

## **P.E.O. Founders and the Mystery of Sisterhood**

It was the mysterious moment I had been waiting 18 years for. There we were, my mother, my grandmother, my great aunt, my older sister, and a room full of nervous senior citizens trying to remember their parts at this momentous occasion. If they didn't get to the good part soon, I thought I would scream with the frustration of anticipation. All I wanted to hear was the meaning of those three simple letters, "P.E.O."

Their true identity had baffled me for so long; I could concentrate on little else on that important day. As long as I could remember, my family had teased my mother and grandmother about the meaning of P.E.O. We never ceased the effort to come up with exciting original ideas. We would even fill long hours on the road during vacations thinking up new variations. Some of my favorites included, "People Eat Onions," "Pee at Every Opportunity," "Personal Envoy Organization," "Pickle Eaters Organization," "Petunias, Esters, and Orchids," "Polly, Eugenia, and Ophelia," "Pit Every Olive," "Pick Endless Opportunities," "Purchase Every Ounce," "Play Every Occasion," "Purple Eye Offenders," "Private Eyes Only," and my favorite, "Practically Everybody Old!" This list goes on and on.

The minutes trekked by slowly as my future P.E.O. sisters rattled on the meaning of the star and all the other traditions I would some day treasure. My mother, the eternal perfectionist, had held every P.E.O. chapter office so many times; she had spent the whole morning coaching and correcting every role. I never knew someone could retain so many memorized lines! Years later I would realize that Mother knew the lines so well because each one meant so much to her. While the ladies (their minds tarnished with time) struggled to recite their parts, my palms grew clammy and my stomach churned. Why couldn't they hurry up and tell me what the letters stood for? They had just told me the password for every P.E.O. meeting. I should have been thrilled, however until that moment, I had not known there was a password, so I wasn't shocked or thrilled by the revelation.

Just as I thought my knees would buckle and I would either faint, shriek, or start giggling uncontrollably, Mother leaned over to tell me what I had longed to hear. Although the words were whispered with care, the expression on my face (my eyes round as saucers) indicated I had heard and understood every word. Their meaning was so simple I almost could not believe what my mother had said to me. Surely,

that?!? The meaning of the letters, "P.E.O.," could have been made up by a child. I looked around the room and saw that most of the ladies had tears shimmering in their eyes. Could these simple words have touched their lives so much? Have they so much meaning to them? What have I committed myself to? What really is "P.E.O.?" I decided to do a little research of my own. I am a hopeless sentimentalist. I wanted to know and share what had affected these women so.

I found that the growth of P.E.O. is an exciting story of dedication in which every member has had a part. In itself, it is a tribute to the seven young college girls who set down the founding principles on January 21, 1869. P.E.O. owns and administers Cottey College for women at Nevada, Missouri; directs a large, revolving Loan Fund, known as the P.E.O. Educational Fund; and has established and administers the International Peace Scholarship Fund, whereby qualified young women from foreign countries continue their education at the graduate schools of their choice in Canada or the United States. P.E.O. finds expression of its basic principles through service to these projects, for P.E.O. was formed to commemorate the love and friendship of seven young women. With the passing of each year their friendship had deepened. It was dear to them and they wanted it to be a lasting thing.

P.E.O. was no hastily conceived plan. Through social and economic trends, it had been in the making for centuries. Christianity, the industrial and mechanical revolutions, education, the feminist movement, western expansion, the Civil War, the fraternity system, all contributed toward its development. Exactly when or where the idea of P.E.O. first entered the consciousness of the seven founders, or who spoke the first experimental word which stimulated the imagination of the seven until they envisioned a society of their own, is not known. There was nothing about that memorable day but the hopes and vague plans which seven college girls carried to the Iowa Wesleyan campus that morning that were to culminate before the day was over into one of the pioneer societies for women, P.E.O.

These girls sought only to organize a society in response to their own needs. It was a revolutionary idea, and they knew it. They had reason to know that the status of women was changing, although they could not have realized the extent to which their response was colored by capably changing social conditions. Small wonder that our founders responded as they did to their heritage and environment. Small wonder that they developed the characteristics necessary to bring about greater change. They were charmed by the idea of P.E.O. and by the magic of working together for the advancement of women. These were new concepts in a century just

awakening to the tremendous possibilities involved in educating females. The development of cultural patterns within a specific society, or cluster of individuals, reveals imagination, communication, creativity, need, and the general ability to work together in developing these patterns. A small cluster or group of people organized P.E.O. Cultural patterns were developed in response to group needs. But no single P.E.O. pattern exists, for P.E.O. is a many patterned thing, comprehensive in structure, delicate in concept. It reaches back into antiquity and stretches ahead to the limits of the imagination. It is involved in the history of mankind, yet it concerns persons.

Each founder brought some rare gift to P.E.O. Those abilities, gifts, or attributes, have been mentioned in many ways by many writers. They might be summarized as follows: from Mary Allen, P.E.O. gets its poise; from Alice Bird, its literary bent; from Hattie Briggs, its homemaking tendencies; from Alice Coffin, its interest in education; from Suela Pearson, gaiety; from Franc Roads, progressiveness, and from Ella Stewart, its desire for social services.

P.E.O. is like a precious hand cut gem with each plateau a pattern in itself. P.E.O. was fashioned to commemorate the love and friendship of seven girls. So long as P.E.O. exists it will reflect those qualities. The real nature of P.E.O. is learned only with the long years of participation in its activities. It is a beautiful, valiant story of sisters assuming mature obligations; of devotion to each other and to P.E.O.; of correct procedure always laced with kind understanding of mistakes and the courage to correct them; of Christian philosophy put to practical use; of vision and the pioneering, adventurous spirit needed to make vision a reality.

Because of their inheritance, it was natural for early P.E.O.s to emphasize the educational pattern. P.E.O. was born on a college campus, and the founders were educationally minded. It was inevitable that the founders and their contemporaries should also develop a keen spiritual awareness and a deep social consciousness. Spirituality was part of their heritage. They constantly sought benevolent activities they might enter into, not only because they recognized the needs about them, but also because of their own need for expression in something greater than themselves, something that might benefit mankind. All P.E.O. growth has been brought about through the vision, the courage, the devotion, and the enthusiasm of members in the early chapters; members who loved and worked for P.E.O. and cherished its ideals in their hearts.

P.E.O. has survived these many years through the lovely, yet elusive spirit of P.E.O. One could no more describe silence or catch sunlight in her hands. Yet

every P.E.O. knows what it is. Each interprets it in the light of her own personality and capacity. It is present wherever two P.E.O.s meet, but even when alone, a true P.E.O. carries that spirit in her heart. What a wonderful gift has been bestowed to me in the form of P.E.O. I hope I was able to share it with you.