

SISTERHOOD
by Lynda Womack
Chapter BE, P.E.O.

It has been said that the desire for a sister is primitive; it may have everything or it may have nothing to do with the family to which – (without choice) – one has been born. Certainly, the ties of biological sisterhood are most often amazingly strong and binding, but according to the English writer, D.H. Lawrence, as one leaves childhood – having known only the customs, preferences, aspirations and culture of the family into which (without choice) he was born – and comes into a new maturity and independence, his horizons expand, and often close relationships of one's own choice are made because of the closeness of heart and spirit that we find in another – and thus a relationship is found which seems truly to be a part of our essential self and may prove to be a fulfillment of that primitive desire for sisterhood.

Such may have been the experiences of seven young women students at the Iowa Wesleyan College in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. These seven young women had formed a very close friendship based upon common beliefs and aspirations. They shared a pioneer and religious background with highly significant emphasis on education. All of the seven families were deeply religious – not just pious, but people who made practical application of religion in every day life. Indeed, these seven young women seemed to have become a sisterhood of heart and spirit.

At this time, in 1869, when organizers for Greek letter sororities first came on campus in Wesleyan College, Iowa, and began their invitations for membership in their society, when they did not extend invitations to two of the seven girls, the group was quite disturbed. They did not wish their friendship which was so important to each of them to be broken, so one of the seven suggested that they form a secret society of their own. They came together in agreement and began preparations immediately and history was made. One the first things they decided was that their membership would not be limited to the college campus, but would be extended to others after graduation. They selected for the name the English Letters P.E.O. – which publicly named the purpose and goal of their sisterhood. A Philanthropic and Educational Organization were they, and never has that title been desecrated or destroyed, for they have befriended all with whom they have come in contact in true benevolence and have with their various educational

gifts, raised the status of women in education and the status of womanhood in general.

They selected as their emblem the star whose five points represented the five values: Purity, Justice, Faith, Truth and Love. By adherence to those values by which they have been guided, not only in the initial formations of their sisterhood but over a century, P.E.O.'s existence has remained.

After quick but careful planning, it was on January 21, 1869 that seven girls wearing their Star Emblems formalized a College Sorority on the campus of Iowa Wesleyan University at Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, mainly for the purpose of bonding their valued friendship and perpetuating the ideals which they held as important values of living, and also because they wanted their sisterhood to be more than a college secret society. That has grown into an International Sisterhood in which thousands feel it a privilege to claim membership and have the right to wear the badge – the “Star of Values.”

Perhaps, the one thing they have given to all of us is the lovely spirit of P.E.O. That spirit which lends warmth and glow to shine in every phase of P.E.O. One could no more describe that spirit than he could describe silence or catch sunlight in his hands. Yet every P.E.O. knows what it is and prepares a niche for it in her heart and there that spirit shall stay forever. It shall not die, but shall live as long as women like you believe in Faith, Love Purity, Justice and Truth.

Now, let me read to you a lovely message that Alice Coffin, one of the seven founders, sent to a P.E.O. Convention nine months before her death, in 1888.

“I greet you as Sisters,” she wrote. “May you raise the standard of true womanhood, elevate the fallen, help the weak, scatter rose blossoms, make light the burden of the oppressed and give smiles.

I say to you in the words of Emily Dickinson;

“You, my sisters, might not need me,
But then you might.
I’ll let my head be just in sight.
A smile as small as mine might be
Precisely your necessity.”

I salute you, my sisters, I truly believe you hold dear the values of the star and carry its message. You have my smile and my deepest appreciation and P.E.O. love.