Today we celebrate the 133rd anniversary of the founding of P.E.O. along with the advent of a new century. (Perhaps the word “millennium” with its various misspellings has been overused.) The technology of our lives inspires, daunts, and sometimes overwhelms us. Therefore, I’m making an old-fashioned, perhaps reactionary, request: that we make mental pictures of the 1869 setting, historically and socially – the context in which those seven young women founded P.E.O. Many of you are so knowledgeable about P.E.O. history that it seems presumptuous of me to detail innumerable facts, however (perhaps because I’m an educator!) there were certain questions that I wanted answered as I did my research:

1. What were the conditions in America in 1869?
2. What was it like at Iowa Wesleyan in particular?
3. What events preceded the founding of P.E.O.?
4. What happened to those women whose friendships were so strong?
5. As we enter a new century, how might we reflect on the meaning and the mission of our Sisterhood?

1. **What were the conditions in America in 1869?**
   * The Civil War had ended in 1865 and Lincoln had been assassinated when five of the founders entered Iowa Wesleyan at Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.
   During their time in college:
   * Johnson faced impeachment during the reconstruction years.
   * Grant was elected President.
   * Alaska was purchased from Russia – considered at the time to be a foolish purchase.
   * Maximilian entered Mexico City with 3500 French soldiers and was later murdered when the French withdrew.
   * The Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads met in Utah.
   * Camp meetings were popular – families gathered and set up tents in the woods for a week of intensive religious services.
   * Magazines of the time included Harper’s, Scribners, Harper’s Weekly Youth Companion, and of course, Godey’s Lady’s Book.
   * The suffrage movement had begun. After the Civil War, Women’s Lib (there really is nothing new under the sun!) was beginning to bloom under Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lucy Stone, Frances Willard, Amelia
Bloomer, and the inimitable Susan B. Anthony and her close friend Cady Stanton.

2. What was it like to be at Iowa Wesleyan in 1869?
* Iowa Wesleyan was the first co-ed degree granting college west of the Mississippi.
* Chapel service, five mornings, was compulsory
* Men sat on one side of the room, women on the other
* To even matriculate, students had to furnish testimonials of good moral character.
* A few daring men would walk or talk with a girl without permission. They were called before the faculty and their deportment grade was lowered.
* Strictly prohibited were: making or receiving visits during study hours at night; leaving town without permission of the college president; contracting debts without knowledge and consent of parents.
* The college year was divided into three semesters; summer vacations ran from the third week of June until the first week of September; study rules were relaxed on Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve.
* But the students still had fun: there were taffy pulls, sleigh rides, oyster suppers, receptions, banquets, and a strawberry party for the parents.
* There were skating parties on the Skunk River and picnics in Soudner’s Grove. Boys furnished the buggies and the girls the baskets.

3. What events preceded the founding of P.E.O.?
* Beta Theta Pi fraternity appeared on the Iowa Wesleyan campus in 1868.
* I.C. Sorosis was founded in 1867 at Monmouth College in Illinois, just 58 miles away. It later became the sorority Pi Beta Phi. That would have been fine, except that in September of 1868, Libby Brook and her sister transferred from Monmouth to Iowa Wesleyan for the express purpose of organizing a chapter of I.C. Sorosis there. That, too, might have been all right except that Libby made a mistake. She reportedly invited three of the seven inseparable friends, all of whom were campus leaders, to join her and excluded the other four. The three declined and that was that, until the night of January 20, 1869 when some of the guests of the Beta Theta Phi fraternity party came in with golden arrows pinned to their blouses. Libby had done it! I.C. Sorosis was a fact on campus.
So on the morning of January 21, 1869, we find Hattie Briggs and Franc Roads engaged in deep discussion about the events of the
evening before. What should be done about it? Finally Hattie said, “Let’s start an order of our own,” and Franc replied, “All right. Let’s find Mary (Allen).” And they did. These “triamese” twins, as their friends sometimes called them, wasted no time in rounding up the other four, and it was decided that they would organize that very afternoon in the music room on the second floor of Main Hall. Alice Bird, with the literary bent, was charged with writing the ceremony, a simple 35-word oath by which, that afternoon, they pledged to each other and subscribed to the old-fashioned principles which still dignify our sisterhood. Before they parted, they had decided to name the society “P.E.O.,” they had adopted the star as their emblem, and Alice Bird was designated as the one to prepare a constitution in time for their second meeting at the Allen home on January 23rd. Thus P.E.O. was born.

Many delightful stories are told of the rivalry between P.E.O. and I.C. Sorosis. While the newly organized P.E.O.s were wondering how to announce their sorority, they learned that the I.C. girls were planning to march into chapel wearing identical blue calico dresses. Working feverishly with the help of Franc’s mother, our seven sewed together ruffled aprons of white percale with a tiny black star print. These were cut high on the left shoulder to hold the star pins. Hiding in the clock room the next morning, the P.E.O.s were able to slip just in front of the entering I.C. Sorosis girls and marched slowly down the chapel aisle to their seats near the front. As you can imagine, there was much speculation about the meaning of P.E.O. Some jokingly suggested “Pigs Eat Onions”, but the real meaning has been a guarded secret from the first day.

The rivalry persisted until the I.C.s were chartered as a campus sorority under the Greek title “Pi Beta Phi.” Since then, the star and the arrow have at times found their places side by side on the same blouse. For example, Jane Burtis Smith, Past President of International Chapter, is both a P.E.O. and a Pi Phi.

4. What about the lives of these seven women whose friendship was so strong that it caused them to form a sisterhood? (Biographies of each of the seven founders are available from PA 2nd VP or see page 5 of this program)
* Ask seven chapter members to represent each of the seven founders. Supply them with the biographical material. They speak in the first person, limiting their presentations to 2 or 3 minutes each.

5. *What about the meaning and mission of our Sisterhood at the beginning of the new millennium?*

I draw your attention to the Keynote address at the 1999 International Chapter Convention, given by Jean Carnahan, a Missouri P.E.O. and the first lady of that state. She posed the question as to whether women’s organization can survive and flourish in the 21st century and suggested that they can if they add meaning to our lives. If a founder appeared to ask us if the star still has its meaning, our response would be that it does, as long as the virtues of faith, love, purity, justice and truth are still very much a part of our lives.

Our Sisterhood will flourish as long as meaning is accompanied by mission. P.E.O.’s mission has never changed and can be stated in three words: Education for Women. This mission is a timeless and necessary cause and P.E.O.’s primary philanthropic focus.

In 1926, few people outside her local chapter took notice of the P.E.O. initiation of Virginia Alice Cottey Stockard, but what an impact her presence would have. In 1884, she had founded with her savings from teaching – (quite a feat in those days!) a two-year liberal arts college for young women, and now she was looking for someone else to preside at the helm. She recognized P.E.O. and the embodiment of her ideals for the school. So at the 1927 Supreme Chapter Convention, she offered to give Cottey, the amazing gift of her life work, to P.E.O.

Although the school grew and prospered academically, finances became quite shaky during the 1931-1933 depression. As rumblings grew among the P.E.O. membership that a severance recommendation would be made at the 1933 Supreme Chapter Convention in Kansas City, President Zora Knight, in an inspiring move, chartered a special train to take all 882 delegates to Nevada, Missouri, for a day at Cottey College. As you might predict, the recommendation to discontinue support was defeated by a large majority. Since then the school has flourished, welcoming students from the United States, Canada, and worldwide, earning its slogan “Cottey College of World Friendship.”

At the risk of stating a truism, women need the benefits of education at every stage of their lives. P.E.O. has come to the rescue of thousands of women:
* Since 1907, the Educational Loan Fund has made loans totaling more than $76 million dollars for more than 38,000 recipients.
* Since 1949, International Peace Scholarship Fund has provided nearly $15 million dollars for over 4,500 international women from 152 countries to study in North America.
* Since 1973, Program for Continuing Education has granted more than $18 million dollars for more than 20,000 women.
* Since 1991, Scholar Awards, allowing women to work on advanced degrees or research, has awarded $5,115,000 for 795 women.
(figures from the Jan/Feb 2002 RECORD)

As we enter a new century, a new millennium, each one of us should listen to Alice Bird Babb’s timeless message given at the end of the 19th century: “May nothing happen to check or prevent our marvelous growth. May we not be too wise in our conceit, but modestly, enthusiastically, and wisely go on to help a world that does need so much… God bless us all and envelop us with love toward each P.E.O. and toward each one with whom we associate.” (P.E.O. Record, June 1990)

To conclude the program, distribute a candle to each of the members who portrayed the seven founders – the rest of the group then lit candles from those seven. We formed a circle, holding hands (where feasible) and sang “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.”

Program prepared by - Nancy Hoop
Chapter K
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Biographies taken from Programs #30 by Chapter K and modified by Chapter BB

HATTIE BRIGGS: Welcome, I am Hattie Briggs. It was my idea to have a society of our own. In college, I was a leader in church and campus affairs. After graduation, I taught music and art. It was said that I was cheerful, democratic, and always receptive to the needs of others. Although I died at the young age of 28, my spirit lives on in all of you – my P.E.O. sisters.

ALICE BIRD: Good Morning! I am Alice Bird. I wrote our P.E.O. Constitution and helped to direct the Grand Chapter during its formative years. I was the associate editor for the P.E.O. Record, writing often under the pen name of Avis. I later returned to Iowa Wesleyan and headed the Greek and Latin departments.

MARY ALLEN: Greetings, I am Mary Allen. I wrote our P.E.O. oath at the time of our organization. In conducting business meetings, I stressed the importance of proper procedure. My wise and kindly interpretations of P.E.O. laws and activities helped to create the image of P.E.O. for those who came later. My husband was a minister and served as president of Iowa Wesleyan University from 1891 to 1899. Laughter and love filled our home, making it a favorite gathering place.

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN: Hello, I am Alice Virginia Coffin and I am so glad to be here with you today. It was my suggestion that the star be our emblem, to serve as a badge of sincere friendship. I devoted my life to teaching and was remembered for sparing neither time nor effort in imparting knowledge.

FRANC ROADS: Good day, I’m Franc Roads. My dear mother designed the aprons for our march into the chapel that introduced P.E.O. to the world. After college, I taught high school and later taught drawing and painting at the University of Nebraska. In 1884, I represented Nebraska as the Associate Commissioner of Art at the New Orleans Exposition. I worked for 18 years to secure the right to a seat and vote in the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. I count among my good friends Lucy Stone, Susan B Anthony, and Elizabeth Stanton.

SUELA PEARSON: Hello, I’m Suela Pearson. I am most remembered for my positive attitude when faced with many personal challenges. I participated in many school activities and became an excellent musician. I was outstanding in dramatics, or elocution, as it was called. My father, Dr. Clement Pearson, founded Hanneman Medical Society and my husband was associated with the Standard Oil Company.
ELLA STEWART: I’m Ella Stewart and I am delighted to be with my six special friends… and with all of you, also on this special day. My P.E.O. pin is the only one of the original seven still in existence today. Although I was unable to finish college with my friends due to family responsibilities, I continued to take part in P.E.O. affairs. As a young woman, I taught piano lessons. Later, I taught at the Iowa Industrial School in Eldora, a school for wayward boys.