

P. E. O. Beginnings

On the sunny morning of January 21, 1869, Hattie Briggs and Franc Roads sat on a stile in the fence around the Iowa Wesleyan College campus and talked earnestly in hushed tones. A personal social problem was the subject of their conversation. Could some way be found to cement the bond of friendship that they had formed with a small group of prominent girls?

"Let's have a secret society of our own", said Hattie Briggs, to which her companion consented and they hurried off to tell a few special friends.

To five other girls they confided the plan. Alice Coffin suggested a meeting for that very afternoon. Alice Bird was directed to draft a constitution. Suela Pearson, Mary Allen, and Ella Stewart enthusiastically joined the group. And so after noon behind carefully locked doors in Old Main the seven girls met in deep secrecy to form the society to be known by the cryptic initials P. E. O. The meaning has remained a secret of the members.

At the time of the founding of P. E. O. there were very few associations for women. The Soldiers' Aid Societies which had flourished during

the Civil War had become obsolete before 1869. Though women were assuming leadership in social and political reform, people were not generally conscious of a feminist movement in America. And so perhaps it is significant that P. E. O. was founded at the beginning of the year in which the second volume of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* came off the press, the year that Frances Hodgson's first story was printed, the year the American Woman Suffrage Association was formed. The aims of the founders of P. E. O. reflected, perhaps vaguely, the trend of the times.

The seven founders of the society were not benign, elderly ladies, as present members might regard them, but typical, lively college girls. The organization they formed was in response to their own needs. Yet in the sincerity of their aspirations they unconsciously embodied the universal hopes of womankind, so that the modest college sisterhood spread beyond the campus and extended its cultural influence everywhere. In the character and personality of the seven Iowa Wesleyan co-eds there must have been some vital spark which was transmitted to the society they organized, for the spirit of their purpose has endowed each chapter and persisted through the years. Perhaps the diversity of talents represented by the original seven was prophetic of their success.

It was natural that Alice Bird (1850–1926), a senior, should be assigned the task of drafting the constitution for the proposed society. Well known in college for her literary skill, she continued to write all her life. She was an eager student who read avidly, and the characters in literature were no more confused or forgotten than her closest friends. The keenness of her wit and her clever descriptions made her a charming conversationalist. Perhaps her almost constant reading was the cause of her failing vision, for in her last years she saw but dimly. In this plight, however, her husband, Judge W. I. Babb, and her daughter Alice, fulfilled her need by reading to her.

While the author of the constitution and the first president of P. E. O. was distinguished for her literary ability, the first secretary possessed the equally important quality of being useful. Ella Stewart's life (1848–1895) was one of service given unsparingly. Her father, a minister, died when she was very young. After three years of college Ella had to quit to help her mother support the family, "as any good daughter would do". She was the only one of the founders who did not receive a college degree. In addition to helping her mother keep boarders she gave piano and painting lessons. Later she became a pioneer

in social service work through the influence of the Reverend Thomas E. Corkhill who fathered the movement for the reformation of juvenile offenders in Iowa. Ella Stewart worked with the boys in the Industrial School at Eldora for several years until her health failed, giving them a clear example of right living.

It was probably Suela Pearson (1851-1920) who instigated the first party called the "P. E. O. Siderial Soirée". At the elegant Brazelton House on that occasion witty Alice Bird and madonna-like Ella were centers of admiring groups, but sparkling, smiling, and dancing into everybody's heart was pretty Suela. The brown eyes, pink cheeks, soft curls, and winning ways of the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Clement Pearson of Mount Pleasant made her the queen of any festivity. After graduation in 1871 she studied music in the East and married W. A. Penfield of Cleveland.

Franc Roads (1852-1924) was the girl and woman of vision with a talent for achievement. A year after her graduation, in 1872, she married S. C. Elliott, son of the former president of the college (and their daughter married the son of the president of Nebraska University). Along some lines she did more for the advancement of women than any other P. E. O. founder. She taught art to university students in Lincoln, Nebraska; she



FRANC ROADS



HATTIE BRIGGS



ALICE COFFIN



ELLA STEWART

designed a model school room in Aurora, Illinois; she was a commissioner for Nebraska at the New Orleans world's fair; she actively opposed war; she traveled in France and Italy; she studied at Columbia, Stanford, and Chicago universities. Not a moment of Mrs. Elliott's life was dull. Her intellectual interests were exceeded only by her accomplishments.

The long and active career of Mrs. Elliott was in contrast to the short life of Hattie Briggs (1848-1877) who shared the original idea of organizing a society for women and was elected the first treasurer. Her sunny disposition introduced a note of joy in the chapter. After graduation in 1869 she studied science for a master's degree in 1872 and married Henry L. Bousquet in 1874. Though she wore the P. E. O. star only eight years, her radiant smile left a memory that grew stronger and sweeter.

The P. E. O. star that Hattie wore was designed by the artistic, beautiful Southern girl, Alice Virginia Coffin (1848-1888). Placed in the care of the college when her father went to war, she remained to graduate in 1869 and later took a Master of Science degree in preparation for teaching. Brilliant, well-poised, carefully gowned, and generous, she devoted her life to teaching other women's children with great kind-

ness and understanding in Chariton, Des Moines, and Newton.

Mary Allen (1848-1927) lived longest and was the most widely known of the P. E. O. founders. She was popular in college and active in religious work. Her marriage to Charles L. Stafford, soon after his graduation from Iowa Wesleyan in 1871, was the culmination of a college romance. Though she devoted herself to her home and the infinite duties of a Methodist preacher's wife, she continued to be a leader in P. E. O. affairs. She was the only founder to participate in the ceremonies of breaking ground and laying the cornerstone of the Memorial Library at Iowa Wesleyan.

Of these seven founders, at least five lived in Mount Pleasant. Five were seniors and one was a sophomore. The six who graduated also received master's degrees, which is a remarkable record for any seven college students. Six of the girls were Methodists; one was an Episcopalian. Five married and reared children. All were distinguished for founding one of the foremost women's organizations in the United States.

While P. E. O. is not now associated with colleges, it was originated by college girls and was in the beginning a strictly local society on the Iowa Wesleyan campus. Its purposes were much like

those of a modern sorority. The time and place of the meetings at the homes of various members were at first kept very secret. Their public activities were mainly social and literary in character.

The organization of P. E. O. was prompted by the formation of another secret society for girls at the college. Libbie Brook, who was one of the founders of I. C. Sorosis at Monmouth in 1867, started a chapter at Iowa Wesleyan. Some of the members proudly displayed their golden arrow pins at a fraternity party, much to the chagrin of the girls not invited to join. P. E. O. was organized the very next day, and for years the two groups were rivals, just as Greek-letter college groups are to this day. The members of each belonged to a different literary society, and the boys in the two fraternities had to be careful about dividing their attentions.

This rivalry was carried into public one day. The P. E. O. girls learned that the I. C. members were planning to attend chapel in a body dressed alike in blue calico. Not to be outdone, the P. E. O.'s hurriedly made white calico aprons, decorated with a black star and designed with a bib to be fastened on the left shoulder with the P. E. O. pin. Long before chapel time the P. E. O.'s crowded into a closet-like room used by the janitor, and just as the I. C.'s appeared farther

down the hall the P. E. O.'s stepped out and marched into chapel first.

At one time the rivalry became so strong that the principal of the Mount Pleasant Female Seminary, in which there were members of both societies, demanded that the pins be given to him for safekeeping until the girls could live together in peace. According to legend some of the girls could not find their pins. It was suspected that they wore them invisibly on their underwaists.

Eventually the I. C. Sorosis became the Pi Beta Phi sorority and the college chapter of P. E. O. left the campus to become a city organization. Today over many hearts the star and the arrow gleam side by side, and if the point of the arrow is a little sharper or the star a little more pointed because of this proximity "only the women with gray hair and who view the world through bifocal lenses can see it."

Nineteen initiates were taken into the newly formed P. E. O. society by the original seven in 1869. The first three to be elected were Ione Ambler of Mount Pleasant, Cassie Allen of Des Moines, and Emma Harbin of Keokuk. The others who joined in 1869, some after school opened in the fall, were Pauline Ambler, Cora Baxter, Belle Brooks, Laura Cleaver, Lulu Corkhill, Mattie Fell, Clara Gamage, Emma Kaufman, Ella

Kilpatrick, Lizzie Ogilvie, Dora Shaw, Mary Smith, Anna Taylor, Georgia Tuttle, Alice Wilson, and Carrie Woolson.

It was not until five years later that another chapter of P. E. O. was established on December 4, 1874, in Bloomfield. Six years later, on September 12, 1880, a chapter was started at Fairfield. In the following year Centerville had a chapter, and soon afterward chapters were founded in Iowa City, Moulton, Ottumwa, Albia, and Keosauqua. There are now over 2100 chapters in forty-four States, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and Canada. The total membership is over 72,000.

Chapter A, designating the group at Mount Pleasant, was in a sense the governing body for thirteen years. Meanwhile, the desire to federate the separate chapters and provide a more democratic government had been growing. A preliminary meeting of two delegates from each of the five P. E. O. societies was held at Bloomfield on November 1 and 2, 1882, and in October of the following year at Fairfield a governing body called the Grand Chapter with general legislative and judicial powers of the sisterhood was established. Delegates came from Mount Pleasant, Bloomfield, Burlington, Iowa City, Centerville, Fairfield, and Jacksonville, Illinois. The first

president of the Grand Chapter was Mary Berry of Centerville.

Eventually State Grand Chapters were formed and the name of the general organization was changed to Supreme Chapter. Nebraska formed the first State chapter in 1890 at a meeting in Omaha. The second State chapter was established in Iowa in 1893. There are now twenty-nine State chapters as well as a province chapter in British Columbia and a high chapter in the District of Columbia.

In the beginning of the organization of various groups the members exchanged letters about chapter activities. When the Grand Chapter was formed, it was decided to publish a P. E. O. magazine. Mrs. Effie Hoffman Rogers was elected editor-in-chief at a salary of forty dollars a month. The *P. E. O. Record* was published at Oskaloosa and the first issue came out in January, 1889. The salutatory stated: "We intend to give you sixteen pages, two columns per page of good reading matter, pure, clean, and helpful." Advertising rates were one inch for one year at four dollars, up to one page for one year at forty-five dollars. Light-weight, colored paper was used for the cover.

From 1891 to 1893 and again from 1897 to 1914 Miss Mary Osmond of Osceola was the

editor. At the time of her selection she was the owner and editor of the *Osceola Gazette*, and so most of the work of printing, binding, and mailing was done personally in her own shop. In 1893 the job of editing and publishing the *Record* was submitted to bids and Mrs. Siddie F. Richards, whose husband was a newspaper man in Waterloo, got the contract. But subscriptions and advertisements failed to provide enough revenue. At the suggestion of Mrs. Richards in 1895 the Supreme Chapter allocated twenty-five cents of the dues of each member to the magazine and had it sent to all P. E. O.'s. With the increased size of the magazine in later years, the subscription price has been increased but it still goes to all members.

In over a half century of publication the *Record* has had only four editors. When Miss Osmond retired in 1914, Mrs. Rogers, who had pioneered in establishing the magazine during the first two years, resumed the editorial duties. For four years during the tense period of the World War, until her death in February, 1918, she managed the "Official Organ of the Supreme Chapter" with calm assurance. Since then, nearly half the lifetime of the magazine, Mrs. Winona Evans Reeves has served continuously as the editor. It seems prophetic that she was initiated in the orig-

inal chapter at Mount Pleasant while a student at Iowa Wesleyan during the very year the *Record* was started.

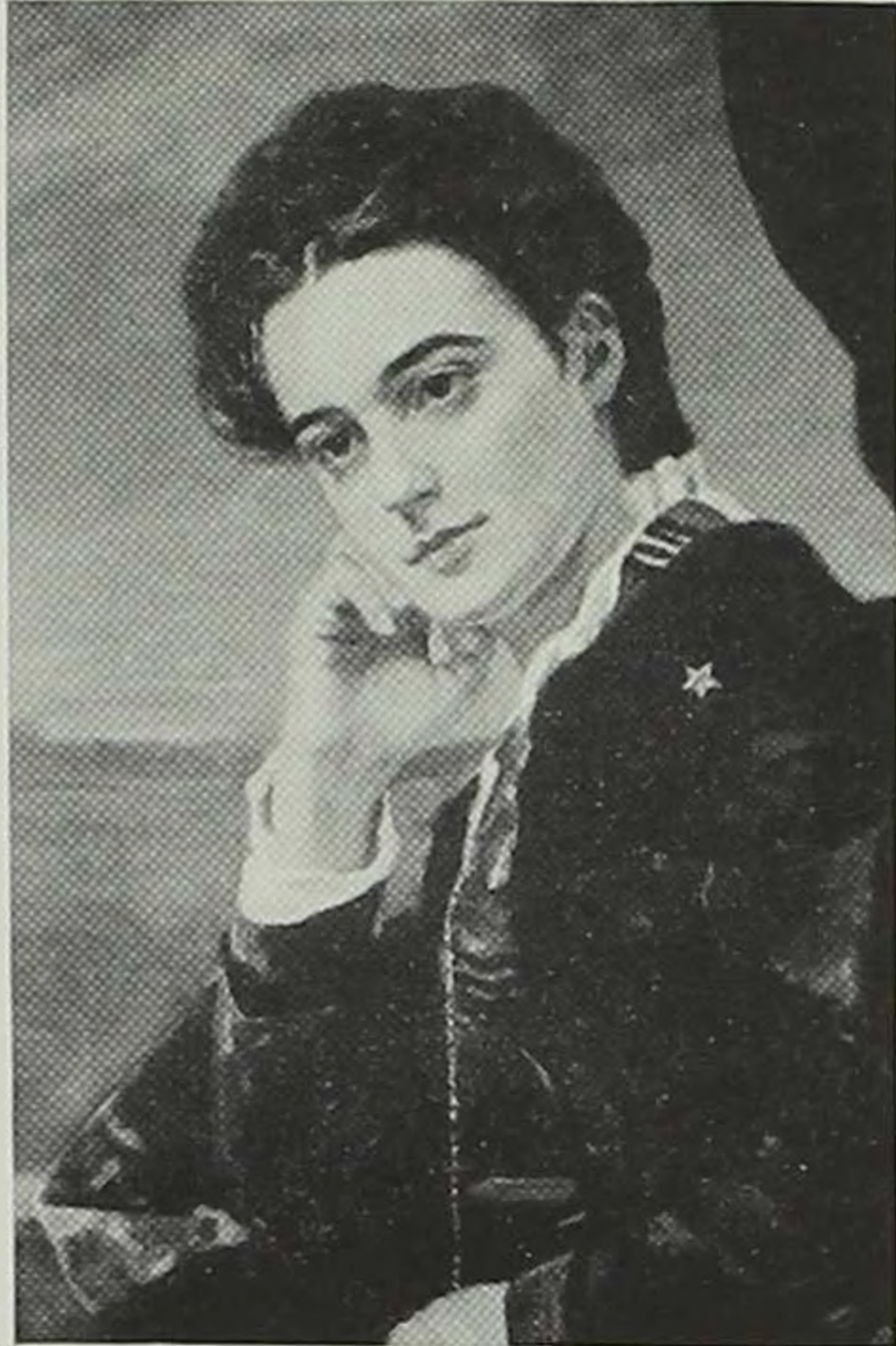
In 1907 the P. E. O. Educational Fund was established with approximately \$1000. The money was to be used for loans in assisting worthy young women to complete their higher education for the purpose of becoming self-supporting. The first loan was made in 1908 to a girl who attended Iowa State Teachers College at Cedar Falls. By 1919 the fund had grown to \$100,000. In August, 1941, it amounted to over \$829,500, and had been used to help 8127 girls.

As the Sisterhood grew in strength and influence, the contribution of the founders was not forgotten. From time to time the establishment of a memorial at Iowa Wesleyan was proposed. This idea finally crystallized in the adoption of a resolution by the Supreme Chapter Convention of 1925 that a memorial library, which would also house the P. E. O. executive offices, should be erected on the Iowa Wesleyan College campus at a cost of \$100,000. When the news was received at the college, the old chapel bell pealed out "good news" to the elated student body.

Ground was broken for the building in January, 1927, by Mrs. Mary Allen Stafford, the last of the P. E. O. founders. She was also present at



MARY ALLEN



ALICE BIRD



SUELA PEARSON

the ceremony of laying the cornerstone. On that occasion Mrs. Lulu Corkhill Williams, one of the first girls to be initiated, spoke on the origin, growth, and outlook of the sisterhood, and Charles L. Stafford, husband of Mary Allen and former president of the college, gave an address on "The Smaller College as an Educational Factor". On September 27, 1927, the library was dedicated and presented to the college. Meanwhile, Mrs. Stafford had died, which saddened the dedication ceremonies.

The second floor of the Memorial Library is beautifully furnished with gifts of various chapters and individuals. On the east wall hang the portraits of the founders, painted by Marion Dunlap Harper from photographs taken in 1869 by Joe Leisenring, a bachelor and popular beau in 1869. The portraits were unveiled on September 23, 1929, in the presence of many members who came by special train from Chicago following the national convention. The pictures of the founders used to illustrate this story of P. E. O. beginnings are photographic copies of these portraits.

The first discussion of a P. E. O. home occurred in 1896 at the Iowa State Convention, but no decisive action was taken until 1929 when Mrs. Sarah Porter Beckwith of Mount Pleasant gave her large home in that city. The house is a two-story

brick building (with a fireplace in each of its twenty rooms), surrounded by a lawn of two acres planted with lovely old trees. Opened on May 10, 1930, for elderly Iowa P. E. O.'s who need its shelter, the home has always been well filled. In 1933 a new wing was added. P. E. O. homes have also been built in California and Nebraska. To assist members who need financial aid, State welfare funds have been established.

From the beginning, P. E. O. has been college-minded. It began in a college. It gave a library to a college. In 1927 it accepted the gift of Cottey Junior College in Nevada, Missouri, from Mrs. Virginia Cottey Stockard who founded the school in 1884. Since then the sisterhood has developed the college, thus perpetuating the purposes of its founder and extending the services of the society in behalf of higher education for worthy girls.

Over seventy-two years ago Hattie Briggs and Franc Roads sat on a wooden stile on the campus of Iowa Wesleyan College furtively discussing a vision of permanent companionship. Little did they then realize how many women their plan would affect or how widely the influence of their dream would spread.

FRANCES E. JACK