Founders' Day Program

“Patterns in P.E.O.

By Beverly Briggs Chapter BF Las Cruces
January 2002

Time 30 minutes

Introduction

(Three speakers are used named Sue, Chickie, Sunny and Beverly. Beverly does Introduction.)

Beverly:


This history of the 1st century of P.E.O. was published for its Centennial Observance in 1969. Stella Clapp, a past president of Kansas State Chapter, in 1959 was named historian and she prepared the manuscript for the book.

I was particularly intrigued with Chapter 6, Patterns in P.E.O., which told of the founders and how they developed patterns or rules, regulations and Procedures. After some editing to shorten the chapter, I devised a script with 4 speakers telling of the founder, experiences in developing the patterns, which we now follow.
Sue:
The development of cultural patterns within a group of individuals reveals imagination, communication, creativity, need, and the general ability to work together in developing these patterns. A small 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. But patterns to be useful must fall within a framework so the founders sought theirs among familiar organized groups. Two organized groups were established on the Iowa Wesleyan campus before P.E.O. was born there in January 1869: Beta Theta Pi and Pi Beta Phi. It was to be expected that a new society on the campus would attempt to fit itself into the fraternity pattern and so it did. But there were differences from the beginning. For one thing, P.E.O. was fashioned to commemorate the love and friendship of seven girls, and so long as P.E.O. exists it will reflect those qualities. In the early years Chapter A drew most of its membership from colleges, although members continued to be active after graduation, which pointed to the future development of a unique society destined to carve its own distinctive patterns.

Chickie:
The real nature of P.E.O. is learned only with long years of participation in its activities. Yet much of its inspiration and the only true documentary source of its early patterns have been caught and held for us between the covers of several slim volumes of minutes, beginning with April 16, 1870. Inside are the first available minutes of P.E.O. The ink has faded and much of the fine script is difficult to decipher, making it necessary to use a magnifying glass to read many of the pages. But the record is there: what the brave new members did, what they thought they were doing and the patterns that evolved.

Sunny:
It is a beautiful, valiant story of youth 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 a philosophy put to practical use; of vision and the pioneering adventurous spirit needed to make vision a reality. Those early years in Chapter A constitute the mutual background for every chapter that has followed.

Beverly:
On the day that P.E.O. began, the founders created three delightful patterns: the oath with its religious connotations and its touch of secrecy; the name, simple and precious; and the emblem, a beautiful star, symbolic of high ideas and aspirations. The oath constituted the initiation ceremony that was held in the music room at Iowa Wesleyan, when seven young
women became the first seven P.E.O.'s. That ceremony followed a pattern that was simplicity itself, yet because of their dedication the founders made it a cherished memory. The name pattern was a simple one. It wasn't the P.E.O. Lodge or Sorority; it wasn't the P.E.O. Sisterhood; it wasn't even the P.E.O. Society; it was simply P.E.O. The star was a natural choice for the emblem. The girls had studied astronomy and had been intrigued by the vastness of the universe thus presented to them. The star symbolized for them their own search for the highest and best things that life could give.

Sue:

Other patterns followed in rapid succession as P.E.O. developed. The pattern used for the many business meetings that followed was not a simple one. Wisely, and quite naturally, the founders adopted the pattern of literary societies with their excellent parliamentary procedure and demanding literary programs. The girls were not troubled by the proper conduct of business for they were experienced parliamentarians but they frankly admitted that the difficult part in perfecting their society was to determine what they wished to become. Three early business patterns distinctly pertinent to P.E.O. follow. Minutes of Chapter A furnish the documentary source.

Chickie:

Order of Exercises:
Besides the usual order of exercises, the girls added a few innovations of their own. Without exception the meetings were opened with prayer, although the office of chaplain did not become an elective one until Sept. 2, 1871. Officers were elected each six months and a simple installation ceremony was used, at least by the second year and probably from the beginning. The constitution and bylaws were customarily read at each meeting. It was the exception when they were not read and that exception was noted in the minutes. Programs were listed near the center of the order of exercises and usually consisted of music and a reading, essay, critical study, or sometimes a debate. For a short time roll call came just before adjournment. Two unusual items were included in the 1st recorded order of exercises: Chip Basket and Experience. Those 2 items were mentioned frequently in the minutes, but specific contents were not recorded. The titles suggest remarks that might be helpful to P.E.O. Chip Basket was discarded after a few years.

Sunny:

Membership:
Membership presents one of the intricate patterns in P.E.O. This was certain to be true since the founders stressed their love and friendship as incentives for organizing their society. The
original intent was to have only the seven founders as members. That idea was discarded soon when the girls began to vision a permanent society, one that would perpetuate itself. Naturally such a bold step required great care in the choice of new members. One can only imagine the deep concern of the founders as they discussed prospective members. Two paragraphs from Alice Bird's article, “The eighth P.E.O.,” are relevant here.

"When the seven met together on the January 21 and formed the P.E.O. Sisterhood, the call went up from all sides, "What about Carrie Woolson?" For while we seven were dear friends for years, there was another who, if she had been there would have been the eighth P.E.O. She had been with us during three years of college life, and in the fourth year her father sent her to Albion College to graduate under his friend, Dr. Jocelyn. But we soon passed it over, and said that as soon as Carrie came home in the spring we would make her a P.E.O. To me Carne had always been one of the original P.E.O.'s. When she returned in March, six weeks later, she became one of us, but Franc and Mary will nod approvingly when I assert that she was one of the original P.E.O.".

Beverly:

The end of 1869 had initiated at least sixteen young women. In those days it was not uncommon to initiate girls thirteen, fourteen or fifteen years old. Presumably this pattern was established to keep a competitive society from initiating them. Lulu Corkhill was one who was initiated in March 1869, either just before or just after her fifteenth birthday. Lulu was delighted and wore her mother's large shawl to the initiation meeting because she thought it made her look older. The minutes of Chapter A reveal another unusual membership pattern. Mothers of coveted, but very young, girls were sometimes contacted about their daughters joining P.E.O. at some future time. It was an expression of interest in the girl, a first contact. Sometimes that approach worked out favorably, sometimes not.

Sue:

The early pattern of voting on prospective members might be termed fascinating and thorough. For a number of years each member of a chapter was required to vote on every name presented. For those members not present to vote in meetings, an investigating committee was appointed to see each one, collect their votes and report at the next meeting. The Bloomfield chapter, organized as Chapter F in 1874, had a lovely little wooden ballot box for collecting the votes. It was made of dark wood with brass trimmings, and had a slit in the top where the vote could be inserted. The box could also be locked. Presumably the president kept the brass key in her possession. This ballot box is still in excellent condition. A few years ago special messenger sent this box to the
Executive Office in Mount Pleasant. It was placed in the Memory Room of Chapter Original A.

Chickie:
At one time a prospective member of the Bloomfield Chapter, Lola Stansberry Savage, was asked to accompany the investigating committee on its rounds. Lola was 14 years old at that time. She did not go inside when stops were made so had no idea what was taking place. Years later when the Bloomfield chapter had become Chapter B, Iowa, she wrote to them as follows: "Helen Taylor and Belle Traverse were the ones who took the ballot box around. To their everlasting credit I knew nothing of their mission. Can you imagine anyone being so simple minded now as not to even guess their mission?"

Sunny:
Finance:
One of the incredible patterns in early P.E.O. concerned finance. There were no dues until after Grand Chapter was organized in 1883. The method of handling chapter finance was a simple one. When money was needed the girls fined themselves the necessary amount, usually from ten cents to fifty cents each, and a committee was appointed to collect the fines and pay the bills. A little later the word "tax" was used interchangeably with "fines" and many were the taxes levied. If difficulty was encountered in collecting the money, someone suggested that the treasurer "read out the fines." The early P.E.O. financial pattern was as simple as that, and it worked.

Beverly:
Financing and Handling of Pins:
Were it not that Chapter A supplied the pins for all P.E.O.'s, this section on finance would have ended with the first paragraph. However financial difficulties sometimes arose because an initiate was careless about paying for her pin and Mr. Crane, though patient, had to be paid. Mr. Crane, of the Crane Jewelry Store in Mount Pleasant, had secured the first seven pins for the founders. For several years he had various manufacturing firms make pins, usually keeping some in his own store to be engraved as needed. Chapter A received and approved all orders for pins, ordered the engraving, then delivered the pin to the new P.E.O. With each transaction Chapter A became responsible for reimbursing Mr. Crane for the price of one pin. The price of pins varied from $2.50 to $3.00. In October, 1870, after a troublesome debt at Mr. Crane's had been paid, a bylaw was put into effect requiring an initiation fee of $3.00, the society then to furnish the pin.
That bylaw exists to this day although amounts have varied through the years. So far as known, the wisdom of that financial pattern has never been questioned.

**Sue:**
Sociality:
No history of P.E.O. would be complete if it failed to include the social or entertainment pattern. There were the usual church, college and family events, but members of Chapter A, and later other chapters, created their own P.E.O. entertainments, be they simple parties or elaborate social functions. Few sets of minutes failed to mention parties either past or in the planning stage. There were many socials, simple and sometimes impromptu affairs, with programs and refreshments. There were taffy pulls, slight rides, picnics, oyster suppers, dinner parties, receptions, banquets, the strawberry party for parents, the Calico Party, the elaborate Sidereal Soiree and many, many more. Parties were carefully planned. Committees were appointed, personnel, finance and refreshments discussed and necessary arrangements made. It is all there in the minutes of Chapter A, and what a treasure that is.

**Chickie:**
The second set of minutes, April 30, 1870, reveals plans for a picnic in Rome, a tiny town seven miles west of Mount Pleasant. The sisters at the seminary, Chapter B, were to be invited. But plans did not develop immediately. It was not until July 30 that the picnic was set for the next Thursday and Alice Coffin and Pauline Ambler appointed to arrange for a bus. Then that date had to be changed but a motion carried August 13 for a called meeting to make arrangements for the picnic. Later minutes do not report on the picnic. It may or may not have been held.

**Sunny:**
Then came the 1st real party, the elegant Sidereal Soiree. Plans were launched by motion, November 5, 1870, to have an annual reunion of P.E.O.'s sometime between Christmas and New Year's. Alice Bird likened that reunion to a housewarming: "Thus when we girls had completed our seven-room house, and hung out the star for a lantern, we wished to place a climax on the whole by having a grand party." Elaborate parties require elaborate plans, and minutes through November and December record those plans in some detail. A grand name had to be chosen for such a grand party. Many of the names discussed reflected Latin, French or astronomy. It was Maine Allen (Mary) who finally suggested Sidereal Soiree, and so the party was named. Printed invitations were ordered simple white cards with a gold star near the top on which were the letters P.E.O.

**Beverly:**
Guests were carefully selected, with each P.E.O. suggesting one name. A committee arranged the names and presented them to the chapter for approval. One can only guess
at the dire consequences that might have resulted had a name been rejected. Fortunately all were approved, and invitations were sent to the gentlemen, in the name of the Society, and each was assigned as escort to the young woman who had suggested his name. Such a unique pattern for arranging dates reflected great dignity and that was important. Alice Bird described the escorts of the founders:

"The most important item was the selection of the gentlemen whom we would invite to this grand party for they must be grand gentlemen, as indeed they were. I am not certain about them all, but I imagine the initials of the one Franc Roads asked were S.E. (Simon Elliott); those of Mary Allen's escort were C.L.S. (Charles L. Stafford); Allie Coffin asked Will Pearson; Ella Stewart invited Dillon Payne; Sue Pearson asked a dozen probably... she wouldn't know when to stop; and Hattie Briggs maybe asked Robert Burton. I told my father I thought of asking Mr. Babb (Washington Irving Babb). "Well," said he, "Babb's been through the Civil War end is old enough to have a little sense. You can go with him."

Sue:
It was decided that each P.E.O. should wear whatever she liked remembering, of course to wear her pin. A tax of 15 cents per member was collected to pay for the invitations. Mr. Charles Stafford, whom Mary Allen married the following year, was invited to ask the blessing; the party began at 7 p.m. And ended at 12 o'clock; Colonel Root of the Brazelton Hotel was to be paid beforehand; and tickets were to be given to Mrs. Root in the dressing room. It is not known exactly how many attended the party, but 100 tickets had been ordered. There were many P.E.O.'s by that time - 16 initiates in 1869 and a similar number in 1870. So the party was not a small one. There were toasts arranged by Cassie Allen and Franc Roads and read at the party by Cassie Allen.

Chickie:
Alice Bird described the type of programs and dinner menu that would have been appropriate for that time: The next important question was: What shall we order for our supper. I have no menu card... we didn't have such things then... but instinctive recollection would suggest roast turkey, escalloped oysters, meshed potatoes, coleslaw (we had no salads then), and for dessert marble cake and ice cream. The ice cream was quickly brought from Well Fluke's ice cream saloon, for packing ice cream in ice for delivery was unheard of then. Then came the literary program for the feast. Toasts were for old people so I imagine Mary Allen read an essay on "The Beauties of Nature"; Franc Roads one on "The Emancipation of Women;" then Alice Briggs and Ella Stewart played an instrumental duet; where they crossed hands, one going to the north end one to the south... oh how fine it was. Then Alice Coffin end Ella Stewart sang one of their famous duets, "In the Starlight." Sue and I then stepped out, hand in hand, and spoke a
piece - maybe "Beautiful Snow" or "The Charge of the Light Brigade" or perhaps "Curfew Shell not Ring Tonight." In this piece we used to grasp an imaginary bell clapper, frantically, and swing out over an imaginary audience.

Sunny:
For sheer beauty end individuality, another party, the Calico Party, must have been ‘camp’ for 1873. How Core Baxter's large home must have reverberated the party sounds; and how lovely the girls must have looked in their fresh, colorful, calico dresses! Invitations were printed on oblongs of black and white striped calico, one-fourth inch stripes. The following lines were printed on the white stripes:

- The P.E.O. Sisterhood presents compliments
- For Thursday Evening, January 30
- At half past six o'clock, at the home of Cora Baxter.
- Ladies to appear in calico. Refreshments at eight o'clock.

Beverly:
It was a large party; at one point in the planning fifty more invitations were ordered. A reception must have occupied the early part of the evening. Little is known about the program except the suggestion that those P.E.O.'s who play in public should be prepared and should not refuse if called upon. Of course there were the inevitable toasts, probably given during the supper hour. It was an oyster supper with all of the trimmings, and with confections and nuts added for good measure. There were toasts from representatives of the various societies invited. In those days the preparation and delivery of toasts constituted a highly developed art form. Seldom were they overlooked at a party where they might appropriately be used. The party was financed, as usual, by taxing each member a specified amount.

Sue:
One of the largest and most elaborate P.E.O. parties of all time was the one held at the Leissenring home in June 1880. Ella Avery Leissenring's initiation is recorded in the first available minutes of Chapter A, April 16,1870. The party was sometimes spoken of as the Strawberry Party since Mrs. Leissenring had planned to invite the P.E.O.'s for a party during strawberry time anyway. It was decided, "with unusual enthusiasm", to invite the parents of P.E.O.'s and a few from other societies. Three men were hired as waiters. The menu included roast turkey, sliced tongue, pickles, buns, angel food cake, ice cream (Neapolitan) strawberries, coffee and iced tea. The party was a huge success even though strawberries were off the market and oranges were substituted.

Chickie:
Education and Philanthropy.
Education and philanthropy are two structural patterns that have been a part of P.E.O. since its beginning. Different as they are, a certain interrelation existed between these two patterns as they developed through P.E.O. channels. Eventually, and quite naturally, it was education that became the chief philanthropy of P.E.O. The first laws of P.E.O. stressed education. True it was called general improvement, but general improvement, or self-improvement as we think of it is a form of education. 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 education minded. By experience they were Students at Iowa Wesleyan, five of them seniors, and college life was the focal point of their activities. Education was the thing they knew best. The personnel of Chapter A and other early chapters were chosen from among college students for several years. Programs conveyed a distinct educational aspect and P.E.O. 's were invited to participate in many functions of an educational nature.

Sunny:
It was inevitable that the founders and their contemporaries should also develop a keen spiritual awareness and a deep social consciousness. That was part of their heritage. They constantly sought benevolent activities that 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.

Members of early P.E.O. chapters successfully carried out hundreds of local projects of an altruistic nature. Libraries became a favorite field of endeavor. Many gifts of money, books and services were noted in minutes and in the White History. Chapter A had sidewalks laid to the city cemetery. Later they had a beautiful fountain built on the town square. Their first recorded project was to pay for shingles to put a new roof on the home of a needy family. Similar projects were repeated in other chapters.

Beverly:
Hospitals in many localities received help from various chapters, and sometimes hospital rooms were furnished by P.E.O.'s. Receiving attention were Orphan’s homes and homes for the aged. The kindergarten movement was promoted in Washington, Iowa, and elsewhere. Kindergarten rooms were furnished and occasionally needy children were maintained through the school year. Flood and cyclone victims received help, as did famine sufferers in Russia. There were countless gifts of food and clothing, some of the clothing being made by the girls themselves. A flag was presented to a company of state militia. A bandstand and comfortable benches were furnished for a park in Leon, Iowa. Occasionally a P.E.O. flowerbed appeared in a park or on a campus.
Sue:
In the fall of 1880 members of Chapter A planned and executed a festival, the proceeds being used for charitable purposes. It was held in a hall in the business district. Admission tickets and supper tickets were sold. There was a supper table, a candy table, a mush and milk table and perhaps several others. There was also a program at which Alice Bird Babb presided. At Mrs. Babb's suggestion, a speech contest was held and the audience vote decided the winner.

Chickie:
This is only a suggestion of the many, many projects undertaken by early chapters. It shows how altruistically oriented those young women were. Occasionally there was talk of a unified project but none materialized until the Educational Fund was established in 1907.

Sunny:
Truly there are many great patterns in P.E.O. But the loveliest pattern of all, and the most elusive, is the Spirit of P.E.O. - that spirit which lends warmth and glow and shine to every phase of P.E.O. One could no more describe it than he could describe silence or catch sunlight in his hands. Yet every P.E.O. knows what it is. Each interprets it in the light of her 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.