

THE SEVEN SISTERS P.E.O. Founders Day Program

The following program, purporting to tell the story of each girl in her own words, was written by Helen Pringle for Chapter DE, Fort Worth, Texas, and presented at our meeting January 16, 1998, at the home of Barbara Urquhart.

It is based on information contained in OUT OF THE HEART. In some instances, the written reminiscences of a founder here proceed from the mouth of one of her sisters, as some of the founders wrote prolifically and others did not, and they did, after all, share the experience jointly. Some had long lives and others did not, but here each tells part of the story of the founding.

The seven parts were "declaimed" in the following order by:
Helen Pringle, as Alice Bird
Jane Burnett, as Mary Allen
Rosemary Mead, as Hattie Briggs
Cynthia Seath, as Alice Virginia Coffin
JoAnn Huckabee, as Franc Roads
Mary Louise Mooring, as Suela Pearson
Julia Grant, as Ella Stewart

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Speaker:

Good morning, my sisters. I was named at birth Mary Alice Bird, though my family and friends called me Alie, and I greet you across a chasm of years as more than a friend. We are linked by a long line of women like ourselves - chosen sisters - whose motives and aims have always been no less than to change the world. I speak first because I was the first President of P.E.O. The others also assigned to me the writing of our oath, and I was the first to pledge to it as it was read by Ella Stewart. Then, I read it to the others. But I am ahead of my story.

I was born May 8, 1850, but January 21, 1869, is the official beginning of our common story, and Mount Pleasant, Henry County, Iowa is the place. It was a bare 30 years after the first settlers came to the place on the wave of Western expansion, many of them merchants and professional men, uncommonly well-educated for their place and time. My own parents were pioneer settlers from Pennsylvania, my father the first physician in Henry County, and my mother an educated woman. You who have almost unlimited access to education cannot truly know what a privilege and prize it was for my mother, my friends and me.

At Iowa Wesleyan College, I studied the classical course, loved reading and singing and any daring adventure. There I met the six other girls who were to become not only my friends but my sisters in a secret society. They were Ella (whom I have already mentioned), Mary Allen, Hattie Briggs, Alice Coffin, Suela Pearson, and Franc Roads. Two were beauties, Franc and Suela, several were intellectuals, others were artists, musicians and writers, but we each rejoiced in the accomplishments of all and there was never among us any jealousy or rivalry. Our friendship was so precious to us all that when a secret society called I.C. Sorosis was formed in December of 1868, and only some of us were invited to join, they would not do so without the others.

Franc and Hattie were sitting on a stile on campus talking about it when Hattie said, "Let us start an order of our own." They found the other five enthusiastic, and plans began to be laid in the Music Room in Main Hall. The old college Bible was brought down from the chapel on third floor, and there around the old-fashioned table, seven old-fashioned girls took the vows pledging to the old-fashioned principles which underlie our order. There we named our society P.E.O. and chose the star as its emblem. I was charged to prepare a constitution and take it to the next meeting, set for the next Saturday evening, January 23, 1869, at Mary Allen's home.

After graduation in 1869, I was a teacher in the academy and then held the Chair of Latin and Greek at my alma mater. I was married to Washington Irving Babb, who taught law at Iowa Wesleyan, practiced law and was a District Judge, a successful businessman and banker. We had two sons and two daughters, and lost our adored Clarabelle at age 7 to diphtheria. My daughter, Alice, was the last surviving child. I myself was so fortunate as to be able to participate in the life and growth of our little society until the end of my life on November 21, 1926, and I now rest in Mount Pleasant near Mary, Ella and Franc.

We planted "the smallest of seeds, yet now the birds can rest their wings in the branches."

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Speaker:

I was born in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, on December 30, 1848, the daughter of Reuben and Evelyn Allen, and called Mary Jane, affectionately shortened to Mame. My father was in business and real estate, and my mother was a rare and precious woman who welcomed all to our home. It was she who made it possible for much of the early life of P.E.O. to take place at our house.

There was held on January 23, 1869, the first business meeting after the initiation in the Music Room. All of us were active in the Ruthean Literary Society, so we were well-versed in parliamentary procedure. Even then we wished for a society of lasting name and reputation and for something broad and substantial as befitted serious-minded women. Bold, beautiful Allie Bird - she of the raven hair, piercing dark eyes, and literary talent - presented the framework of our constitution which she had been charged to write, and in the weeks that followed we all worked together to perfect our bylaws and ritual. We all planned, thought, tallied and wrought together, and we were truly like-minded.

When all was said and done, we seven pledged ourselves to cherish and care for each other and to improve ourselves, our motives, our actions, our interests, our manners and our minds, and to try to radiate this improvement to those around us.

Of all the seven, I had the longest association with Iowa Wesleyan. I married Charles Lewis Stafford, a Methodist minister who was president of our Alma Mater from 1891 to 1899; we were the parents of three boys and one girl. We lost our daughter to scarlet fever at the age of four and a son in his youth, but we lived to celebrate 56 years of marriage, and I was the last of the seven to leave you on July 10, 1927. I rest in Mount Pleasant near Alie Bird, Ella, and Franc.

We thought of ourselves as ordinary girls, but in fact we were unusually fortunate in our circumstances of life and education, and we lived in a time of rapidly changing social conditions, especially for women. We could not have envisioned the spread of our society or the impact upon the world. You now carry our ideals into your homes and towns, from whence they continue to spread outward like circles from a pebble thrown into the water.

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Speaker:

Harriet is the name I was given when I was born on October 10, 1849, but Hattie I soon became, and Hattie I remained. My father, Elias Lyman Briggs, was also a minister and a trustee of IWC, my mother, Jane, a helpmate in all that he did and a hostess to the town and the college. I had not the striking beauty or the compelling intellect of some of my friends, but I did seem able to attract an unusual number of friends in church and town and campus since I was naturally blessed with an interest in people and a cheerful disposition.

I was the first Treasurer of our secret society, but in the beginning we had no dues. When we needed money, we levied a "fine" or "tax" against ourselves, usually ten to fifty cents apiece, and a committee was appointed to collect the fines and pay the bills. Never after this early period would finances be so simple. Mr. Crane of Crane Jewelry Store in Mount Pleasant had our pins, large golden stars with P.E.O. in black enameled letters in the center, made for us at a cost of around \$2.50 each, and after some years we added a by-law requiring an initiation fee of \$3.00 to cover the cost of the emblem.

In the early days, we elected officers every six months and read the constitution and bylaws at every meeting. Programs usually consisted of music and a reading, an essay, a critical study or a debate, always with the goal of improvement.

We would have been a band of eight rather than seven had Carrie Woolson not been recently sent to Albion College. When she returned in six weeks, she became one of us, the 16th on our membership list.

After graduation, I taught music and art, living with my parents at various pastorates. In 1873, I married Henri L. Bousquet, a native of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, who was Assistant Cashier of the Pella National Bank. On the Sunday morning of January 12, my father preached his regular sermon and at the close called us to the altar where he joined us in marriage to the surprise of most of the congregation. Many joined us in celebration that afternoon in Pella where we were to make our first home. Two sons were born to us before my early death only five years later on June 22, 1877, and our son Henri followed me before he was six. Our elder son used my wedding ring when he married another Hattie in 1916, and their descendants have given it to our sisterhood.

I was the first of the little band to go, but I was fortunate to have had a happy marriage and a family, which were to be denied to our beautiful sisters Alice

Virginia Coffin, tall, blonde, with a regal carriage and Pilgrim ancestry, and Ella Stewart, a witty, sparkling Irish redhead. Unsearchable are the ways of Providence.

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Speaker:

I was born Alice Virginia Coffin in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 29, 1848, the second daughter and second child of Matthew Starbuck Coffin, a descendant of Tristram Coffin, the first governor of Nantucket. My mother was a native of Indiana, educated and accomplished. She died when I was nine years old and it left a permanent note of sadness in my life. The same year my father suffered serious financial losses, but after The War we moved to Mount Pleasant to have access to good education.

There at Iowa Wesleyan College, I met the circle of friends who would become the nucleus of P.E.O. Will Pearson, tall, courtly, handsome brother of my friend and sister, Suela, was usually my escort to all our college festivities and we were said to be a striking couple. Romance blossomed, and we became engaged. But fate is not always kind and in a difficult moment I broke the engagement. My plans for a home and family had come to naught, and though there were other offers of marriage, I chose to remain single and devote my life to teaching. It was I who suggested the star for our emblem, and later in my daily life I was usually seen wearing it high on the left shoulder as we did as girls that first morning when we dramatically marched into Chapel and announced ourselves to the public. Until that time, everything was done in strictest secrecy. Chapel services were held each weekday morning at 8:00 o'clock; seats were assigned and attendance was required. Men sat on one side of the room and women on the other. It was the center of campus life, situated on the third floor of Old Main, and a natural place for our new society to announce its existence.

We heard from a mysterious source that the I.C.'s were planning to march into Chapel on a certain morning wearing blue calico dresses, so we hurriedly completed our plans for large white aprons held in place on the left shoulder by our star emblems. We gathered quietly in the cloakroom that morning and marched slowly single-file up the aisle into Chapel causing quite a sensation and leaving the

I.C.'s to follow us in as an anticlimax. Thus began a friendly rivalry wherein each group incited the other to further achievements.

Though I was brought up a Methodist, I did an uncharacteristic thing in my adult years by joining the Episcopal Church. I loved the ceremonies and rituals of that church, and I was very fond of dancing, which in those days was considered sinful by Methodism. My older sister, Mary Frances, and her family were a great joy to me, as I lived near or with them until my death on July 12, 1888, in my 41st year. My sense of the dramatic was always present, and at my own request I was buried in Union Cemetery at Newton, Iowa, just as the sun was setting.

THE SEVEN SISTERS, P.E.O. FOUNDERS DAY PROGRAM

Speaker:

I was the youngest founder, born February 10, 1852, quite near Mount Pleasant and christened Frances Elizabeth Roads. When I had a say about it, I permitted the use only of Franc as my given name. My father Addison was a businessman and public official in our town, and my mother, Nancy, the heart without which the family could not have lived. She supported the idea of our secret society and designed the aprons for our introductory march into Chapel.

In January, 1869, while our star pins were being made, we met at our home one afternoon and evening, and with my mother's help, made seven unique aprons with bibs cut so that the left side was higher than the right, the left side to be held in place by the star. The aprons were made of white percale with a design of a small black star and an inch-wide ruffle around the whole edge. In order to accomplish this feat, we sat up almost all night with my patient mother in attendance.

It was all worth it the next morning as we created wonder and curiosity among the student body, and as they gave us applause. We were young and we reveled in the dramatic sensation, but it was never far from our minds that our purpose was a serious and lifelong one.

I was always said to be the one of the seven who was analytical and a problem-solver as well as something of a crusader, but steady in a crisis. All of my life, I was an inveterate reader, but art was a love of my life and my profession. I

was married to Simon Elliott in 1872, and we had two children, Charles, a physician and professor of medicine at Northwestern University, and Stella, who became head of the department of Women's Physical Education at Ohio State University.

Our son was in medical school when the Panic of 1893 hit, and we faced financial disaster. I became Art Supervisor in various public schools to help the family and never thereafter lost my interest in education or in the advancement of women. Among my friends in later life were Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. I worked for 18 years to secure for women the right to a seat and a vote in the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. When I died at the home of my son in Chicago on August 9, 1924, my body was cremated, but I am memorialized by a marker on the Elliott lot in Forest Home Cemetery at Mount Pleasant, placed there in 1952 by the sisterhood. So it was that I came to rest in my girlhood town with Mary, Alie Bird and Ella. My membership remained in Chapter A as long as I lived.

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Speaker:

To my constant embarrassment, my friends went about saying that I was beautiful, charming and intelligent. There was not a plain girl in our group, but I thought that Ella and Franc and Allie Coffin were the outstanding beauties. I had a storybook life as a child, born to Dr. Clement Pearson and Marie Rose McKinley Pearson, in Cleveland, Ohio, August 24, 1851 and christened Marie Suela. My mother, a member of the family of President William McKinley, was cultured and hospitable. I adored my parents and my handsome brother Will, and they adored me.

About 1860, my family moved to frontier Iowa, and there I entered Iowa Wesleyan in the fall of 1866, just after my 15th birthday. I had many beaux but was also interested in my classical studies, as well as music and elocution. It was in my sophomore year that I met with my six friends and formed our secret society. All the girls were seniors except Franc Roads and me, and besides our serious studies and church activities, we had parties, socials, taffy pulls, sleigh rides, picnics, oyster suppers, receptions and banquets.

All of us were considered fashionable in dress, but money was not lavish during this Reconstruction Era. We were accustomed to having one good silk dress for Sunday, usually black, and perhaps two calico or gingham ones for weekdays. Even calico was 75 cents a yard, and good black silk was \$3.00 a yard. It took 27 yards of 22" wide goods to make a dress, so planning was necessary. For our Ruthean Literary Society exhibition at commencement, I suggested that we all have something pretty and colorful, even if it was cheap. We settled on tarlatan, which is a kind of refined mosquito netting or cheesecloth available in many colors, but even it was 75 cents a yard and the paper muslin lining was also 75 cents a yard. We each made a tarlatan dress, but we picked a good many quarts of gooseberries to pay for them. Mine was canary yellow; Allie Coffin's pure white; Hattie Briggs had pink; Franc Roads, pale green; Alie Bird, rose color; Ella Stewart, blue; and Mary Allen wore heliotrope, carrying a matching pale purple fan to hide her jaw swollen from a toothache.

The audience murmured, "Oh!" as we sat on the stage as a colorful group. They were also astonished to notice our short hair, shingled as we called it then, in imitation of the famous Anna Dickenson, who had recently delivered her lecture at Mt. Pleasant on "paupers, idiots, and women." Her beautiful, heavy short curling hair sent us all to the barber, whom we declared we made rich by the fashion we started. Our beautiful dresses were worn again to our first real party, the Sidereal Soiree, at the Brazelton Hotel on December 26, 1870.

I was as fortunate in my marriage as in my family and friends. In 1876, I married Frank H. Penfield of Cleveland, an associate with Standard Oil Company and a Mayflower descendant. For many years we lived there, where our two children were born. Our daughter Marie Rose became a charter member of Chapter AH, Cleveland, living until the year 1962. Our son Frank died while a student at Yale University in 1901.

If I was beautiful and favored in my youth, I was also steadfast in age. Rose and I cared for my mother during a long invalidism, and Rose cared for me until my death on September 20, 1920. I rest in Lake View Cemetery in Cleveland.

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Speaker:

I was the sister who did not graduate, Ella Lovina Stewart, born in Pittsburg, Iowa, on May 8, 1848, the daughter of (yes, another) Methodist minister Isaac Stewart and his wife, Mary. My father had lost two wives and four children by death before he met and married my mother. Shortly after my birth, we moved to Mount Pleasant where my father was Presiding Elder for the district.

There we lived in an apartment in the Institute Building of the Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute, which in 1853 was renamed Iowa Wesleyan College. After tenure with the College, my father resumed pastorates around the state, and it was at Keokuk that disaster overtook us. My father died in August, 1864, leaving five children and another soon to be born. My gallant little Irish mother moved back to Mount Pleasant and opened a boarding house for students. My brother Harry was born in October, 1864.

It took the help of all the older children to assist my mother, but I did manage to enroll in Iowa Wesleyan in 1865 with the class which became known as the Lifebloods. Somewhat later, because of the urgent need for me at home, I found it impossible to carry a full assignment or attend classes, but I always associated myself with the college and took part in as many activities as were possible for me. I audited classes while working at home and I gave piano lessons in the area.

I was said to be the wit of the group, ready with repartee, but I worked to be disciplined, cheerful, industrious and courageous. I was one of the smallest of the seven, with the Irish auburn hair and blue eyes. I loved earrings and violet scent and could play and sing. My name was often paired with that of Dillon Payne, a classmate and our valedictorian.

I never married but became a teacher of "wayward boys" at the Iowa Industrial School in Eldora. It was the most deeply satisfying work of my life and nothing but illness could have induced me to leave it. I died on December 12, 1894, and now rest in Mount Pleasant near Mary, Alie Bird, and Franc. My pin is the only one of the original seven in existence, and you can see it in Memorial Hall at Mount Pleasant.

When the P.E.O. stars shone forth in Mount Pleasant, everyone was curious. Some called us the Pleiades, the constellation also called the Seven Sisters. Some jokingly said "Pigs Eat Onions." But decades have come and gone, and the riddle remains a testimony to the ability of women to keep a secret.

We loved, respected and admired each other; we depended upon each other for mutual support and encouragement. We pledged ourselves to betterment in the hope that we could better the world. That we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams is evidenced by your presence here. Across miles, years, life, death and any other divide one can imagine, blest be the tie that binds the seven of us to all of you.