

Down Memory Lane

By Franc Roads Elliott - 1904

Because, years and years ago, I, with a half dozen girls, took the initiative in forming the first P.E.O. Chapter, I have been asked to tell you something of the organization as I remember it. In the good Book, four apostles told of the work of the Master when he was amongst men. Because each had his own peculiar, individual temperament and mental point of view, each had a slightly different version to give - though in the essentials they were the same. Could all of the seven girls who formed the first P.E.O. Chapter be here today, the story of each as to its beginning would vary. What strongly appeals to one might make but a slight impression on another, while in the main points the stories would harmonize.

P.E.O. was launched a long time ago. I almost lose my identity, when I think of it, but the figures must be right. I really do not feel any older than in those halcyon college days. And only my mirror is cruel enough to testify that the years have left their marks.

That that coterie of seven girls was inexperienced and simple, I need not tell you. Those were primitive times compared with the complex society of today. Railroads were few in the middle states, and in the far west there were none. Globe-trotting had not then become the domestic pastime it is today, and few of us had been more than fifty miles from home when we formed that first chapter. We had but little worldly knowledge, but much enthusiasm and ideals far beyond the possibility of realization. Much of both of these qualities we gave to our loved organization. Broad and noble ideas as the "Brotherhood of Man" and interdependence of the race were no factors in our early Sisterhood. On the other hand we were decidedly provincial.

It was in the early spring of 1869 that the I.C. Sorority Organizer, from Monmouth College, who was not endowed with a great amount of tact, came to our college to form an I.C. chapter. That a stranger from outside should come into our ranks and call whom she would to be of the elect, became decidedly distasteful and seemed an inexcusable intrusion which called for some expression of protest. I am sure it will be interesting to you to know who really suggested our organization. Hattie Briggs and I were talking together of the I.C. organizer, when Hattie suggested we start a secret organization of our own. I fell in with the suggestion.

We soon found Mary Allen; we three girls were never very far apart in those days. We soon brought together congenial spirits, Alice Coffin, Ella Stewart, Alice

Bird, and Suella Pearson, who all seconded Hattie's suggestion most heartily. We held diverse informal, preliminary meetings, always in the strictest secrecy, before we would announce ourselves to the college public.

At these meetings we decided on our emblem. It was Alice Coffin who suggested the star. We swore the local jeweler, Mr. Crane, who took the order for the seven pins, to secrecy.

The seven met at my father's home to cut and make the bibbed percale aprons with the left arm of the bib longer than the right so that we might use our star to pin it on the left shoulder. My mother helped us in cutting and fashioning the aprons. It was a proud morning when, with much éclat, we marched up the middle aisle of the old college chapel, the cynosure of all eyes. Our young organization met with much sympathy in all college societies. We kept the students busy guessing the meaning of our cabalistic P.E.O. and they have been guessing ever since, and still have a guess coming.

They called us the Pleiades, the term naturally suggested, because we were seven daughters, and the star was our emblem. In those earliest days we thought we would not enlarge our number, but the exigencies of the times demanded it. In college politics, as well as in state, votes are needed, and we saw the necessity of enlarging our circle, if we were to hold power. We began to increase our numbers. Soon after graduation that same year, most of us scattered, as is the custom in college communities. Mrs. Babb alone remained in the old home town. We have always liked to think of her there as a kind of P.E.O. anchor.

It is indeed a gratification that from seven, the organization numbers 10,000 women (1907), holding within their circles latent dynamic possibilities for good. The older I grow, the more firmly I believe that the social and economic problems of the day will be solved by organized womanhood. Each P.E.O. chapter in any town should make the community cleaner socially and politically because of the pure white light of motherhood and womanhood that radiates from it.

And will you allow me to say a word about precedents, about what has been? Do not try to preserve them because of sentiment, for new times demand new needs. Evolution and growth mean life to organizations as well as individuals. Take this thought with you to your chapters, and please remember that true loyalty to those gone before you in P.E.O., to the Founders if you will, lies in improving the unfinished structure they bequeathed to you, for P.E.O. is only yet in its beginning.

**(Address given to the Illinois Grand Chapter Convention, June, 1907
Reprinted in the P.E.O. Record, January 1950)**