A WALK WITH OUR FOUNDERS
2011 Founders’ Day Program
By Lynne Lerberg, Chapter FY, Harlingen, Texas

Note: Founders were portrayed in modern dress by Chapter FY members.

It was 142 years ago this month that seven young women gathered in the music room at Iowa Wesleyan University. Little did they know that the society they formed that day, with the original and simple intention of commemorating their friendship and love for each other, would become a sisterhood with almost a quarter of a million members who proudly promote educational opportunities for women all over the world.

One of these young women was Alice Bird, who was a prolific writer, and among her memories is this description of that first meeting: “… the seven girls who 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 perhaps hoop skirts taking up the empty spaces between us as we stood around the table.”

This very first meeting of P.E.O. took place only 4 years after the end of the Civil War, when economizing was on everyone’s mind, and clothes were simple, practical, and designed to be useful for many different occasions. So our founders tended to dress alike, usually out of necessity, but sometimes by choice. They made their first public appearance as P.E.O.’s in the college chapel wearing identical white aprons with small black stars, anchored by their brand-new pins. They rebelled at the idea of having to wear practical black silk for all of their graduation activities, so they earned enough money to buy inexpensive fabric, and designed and made their own dresses, each identical in detail, but each one a different color. Alice remembered that those dresses threw a kind of radiance over that rather somber time.

Now I have to admit that it’s always been difficult for me to relate to our founders on any kind of a personal level, and perhaps it’s those Civil War clothes that got in my way. They all seem to look alike in their pictures, and they certainly don’t look anything like me and my sisters. But after reading and thinking about them for several months, I can tell you that these women were clearly seven individuals with distinct personalities and interesting lives, and more like us than you might think. When Alice wrote about that first meeting, she included how she saw each of them: “There stood Fran Roads looking artistic enough for a painting, Alice Coffin like a goddess, stately and dignified, Sue Pearson, lovely as a primrose or a wood violet, Mary Allen, wholesome and gracious, Ella Stewart, vivacious, interested in all good works and ready to do them, Hattie Briggs, calm, serene and useful, and Alice Bird with sleeves probably rolled up ready for work.”

As our founders became more and more real to me, I began to picture them as they might look today, and to think these women might become more real to all of us if we could take them out of their post-Civil War clothes and see them as our contemporaries.
join us as we watch each of our seven original sisters walk across 142 years into January, 2011.

FRANC ROADS

First, we would like to introduce you to Franc Roads. It’s no surprise that Alice described her as looking artistic enough for a painting, because Franc studied, practiced and taught art for most of her life. But there was much more to this woman than her art.

She demonstrated her independent streak at an early age, when she shortened her given name of Frances to the more assertive Franc, and that was the name she used for the rest of her life.

Franc has happily exchanged that confining hoop skirt with comfortable slacks and a lovely jacket. This woman was known as being so progressive that she was years ahead of her time. Among other accomplishments, she established an art department at the University of Nebraska, and she was appointed to represent Nebraska as assistant commissioner of art at the New Orleans Exposition, the first time that women were named as commissioners in any world exposition. When her family was facing financial disaster, Franc took a position as art supervisor for public schools to help pay for her son’s medical education. The advancement of women was a life-long crusade for her. She counted among her friends many leaders of the early Feminist Movement. She was passionate about education for women, and she worked her whole life to advance the Educational Loan Fund.

Franc Roads, our most progressive founder, had this to say over one hundred years ago on the subject of change in P.E.O.: “I plead with you to limit the worship of old traditions … and forge ahead to new, better things, for only in doing so will our efforts live to bless our memories and immortalize our order.”

ALICE COFFIN

Next, we’d like you to meet Alice Coffin, described by her friend Alice Bird as “like a goddess.” She was an excellent seamstress, with the reputation of being an up-to-date dresser, so here we see Alice with her unique sense of style, which is completely her own. She lost her mother when she was only nine years old, which left a permanent note of sadness in her life, but this also made her self-reliant, resourceful, and capable. Mary Allen said that at times, Alice seemed to be under a cloud of disappointment or a feeling of dissatisfaction, but this would be only for a moment, and the next moment would be like sunshine breaking out from under the cloud. This sunshine is reflected in Alice’s original and artsy look, which she always has fun with, and her friends love to see what she’ll do next.

In college, Alice and Will Pearson, the brother of another founder, were constant companions, and everyone commented on what a striking couple they made. They
became engaged, but for reasons that her sisters either never knew or never talked about, there was a falling out, and Alice remained single for the rest of her life.

Alice was not one to sit around and mope, and she knew how to have fun. A fellow student once said that she could put aside her dignity and be hilarious. She loved to dance. Even though she was born and bred a Methodist, the Methodists at that time frowned on dancing. Alice solved that small problem by becoming an Episcopalian. She was a free spirit. And there’s no doubt that she would have attracted many suitors after Will, but she turned them all down and devoted her life to teaching.

It’s easy to see that Alice’s students would love her imaginative style and fun-loving personality. She was a dedicated teacher, and she spared no effort on her students, always concerned with every aspect of the total child. One student wrote of her, “She was the kind of teacher that the girls copy and the boys silently worship.” This is high praise, indeed.

It should come as no surprise that this creative and innovative woman was the one who designed the star which we all wear today.

**SUELA PEARSON**

Here is Suela Pearson, who, in the words of Alice, was “lovely as a primrose or wood violet.” She was beautiful and vivacious, and had more and better clothes than anyone else, so it’s easy to imagine how stylish and well put-together she would look today. Guess whose idea it was to “put on some color, and not wear old black silk” for the graduation activities? But her good looks and great clothes were not the only memorable things about Suela. She was charming and gracious and never made an enemy, because she loved everyone, and everyone loved her. Her sisters took great pride and pleasure in saying that she was the most beautiful and popular of the seven. One of their classmates said this about Suela: “She was the star of the planet – her light shone on us all, and no one wanted it put under a bushel.”

When Suela was 20, she moved with her family to Washington, D.C., later married, and lived the rest of her life in Cleveland, Ohio, where she developed a reputation as a lovable person and a gracious hostess – someone you’d want to have on your committee for the Founders’ Day luncheon! She was never involved in P.E.O. after she left Iowa, because there were no chapters in Ohio during her lifetime, but P.E.O. was always in her heart. Twenty years after she graduated, she was contacted by an old classmate who asked if Suela would donate a simple banner that could be presented each year to the best-drilled cadet corps at Iowa Wesleyan. Suela did better than that – she sent a gold badge engraved with IWC and CC (for Iowa Wesleyan College Cadet Corps), but it also had a gold star with a diamond in the center and P.E.O. set in small precious stones at the top. Even though she was an active member for such a short time, P.E.O. remained important to her. Her fondest wish was that her daughter, Rose, become a P.E.O, and although Suela didn’t live to see it, Rose was initiated as a charter member of Chapter AH in Cleveland. Her mother would have been proud!
MARY ALLEN

Mary Allen was the last surviving member of the original seven, and Alice described her as “wholesome and gracious.” She lived to be almost 80 years old, which was no small feat for someone born before the Civil War. Mary was said to have a “no-nonsense” look, and we see her today wearing Izod, on her way to the golf course.

Based on what we know about her, it’s not hard to imagine that our contemporary Mary might be a golfer. She was popular, active, and methodical. She also had a great sense of humor, and those of us who play golf know what an asset THAT can be.

Mary’s husband was an ordained Methodist minister. They had four children, and moved ten times in 26 years. For much of that time, they lived in towns where no P.E.O. chapters existed. Many of us know from personal experience that we can always find friends as long as there are sisters nearby, but without that luxury, perhaps Mary would join the local WPGA.

Mary maintained her interest in P.E.O. and was an active participant whenever possible. She kept her membership in Chapter A until 1905, when she moved to Bloomfield, Iowa. Finally - a town with a chapter! Mary ultimately belonged to five different chapters, and was a beloved member of each one.

Mary lived her whole life by the “rule of right.” She had no interest in what was the quickest way to get something done – her concern was always the right way to do it. She was a stickler for following rules and procedures, and she encouraged us all to “endure the quiet restraint of listening.” She contributed a great deal to P.E.O. because of these qualities – the same qualities that would make Mary a welcome addition to your foursome for the league championship.

Mary attended many conventions in the course of her lifetime, and she was frequently asked to speak. Her wise interpretations of P.E.O. laws helped create the image of P.E.O., and her fondest wish was that we would all live up to its highest standards. What would Mary say to us today? “Ladies, count every stroke!”

ELLA STEWART

Next, we’d like you to meet Ella Stewart, who was our first secretary, and according to Alice, she was “vivacious, interested in all good works and ready to do them.” We see Ella in comfortable jeans and boots, because of her reputation as a hard worker. Whenever work was concerned, her name always came up. Her beautiful shirt is an expression of her vivaciousness, and she wears it in honor of the scent of violets that was said to follow her wherever she went. We should mention that Ella did not like lettering the chapters by the alphabet, but wanted them named after constellations.
Alice Bird and Ella were close friends all of their lives, and Alice once said of Ella that she was able to make the best of everything, and had learned the lesson of economy and thrift to perfection. This was due in large part to the fact that Ella lost her father when she was only 16. Left with 6 children to raise on her own, her mother opened a boarding house for students at Iowa Wesleyan. Despite the fact that her help was often needed at home, and money was in short supply, Ella managed to attend college for three years, even though she was the only one of the founders who didn’t graduate.

By all accounts, Ella was someone you would want to have as a friend. She was a person in whom everyone could confide and find sympathy and help. She had a big heart, and because she was unusually perceptive to the needs of others, she devoted her life to those around her. She had a love for music, and spent many years giving piano lessons in Mount Pleasant, where she continued to help her mother and stayed very active in P.E.O. She was full of energy, and would spur the others on by saying, “Girls, we must go to work and not sit here loafing.”

Her innate instinct for social service led her to take a position as a teacher at the Iowa Industrial School. Everything about Ella made it easy for her to develop a genuine connection to the troubled boys there, and she devoted her love, time and talents to help them become good men, a pursuit that was a natural for this warm-hearted, down-to-earth founder.

**HATTIE BRIGGS**

Alice Bird saw Hattie Briggs as “calm, serene, and useful.” We see her today in classic black, a style that is timeless, just like Hattie. She was the quiet one, with a mild temperament, and she was once described as “the best-hearted girl that ever lived.” She possessed the rare quality of making everyone around her feel comfortable. She had little thought of personal gain, and was always receptive to the needs of others, so we see her look as understated but elegant.

It comes as no surprise that this caring woman, with the expressive eyes and radiant smile, made two early and great contributions to our sisterhood. In 1868, a young woman appeared on campus, wearing a pin bearing mysterious letters. Her name was Libby, and she had come from a college in Illinois, where she helped organize a secret society for women. She and her sister enrolled at Iowa Wesleyan with the plan of expanding this society. But while some of our seven sisters were invited, others were not. Because our founders were very close friends, those that were asked refused to join without the others. Based on what we know about her, it’s no surprise that it was Hattie who came up with the solution to the problem when she said “Let’s have a society of our own.”

Hattie’s second contribution to our sisterhood was choosing our name. All P.E.O.s know and cherish the meaning of our initials. Who else but Hattie, the best-hearted girl who ever lived, would have given us such a lovely and meaningful name?
You will notice that Hattie has complemented her outfit with a beautiful embroidered shawl, something which is just as fashionable today as it was in 1869. Shawls have stood the test of time – just like the name Hattie gave us.

**ALICE BIRD**

Last but not least, we have Alice Bird herself, with sleeves rolled up and ready to work. This is an appropriate description of the woman who was our first president. Today she is wearing something we might have seen her in at the many P.E.O. conventions she attended during her lifetime.

This well-rounded woman was a serious student of the classics, and was actually chair of the Latin and Greek Department at Iowa Wesleyan for four years. Her love of language made her an excellent and prolific writer. She wrote the first P.E.O. oath, the first P.E.O. constitution, and was associate editor of The Record for a number of years. But just as important to the history of our organization, she wrote many, many letters, and left us with her thoughts about the early days of P.E.O. and her fellow founders. In addition, Alice was a superb speaker – she could “make a better speech than any man,” according to one reporter.

The Civil War was a real part of Alice’s life – her father and a brother all served in the military, and she was married for 52 years to a veteran of the war who had returned to Iowa Wesleyan to study for his law degree. Alice had great faith in her husband’s abilities, and once said that if she needed a divorce, she would go to him for it, because she would trust him to get it right. One year, she wanted new lace curtains, so she gave them to her husband for Christmas. The next year, he gave her a set of law books. They were devoted to each other, and when Alice’s eyes failed, he read her beloved books to her daily.

Alice was an active and enthusiastic participant in P.E.O., from its organization until the end of her life. She made a tremendous contribution in the preparation of resolutions, laws, and ceremonies. She was a gifted and life-long student, who was quick to share her many talents, and more sisters than she would ever have dreamed possible have benefitted from them.

Each of these seven women, whose memory we honor today, brought a gift to P.E.O. From Franc Roads, P.E.O. gets its vision and progressiveness; from Alice Coffin, its interest in education; from Suela Pearson, gaiety and charming sociability; from Mary Allen, its poise; from Ella Stewart, its desire for social service, from Hattie Briggs, its care and concern for each other; and from Alice Bird, its literary bent. We hope that by watching each of these women walk across the many years that separate us, we can all see more clearly that our Founders really were our sisters in heart and spirit.