E.O. is just beginning. It must grow.

**ELLA STEWART'S DIARY**

Dear Diary:

I am so tired, but I must keep my book up to date. A sniff of my favorite scent of violets will help. I worked hard this evening, made butter (love using the mold with the acorns and oak leaf imprint), cleaned the lamp chimneys and stuffed the bed ticks full of straw for the new boarders. The cold comes right through tonight. Then Mother called me to help with my sick little brother. With the six of us children and the extra boarders, Mother needs me here more than ever. I wonder how much longer I can attend classes or if I will be able to graduate with my friends. I am glad that I can help Mother, but John Ruskin's Essays may have to wait until tomorrow night and my beloved Dickens until Saturday. I am told that there are crowds waiting to hear Dickens in Steinway Hall. Wish I could see him, but like the other six of us, I have never been more than fifty miles from Mt. Pleasant and probably never will. I am reconciled to spending my life with Mother and can hope to use my services for teaching in the Boy's' Industrial School. I have known love once and never will again!

I was with the girls at Franc's home until late last night sewing my special apron, then left for classes early this morning so that we six could meet in the small cloakroom just outside the chapel door. As the last stroke of the bell rang, we marched Indian file into chapel, ahead of the I.C.'s wearing their plain blue calico dresses. Each of us proudly wore her pretty white apron with the beautiful new star twinkling on her left shoulder. Wish that we could have seen the I.C.'s faces.

We lack many things to be a proper Society. We don't even have a gavel and use a large crochet hook. But we are working hard! I am pleased the girls accepted my suggestion for our colors. I feel sure our Society will endure for our lifetime. But I wonder if P.E.O. will die with us?

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We have come to the end of the diary entries, but let us remember our founders as they were then:

Girls with meek braids, soft, romantic curls,  
 Breast pins, silk mitts and little, funny, perching hats.  
 Hoops and petticoats and tight basques with breathless fits,  
 Just girls who carried reticules,  
 Whispered and giggled, flirted and broke rules,  
 Studied and worried, and shed tears.  
 One day had a vision of a Sisterhood  
 Beyond all friendship.

If we listen, we might hear them say:  
 Do you ever think about us?

Are you guided by our aims?  
Do you look back in remembrance?  
Do you ever say our names?

And so, to our Founders:

Across the years we reach our hands  
And holding yours we walk in memory  
And friendship ever stronger grows.  
We speak of you with love, behold the star glow  
That lights all our hearts.  
In buoyant life, you journey with us still  
Assured and proud that we your hopes fulfill;  
A challenge to us every day

*(Adapted from poems by Ruth C. Mitchell, Harried Batchelder, Leila P. King)*

And so, today we have remembered.

Compiled and written by Lu Ann Morgan, AR, Cincinnati