

**TRIBUTE TO THE FOUNDERS  
WE WEAR P.E.O. LIKE A SHAWL**

Cincinnati Reciprocity Founders' Day, March 2013

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*The speaker should wear a large shawl, but not simply around her shoulders and under her arms. I place mine around my shoulders, then bring one side up to the opposite shoulder and pin it through both layers & the shirt underneath, so that end falls in a fold over the end that hangs underneath. Some other "stylish" way is fine.*

As I thought about what to wear as I gave this presentation, my first reaction was to go to the costume box and get out my long, old fashioned skirt. Until I realized it is more appropriate for Little House on the Prairie than for the time period when our Founders were in school. They started college right after the civil war, which means they wore hoop skirts. Think *Gone with the Wind* and Mary Todd Lincoln.

We know they were still wearing this in 1869 because we have a quote from Alice Bird as she looked back on the fateful gathering: "Seven girls stood around the old fashioned table, on which lay the old fashioned Bible, the girls wearing the quaint 'after the war' style garments of strong good dress material with wide flowing sleeves, clean white collars with big breast pins, and our hoop skirts taking up the empty space between us as we stood around the table."

Well, I don't own a hoop skirt, but I decided this shawl was appropriate. A shawl is an article of clothing that our Founders wore and I think it is symbolic of our sisterhood. We wear the same P.E.O. our Founders did, but like this shawl, we wear it in an updated way.

During the next few minutes, rather than talking about our seven Founders individually, I would like to talk about them collectively and about the environment in which they lived.

P.E.O. was founded at Iowa Wesleyan College in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. From its earliest days, Mt. Pleasant was an educational and cultural center. Many families interested in education were drawn to the town, including the families of our Founders. Of the seven Founders, two were born in Mt. Pleasant, one in a smaller town close by, and the families of the other four moved to Mt. Pleasant because of the educational and cultural opportunities of the town. Suela Pearson's family "moved west" from Cleveland and stopped in Mt. Pleasant. Ella Stewart's father came to the town because it was a center of the Methodist Church.

So the Founders all knew each other growing up and went to school together at various times. They all lived at home during college.

Iowa Wesleyan started out as the Mt. Pleasant Collegiate Institute. It opened in 1846 with one building, which is still standing and now called Pioneer Hall. The Institute included elementary, high school, and college classes. Tuition was \$12 for elementary students, \$16 for high school students, and \$20 for college students! Classes were held on the first floor of the building.

Upstairs, on the second floor, there were two apartments. In one lived the Institute president. The other apartment was the home of the Rev. Isaac Stewart – father of Founder Ella. Ella's father was the presiding elder for the Mt. Pleasant District of the Methodist Church. (If you are a Methodist, he was the District Superintendent.) So not only was Ella a PK, her father was DS. The family moved there when she was one year old, so during her preschool and early elementary years, she lived upstairs over the Institute. Later in her elementary school years, her father went back to serving local parishes and the family moved away from Mt. Pleasant.

In 1853 the Institute got a new president whose goals were to 1) build a big, new fancy building and 2) transform the Institute into a real university granting baccalaureate degrees. This man knew how to get things done because three years later, in 1856, the renamed Iowa Wesleyan College granted its first B.A. degree – to a man. But the school was coed from the beginning and three years after that, in 1859, it awarded its first B.A. to a woman. So our Founders grew up in a town with a university granting degrees to women before the Civil War.

As we look at the college life of our Founders, some things were different, of course, but some things were very much the same.

Five of the seven Founders were freshman in 1865, the year after the Civil War. Three of them were 17 years old, one was 16 yrs old, and one of them was 15. Four of the five graduated in 1869 after spending four years in college, which is still the accepted pattern. However, it was barely the norm then, as now, as the other three girls show. One had to drop out for financial reason, as still happens. Ella Stewart's father died when she was 16. Her mother returned to Mt. Pleasant with five children and was pregnant with the sixth. She opened a boarding house and Ella, as the oldest daughter, helped her mother run it. Ella started college part time and dropped out after two years. However, she continued to be active in college events.

The other two Founders entered school the following year. One, Suela, was aged 15 and like many students today, took five years to graduate. The other, Franc Rhodes, was aged 14 and was a protégé. She completed college in three years and graduated with the other Founders in the class ahead of her, at age 17!

So the little group who founded P.E.O. consisted of five seniors, one junior, and one non-student, ages 17-21.

The school year then consisted of three semesters of three months each: fall, winter, and spring. The five Founders who were seniors all finished their college requirements winter semester, which was the end of March.

Transcripts exist for all six Founders who graduated. Three received B.A.s in the Classical Course, which included a predominance of classes in Greek and Latin, including Virgil, Homer, and Sophocles, plus History, English, and French. But they also had to take chemistry and a math class. The other three received B.S. degrees in the Scientific Course. They got out of most of the Greek and Latin, and no Virgil or Sophocles required. They took German and physics, trigonometry and surveying – which I can't imagine doing in a hoop skirt!

Chapel was an integral part of campus life back then. Service was held Monday – Friday mornings at 8:00 a.m. Seats were assigned and attendance was taken. (Chapel is where the new P.E.O.'s beat the rival I.C.s into the room to show off their aprons and star pins for the first time.)

I have often wondered why we ended up a community sisterhood rather than a college sorority. I think one clue lies in the life situation of those seven young women. Five of the seven were seniors when they founded P.E.O. on January 21 and were going to finish classes two months later, at the end of March.

The original officers were elected for six months. (*Don't all of you who are in your second year as president which you had known that in January!*) President was Alice Bird, Vice President was Alice Coffin, Secretary was Ella Stewart, and Treasurer was Hattie Briggs; three graduating seniors and one non-student.

The graduates all stayed in town after graduation and all stayed active in P.E.O. They were still attending meetings two years later in 1871 when Suela graduated. I think all this pointed to the future direction of our sisterhood.

From the beginning, the Founders saw P.E.O. as a larger organization than just their little group of seven friends. In the eight weeks between the founding on January 21 and the end of the school term at the end of March, eight other girls were initiated. In the following nine months, from April until the end of the year, an additional eight girls were initiated for a total of 16 initiations in 1869. During 1870 another 18 girls were initiated. This means they were initiating someone every three to four meetings. How about that for an initiation goal!

Their meetings were always opened with prayer, but the office of chaplain was not created for two and one half years. The first one was elected in September 1871. It was another ten years before the office of guard was created in 1881.

The opening Ode for the first fifty years was “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.” Throughout those fifty years, meetings were closed with “God Be With You Till We Meet Again.” You can tell that six of the seven Founders were Methodists. The lyrics to the current Opening Ode were adopted in 1921.

On that fateful Thursday, January 21, when the seven Founders, in their hoop skirts, met in the music room on the second floor of Old Main, four important decisions were made before the meeting ended: 1) the Society was named P.E.O.; 2) The star was chosen as the emblem; 3) Alice Bird was charged with writing a constitution before the next meeting; and 4) The next meeting was set for two days later – Saturday, January 23!

Alice, like students today, thought well under the pressure of a deadline. What she came up with, the original constitution and bylaws, were read at every meeting and part of every initiation. So get comfortable. I am going to read Alice's original constitution.

“Whereas, recognizing it to be the chief duty of every individual to cultivate her powers, physical, mental, moral and social to their fullest extent, we organize ourselves into a Secret Society, and adopt for our government the following constitution and by-laws.

Article 1<sup>st</sup>

Sec 1<sup>st</sup> The Society shall be known by the name of P.E.O.

Sec 2<sup>nd</sup> The badge of this Society shall be a golden star with P.E.O. in black enameled letters in the center

Article 2<sup>nd</sup>

Sec. 1<sup>st</sup> The object of this society shall be general improvement, which shall comprehend more especially

1<sup>st</sup> Improvement in charity toward and interest in each other as P.E.O.’s

2<sup>nd</sup> Improvement in our charity toward and interest in all with whom we associate

3<sup>rd</sup> Improvement in our manners at home and in society

4<sup>th</sup> Improvement in our minds by the pursuing of such books and pamphlets in and out of society as shall be proper for P.E.O.s

Article 3<sup>rd</sup>

Sec 1<sup>st</sup> It shall be the chief duty of each member to consider thoughtfully the full import of P.E.O.

This will include

1<sup>st</sup> a sincere regard for our influence in the community

2<sup>nd</sup> a careful consideration of feeling when speaking

3<sup>rd</sup> a determination to do all we can at all times and under all circumstances to care for each other in trouble, to sympathize in affliction, and to console in grief.

So Alice’s original constitution is also like this shawl. We still wear at every meeting, just as the Founders did. But we wear it in an updated way.