We cannot fully appreciate the present unless we know something of the past. The style and customs of P.E.O. have changed with our mode of living and the needs of an ever expanding and complex organization.

Each year we honor our founders and stress the ideals which have been built upon over a period of over 100 years. As members, we know very little of the actual business of the organization, the early customs and the evolutions that have made P.E.O. what it is today.

Most of us know the story of the beginning of P.E.O. but we are vague as to what happened to the college chapter and why it went off campus. I will give you a condensed version taken from the “Story of P.E.O.”

In the beginning, it was a college chapter but as members grew older and passed out of the college life they still retained their membership until sometime in the ‘80’s. Because of time of meetings and other reasons this did not prove to be a happy arrangement, so the college girls asked for a chapter of their own, and were given a chapter as Chapter AJ. Other chapters had been formed in Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri and Illinois in the meantime and were lettered alphabetically. Later on relettering of the chapters in 1891, AJ became Iowa Chapter S.

The college chapter was in many ways a law unto itself and was a sore trial to the state officers. They had to compete with Greek letter societies whose laws were made to fit college needs.. The P.E.O. laws had come to be such as fitted the needs of the city chapters. The college girls had to rush the new girls, choose pledges and initiate them all in a few weeks. They could not wait for a year’s residence before initiating, for consent from the home chapter. They also had a second degree which was a fun initiation and similar to “hell” week. Finally in 1902 they surrendered their P.E.O. chapter and joined a Greek letter sorority, Alpha Xi Delta. The girls who were P.E.O.’s did retain membership but on longer as a college chapter.

The following article is apparently the original constitution and pledge:

On the morning of January 21, 1869, seven girls (ages 17, 18, 19, and four 21) met in the music room of the Iowa Wesleyan University. The object of this informal meeting was to contemplate a secret organization, which for friendship and honor under conflicting circumstances it seemed necessary to establish.

Whereas recognizing it to be the chief duty of each individual to cultivate her powers, physical, mental, moral and social to her fullest extent, we organize into a secret society.
The P.E.O.’s shall not be limited as to time but shall be a permanent society. It shall not be limited as to place but shall be extended into different institutions at the discretion of the society.

Rules of Order
1. At the calling of the house to order all whispering or disturbances of any kind shall cease.
2. While the president is addressing the society or putting a question no member shall carry on a private conversation.

Pledge
You have presented yourself at our request to become a member of the P.E.O. society, in so doing you acknowledge it is a voluntary act, that you have been biased by no one on this decision. You probably understand the importance of this step, but before taking the oath we assure you the importance is great, the obligation binding as life and that in this particular, as in every other good act there is no royal road to excellence. Convinced of this do you still desire to become a P.E.O. and are you willing to hear the oath? Acknowledging your personal accountability to God and your faith in this Holy Book do you solemnly promise to keep as an honored secret the proceedings of this body and thus cultivate yourself and aid the society? This talisman hath an abode in heaven. Its five points are represented by hope, faith, love purity and fidelity. May this star which I place on your shoulder, be to you a beacon light through the dark tempests of life. May its light never betray you but lead you nearer and nearer the bright morning star. It is the expectation of future happiness that gives joy, as stars of heaven shed a halo of light so may they ever cluster around these five points the light of fidelity.

(The meaning of the letters were given.)

When Hattie Briggs suggested the name of the society, she drew the seven girls around her and whispered it and that has been the custom through the years. We like the mystery which surrounds us but in the early days of its history everything about P.E.O. was a secret and mysterious. The meetings were held in secret, no one but the members knew when or where meetings were held. No one outside knew who the officers were. Each member went alone to the meeting and took a round about way. Many of the early initiates were girls 15 and 16 years of age, and rules of society were far stricter, consequently expelling a member was far more prevalent then.

P.E.O. Emblems
The founders went to Mr. Crane of Crane Jewelry Company in Mt. Pleasant to have the emblems made and swore him to secrecy until the pins were first worn. There were no initiation fees so each girl bought her own pin. They were large and flat and made of lovely yellow gold. There was no engraving on the back and no law governing who could wear them so we find there were instances of other jewelers
who copied them and women other than P.E.O.’s who bought and wore them. The founders and early initiates would sometimes wear their pins in their hair, on their hats in at their throats. At one time, pins were draped in black for 21 days after the death of a member. When Dr. Belden ordered the girls to cease wearing the pins and to put them in a vault, many pins were supposedly lost and the girls wore them under their blouses.

In 1904 the star emblem was made convex so it would appear smaller. In 1915 the large star was replaced by the smaller star used today. There has been one jeweled pin in P.E.O. – it was presented to Alice Bird Babb in 1902 by Chapter A of Mt. Pleasant.

**Proceedings of a Regular Meeting of a Chapter in 1869**

There would be from 5 to 10 ladies present. A wooden star was hung on the door to designate a meeting was in progress – to warn visitors. As no gavel was used at that time the chapter used a bell.

1 tap of the bell seats the chapter  
2 taps for officers to stand  
3 taps for the entire chapter to stand  
4 taps the call to order

The president calls the chapter to order then taps three times for chapter to stand, the guard takes the password which was different than now. The chapter sings “Bless Be the Tie.” The chaplain gives the devotions and all kneel beside their chairs when giving the Lord’s Prayer. Minutes are read – a long discussion over wording adopted or approved. If you wished to present a name, the president or guard passed a paper to each one. All members voted and if one was absent, she sent a written and sealed vote to the chapter. The president appointed an investigating committee of three. The name was entered in the minutes of the meeting whether it was approved or rejected.

Initiation consisted of pledge and oath, password and meaning of letters. Officers were elected every six months. Programs – studies of foreign countries – France, Italy, England. Food, hygiene and book reviews. One verse of “God Be With You” was sung just before the close of the meeting.

**Traditions**

In 1886 the points of the star were first named and the initiation ceremony prepared by Mrs. Effie Hoffman Rogers, the third Grand Chapter president, was adopted. Mrs. Rogers also established and was editor of THE RECORD which cost $.75 per year.

In 1896 at the Nebraska convention it was moved and seconded that each chapter be instructed to provide a floor piece similar to the one used by the Holdrege chapter for
initiation. Also that we conduct our initiation in a similar manner as Chapter K in Lincoln.

It was not to take the place of the Holdrege plan but to be used in small rooms when the other ceremony could not be carried out. The initiation ceremony of Holdrege has been lost but Chapter K’s parlor one, with a few changes, is the star ceremony used today. It was the work of Ida B. Johnson of Chapter K and was adopted by the Supreme Chapter in 1897.

Our founders called P.E.O. – the Order of P.E.O., then P.E.O. Society and finally P.E.O. Sisterhood. Winona Evans Reeves proposed the change to P.E.O. International. Sisterhood after Canada had provincial chapters at every Supreme convention as long as she lived. Chapters were named alphabetically according to the granting of the charters until 1891. Nebraska was the first State to organize a state chapter and caused quite a ruckus at a grand chapter meeting because they objected to being subordinated to the grand chapter of Iowa. Things were finally straightened out and it was decided that each state could form a chapter if there were seven chapters in the state. The governing body of P.E.O. was chapter A until 1883, then a grand chapter was founded as governing body. In 1893 the Supreme Chapter was formed and each state formed a state chapter. Each state then renamed their chapter letters accordingly. York, which was R, became Nebraska chapter A. Norfolk became Nebraska chapter C; Superior became Nebraska chapter D. and so on. Other states did the same.

In 1907 soft music during initiation was introduced.

Mrs. Carrie Hapeman of Chapter N, Minden, Nebraska, who was the 15th Supreme president, made some changes in the initiation. She also introduced the installation ceremony.

One of the questions asked at the convention in 1900 was, “If an active member who has not received the pass word wishes to attend a meeting, does the guard give it or the vice president?” Answer: The president leaves the vice president in the chair and goes to give the password.

The secret work used to be written in the constitution.

We spell dimit with an I for at one time it was used both ways – de or di, the dictionary allowing both forms. It was asked that one method of spelling the word be decided upon and used. The spelling “dimit” was adopted because it carried the idea “from” while demit carried the idea “down.”

The first model meeting was held in 1913. Oregon used it first as a form of entertainment at a state convention. The officers and members of convention were so pleased with the idea that they suggested all states adopt it for their conventions.
As far back as 1890 there is a record of B.I.L.'s in connection with P.E.O. In Nebraska about that time they called themselves MMS to stand for Married Martyrs.

A major change was made in the initiation ceremony in 1921 and there have been some word changes since but basically very little change since 1921. In 1916 the white Bible was introduced. These were ordered from England and were very hard to get during World War I.

There were three hand signals used in the early days of P.E.O. In the 1920’s all of the special work was whispered. The password was the English version of the one used now. The reason for changing the word was to make the password less distinguishable to possible non-P.E.O.’s. The grip was also part of the secret work – it was a hand clasp and a pressure on the third finger. The emblem was a pillow and was handmade. Initiates knelt when they took the oath.

The objects and aims were in the constitution and we were not required to memorize them.

A tradition at Supreme and Nebraska State conventions was Bertha Clark Hughes and her red ostrich fan. Bertha carried the fan to the first banquet that Nebraska State Chapter held and when she was state president also used it when there were banquets at Supreme and when she was supreme president. She also attended 51 supreme conventions – with the red fan.

This now belongs to the past and we number its days among our yesterdays and look backward with a nostalgic smile.