

# GETTING TO KNOW YOU

by Jean Noe Clark  
P.E.O., Loveland, Colorado

## INTRODUCTION (Narrator)

"We would like to introduce you to our seven illustrious founders. No doubt you've heard many, many Founder's Day programs describing their good deeds and how our organization was founded. Today, we'd like to tell you a little more about the personalities of our founders - the things they liked and disliked; what they thought was funny; how they met their husbands; even, in some cases, how they died.

"They all were bright, forward-looking women who were active in their school and their communities. They were movers and shakers; they were strong and they were fun..... Sounds like a typical P.E.O. to me. But I don't want to just tell you about them, I'll let them do their own talking."

*Narrator turns to seven costumed "Founders" waiting at the door, ready to come in. As they come into the room, they go to the tables of guests and introduce themselves with their "Founder" names. After a few minutes (or seconds), the Narrator speaks.*

"Ladies, welcome to (name of town and state). We look forward to meeting each of you. If you'd take the podium now we'd like to hear what you have to tell us ....."

*The seven "Founders", dressed in clothing of the late 1800's, early 1900's [and especially with some "fancy" hats] bustle in, greeting people at the tables as they go. They assume their chairs on the podium or they stand on the stage or podium. Each "actress" takes on the personality styles [shy, quiet, haughty, lively, funny] mentioned in the biographies. They may take dramatic liberties with their mannerisms. The women tell about themselves in the following order:*

*Hattie Briggs*

*Alice Bird*

*Mary Allen*

*Suela Pearson (pronounced sue-eela)*

*Franc Roads*

*Alice Coffin*

*Ella Stewart*

## **Hattie Briggs**

"My name is Hattie Briggs. My family moved to Mt. Pleasant, Iowa in the early 1860s when my father, a Methodist minister, was sent there. I graduated from Iowa Wesleyan College in 1869 with my good friends Allie Bird, Franc Roads, Mary Allen and Alice Coffin. After I graduated, I lived in several other Iowa towns, where my parents accepted pastorates. I taught music and art and I loved working with children.

"Two of the most exciting days in my life happened in two different Januarys in Mount Pleasant. The first was January 21, 1869, when Franc Roads and I decided to start our own society -- what we all know today as P.E.O. And the second was on January 12 in 1873. My father preached his regular sermon that Sunday morning. Many parishioners noticed that the congregation was larger than usual. There were several visitors present and a bit of excitement in the air. At the end of the service, Henri L. Bousquet and I were married by my father. It was a complete surprise to the congregation!

"Henri and I lived in Knoxville, Iowa. We had two children, Cutts Duddack and Henri Lymon who died when he was six years old. I loved being a mother and homemaker but my life was cut very short. I died in 1877, at the age of 28.

"There were many pioneer families in Mount Pleasant who had come there because the town was a cultural center. In later years, it was even called the "Athens of Iowa"! In 1842, a Methodist school was established there, called the Mount Pleasant Literary Institute. It included elementary, high school and college education. In 1855, the name was changed to Iowa Wesleyan College and it became the first coeducational institution west of the Mississippi to grant degrees.

"Young women were encouraged to attend the college. All of my women friends had pioneer and religious backgrounds. Their families put great emphasis on education. We were part of a movement in the country that was beginning to encourage higher education for women.

"People say I have a sunny disposition and they compliment me on my light brown hair, big blue eyes and my smile. I've always been a happy girl but never more so than when Franc Roads and I got the idea of forming our own society. We were sitting at the southeast corner of the campus, talking about the fraternity system in general, when we both came to the same conclusion. "Let's have a society of our own," I said. And no more were the words out of my mouth than Franc said, "All right. Let's tell the others."

## **Alice Bird**

"Hattie and Franc quickly found the rest of us -- Mary Allen, Alice Coffin, Suela Pearson, Ella Stewart and me, Alice Bird. It wasn't hard, there were only two buildings on the campus! We made plans that day to organize our society. We got together in the music room after classes and decided that we needed some kind of ceremony, a bit of pageantry perhaps, or an oath of allegiance. It became my job to compose something suitable.

"The oath I wrote was short -- only 35 words -- and very simple. Ella Stewart read the oath first to me, then I read it in turn to each of the others. I want to say that in life there are some things, thank God for it, that never grow old or even old-fashioned, like the seven girls who stood around that old-fashioned table, on which lay the old-fashioned Bible ... taking a solemn oath of friendship.

"I was 18 when we formed our society and I became the first president of P.E.O. People called me an "intellectual" because I was fascinated by people and events and I read everything I could get my hands on -- books, magazines, newspapers.

"After graduation, I taught at the high school in Mount Pleasant. In 1872, I was invited to teach Latin and Greek at Iowa Wesleyan College. For seventeen years, I directed class plays -- the first person to present plays at the college. We dramatized nearly all of Dickens' works and some of the books of Sir Walter Scott, George Elliott, Harriet Beecher Stowe and others. There were very few plays available then so I had to improvise from the classics!

"In 1873, I married Washington Irving Babb -- I just love his name -- who taught at the college and practiced law in Mount Pleasant. We had four children: Max, Miles, Alice and Clarabelle who died of diphtheria in 1890 at age 7. In 1906, my husband became the legal advisor and later president of the Western Wheel Scraper Co. in Aurora, Illinois. We moved to that city and, eventually, my daughter, Alice, married and lived in Aurora, too.

"Throughout my life, I wrote for magazines and periodicals and spoke in public on many occasions. I became the associate editor of the P.E.O. Record in its first years of publication, writing under the pen name of "Avis" --- a fitting pseudonym, I thought, for someone named Bird."

## **Mary Allen**

"I'm Mary Allen and the first official P.E.O. meeting was held at my house. It was quite a secret gathering! The girls came singly and by round-about ways so no one would suspect what we were doing. We elected officers -- Alice Bird, President; Ella Stewart, Secretary; Hattie Briggs, Treasurer. Not one of us deserves any more praise than the other for we all planned and talked, and thought, and wrought together. What one did not think of, another did.

"The bylaws and ritual were the work of a committee and required so much time and effort that it required several meetings and considerable time to bring these as near perfection as we felt was possible.

"I was born and raised in Mount Pleasant. I was probably the most practical member of our group but even though some said I was possessed by the "Puritan strain", I loved a good joke and dancing. The friendship and fun we seven girls had together was one of the highlights of my college years.

"In 1871, I married Charles Stafford, who had been ordained as a Methodist minister shortly before we were married. Ours was a college romance that lasted for 56 wonderful years. Charles also was president of Iowa Wesleyan College from 1891 to 1899.

"We lived in at least 10 different Iowa towns from the time we were married until 1917, when Charles retired and we moved to Muscatine. I was the very proud mother of four children: Clarence, Ralph, Eva May who died at age 4 from scarlet fever and Reuben who died at 24, shortly after his graduation from the University of Wisconsin.

"All my life, I was a very active participant in P.E.O. We moved around so much that I belonged to four different chapters in four different towns! I attended many state and supreme conventions and I count among my dearest friends my P.E.O. sisters. Sometimes, however, I think I upset some of my sisters when I stressed the importance of proper procedure in conducting business meetings and the necessity for good order.

"At one time, when everyone seemed to be speaking at once," I told them. "We are but undisciplined if we cannot endure the quiet restraint of listening."

### **Suela Pearson**

"My P.E.O. sisters always said that I, Suela Pearson, was the prettiest of them all. That was nice. But I'd rather have been known for my singing and dramatic ability. I loved to perform and I thoroughly enjoyed the grand dramatic effect of the public announcement of our new society.

"One afternoon, we had heard that the I.C. Sorosis -- another women's society -- was going to march into chapel the last week in January wearing matching blue calico dresses. That afternoon, we all met at Franc Roads house and Mrs. Roads designed fancy aprons and helped us each cut and make our own. They were white percale with a design of a small black star and an inch wide ruffle around the whole apron. The left shoulder was higher than the right and that's where we wore our new gold star pins.

"We discovered that the I.C.s were meeting before chapel in one of the literary halls. So we went early and crowded into the janitor's closet, near the chapel door. At the last stroke of the chapel bell, just as the I.C.s started out of the door farther down the hall, we all stepped in ahead of them, and proudly appeared first in chapel. It was delicious! There are those who think that the I.C.s never did catch up with us!

"After I graduated in 1971, my family moved to Washington, D.C. where I continued my musical studies. Then we moved to New York and Cleveland where I met and married Mr. Frank Penfield who was associated with the Standard Oil Company. Frank and I had two children -- Frank Pearson, Jr. who died after surgery while in his first year at Yale University, and Rose Marie. We lived for many years on Euclid Avenue, near the Rockefeller home. We were very active in Cleveland society and I guess I lived up to my nickname in college, the educated butterfly.

"I was not active in P.E.O. once I left college. But I fondly remember those wonderful friendships. In 1890, I was contacted by my old friend and classmate, Ella Killpatrick Dinwiddie, wife of Major William A. Dinwiddie, then commandant of the Iowa Wesleyan College Cadet Corps. She asked me to send something, such as a banner, that might be presented to the best drilled cadet corps of the year. I responded with a gold badge designed especially for the Cadet Corps. At the top were the stylized letters "P.E.O." set with small precious stones. In the middle of the badge was a gold star with a large white diamond in the center. Below the diamond were crossed arms on a shield and the letters "IWU" and "CC".

"It was my way of expressing my appreciation to Iowa Wesleyan and P.E.O. I've been told that the badge is now on display in the P.E.O. Memorial Rooms in Mount Pleasant, Iowa."

## **Franc Roads**

"I'm Frances Elizabeth Roads Elliott. But I ask friends to call me Franc Roads, Franc E. Roads, Franc Roads Elliott or Franc R. Elliott. In college, people said I was years ahead of my time. That's just a nice way of saying you're different and they don't understand you.

"Even though women were admitted to some colleges and universities, they still were greatly discriminated against. I discovered that if I used Franc Roads, some people didn't know whether the person whose article they were reading or painting they were looking at was a man or a woman. And, regrettably, in my day, you got much farther if people thought you were male.

"I was only 14 when I went to Iowa Wesleyan and 16 when we formed P.E.O. It was pretty exciting to be the youngest member of this brand new society! After taking my degree in three years, I taught in the Mount Pleasant High School. Allie Bird taught there, too.

"I married Simon Elliott in 1872. We had two children of whom I am very proud -- Dr. Charles Elliott who was a physician in Chicago and taught at Northwestern University and Stella Elliott Canfield who was head of the department of physical education for women at Ohio State University.

"Throughout my life, I gave private lessons in painting and drawing and I was always taking classes and art workshops. In 1884, I was appointed to represent Nebraska as assistant commissioner of art at the New Orleans Exposition, which was the first time women commissioners were named in any world's exposition. It was so exciting to go to the Exposition meetings! I met with Julia Ward Howe and heard Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Frances Willard and the poet Whittier. They all spoke in behalf of the equal rights of women with men, or equal opportunity in vocations and professions. Meeting these people served as fuel for my burning spirit. I accepted as my life-long challenge the changing of social conditions and the advancement of women!

"In 1893, during the national financial disaster, we suffered terrible financial reverses. In order to keep my son in medical school, I went to work as an art supervisor, first in the Lincoln public

schools, then I was the first art instructor at Nebraska State University.

"Eventually, Simon and I moved to Chicago. I became art supervisor of the public schools in Aurora, Illinois. Here, I planned and carried out a model school room that was used as the ideal throughout the nation -- hardwood floors, tinted walls on which were hung beautiful pictures; a room properly lighted and well ventilated.

"Even after Simon died, I continued to teach and take classes. I lectured extensively on art and education. And, through talks and written articles, I helped set goals for the future of P.E.O. Never was I more proud than when I was involved with the P.E.O. Educational Fund for young women."

### **Alice Coffin**

"I am Alice Virginia Coffin. In Iowa, I was considered a southerner because I was born in Louisville, Kentucky. My mother was a literary woman of unusual talent, I'm told. She died when I was 9 years old. When I was 12, my father placed me and my three brothers and sisters in school at the Iowa Wesleyan College. He then went off to the Civil War.

"I had some illustrious ancestors. On my mother's side, there were Mayflower descendents. We were related to Charles Thompson, secretary of the convention which framed the Declaration of Independence. On my father's side, Tristram Coffin was one of 10 men who bought Nantucket Island in 1660 and established a settlement there. He was the first governor of the island. His daughter, Mary Coffin Starbuck, formed the Society of Friends on the island and became a Quaker preacher.

"I think I loved our P.E.O. girls so much because they were the closest thing to family I had experienced in my young life. Sometimes I envied their close family ties. The years that I boarded with my friend Ella Stewart and her mother were some of the happiest years of my life.

"After graduation in 1869, I taught the grammar grades in public school in Chariton, Des Moines and Newton, Iowa. I tried to be a source of inspiration for my students. One of my students once wrote that I was the kind of teacher that the girls copied and the boys silently worshiped.

"At one time, I was engaged to Will Pearson, Suela's brother. I broke the engagement and never married. But I certainly enjoyed the company of men. I loved parties! And I especially loved our first BIL party, held the December after I graduated. We didn't call it a BIL party. We called it a "Sidereal Soiree." We had studied Latin and our badge was a star so we decided on Sidereal which means "belonging to the stars." We had read French so we added "Soiree." Weren't we sophisticated?

"Our menu was very special and not the least ladies-party-like -- roast turkey and escalloped oysters, mashed potatoes and cold slaw, marble cake and ice cream. This elegant affair was held at the Brazelton Hotel and printed invitations were sent. A tax of 15 cents per member was collected to pay for the 100 invitations and each member paid \$2 for her ticket to the dance.

There were 16 P.E.O.s by that time.

"We had a literary program at the feast. I'll never forget it! Mary Allen read an essay titled "The Beauties of Nature." Franc Roads read her own essay on "The Emancipation of Women." Then Hattie Briggs and Ella Stewart played a piano duet where they crossed hands, one going to the north and one to the south -- oh, how fine it was! Ella Stewart and I sang a duet, "In the Starlight." Sue Pearson and Alice Bird ended the entertainment by stepping out, hand in hand, and speaking a piece -- "Curfew Shall not Ring Tonight" -- where they grasped an imaginary bell clapper, frantically, and swung out over an imaginary audience. It was wonderful!

"Eventually, I moved to Newton, Iowa, to teach. My sister and her family lived there and I adored her two little girls. My sister could never understand, though, why I left the Methodist church and joined the Episcopal church. I made that change for two reasons: One, I was very receptive to the rituals and ceremonies of the Episcopal church and two, I was very fond of dancing which at the time was frowned on by the Methodist church."

### **Ella Stewart**

"I'm Ella Stewart, the girl who performed at the Sidereal Soiree with Alice Coffin. We were the very best of friends. After my father, a pioneer Methodist minister, died, my mother, who was pregnant, moved our family of six to Mount Pleasant. We had lived there shortly after I had been born and we moved back after father died because mother had good friends there and we each could get a good education.

"After my baby brother was born, mother started a boarding house for students. And that's how Allie Coffin and I became such good friends. She used to tease me about my being Irish. She and I had a wonderful time trading smart, witty remarks with each other.

"We couldn't have been more different! She with her tall, blonde stateliness and short me with my curly auburn hair and the flashing earrings I always wore and loved.

"I entered Iowa Wesleyan College in 1865. But mother desperately needed help at home. It was impossible for me to carry a full class assignment or to attend classes during certain hours because I was needed at home. My teachers allowed me to audit many classes, especially music classes, as a special student. When we decided to start our own society, I was not officially a student but only a close friend of each of the other six girls.

"Eventually, I taught piano lessons. But my avocation, of helping the needy, the aged and infirm, was my real joy in life. When I realized that giving piano lessons could not provide my living, I sought advice from my father's old friend, Thomas Corkhill. Mr. Corkhill had worked with wayward boys in Eldora, Iowa, for many years. He suggested that I take a position as teacher at the Iowa Industrial School where I might help him with "his boys."

"That was the best thing I ever did with my life! For eight wonderful, rewarding years I taught those boys. I tried to give unstintingly of my love, my time and talents to help troubled boys

become good men. Those years gave purpose to my life. Nothing would have induced me to give up teaching except ill health.

"In 1891, I returned to Mount Pleasant for a rest, hopeful that I would soon be back in Eldora. But I had developed a lung disorder that slowly progressed and, in 1894, I died and was buried in the Mount Pleasant Cemetery.

"To my good friend, Alice Bird, I left my P.E.O. pin, the only one of the original seven pins in existence. I'm told you can see it now, in Memorial Hall, in Mount Pleasant.

"And now, to my P.E.O. sisters and our honored guests, I leave you with the legacy of P.E.O. -- May the same sense of caring and joy in each other's company be as alive and vibrant today, in your sisterhood, as it was in the special friendships of seven girls on that sunny January day in 1869."

## **CONCLUSION** (Narrator)

"Thank you dear founding sisters for giving us all P.E.O. We appreciate your coming today and being part of our Founder's Day program and for letting us have an insider's look at your lives. All of the information about our seven Founders was found in our historical book, *Out of the Heart*. And now, with no further ado, we bid you *adieu*."

*Leads the applause as the Founders exit.*

NOTE: Please see *Out of the Heart* (1969) and *A Society of Our Own* for more information about the Founders and their roles in our society and its origins.