Then and Now: Are We Still Relevant?
Written 1996 by Patricia Wheeler, CU, Oregon

For over 100 years, P.E.O. chapters around the world have set aside a day in January to honor and celebrate the seven young women who were our founders. From the perspective of the society we live in today, their accomplishment might not seem too out of the ordinary. I know as a new member, the first time I heard their story I found it interesting. But it wasn’t until I really stopped and thought about where P.E.O. has come since its inception that I began to appreciate the scope of their accomplishment. These seven women, living in a time when very few women were engaged in endeavors outside the home or involved in social and intellectual issues, established an organization based on values, beliefs, and goals that so captured the minds and imaginations of other women, that hundreds of thousands of them around the globe have ascribed to their vision. It is astonishing to me that virtually anywhere I go in the world, I would be welcomed by sisters who share this vision and work toward the same goals I espouse. Few other organizations, whether male, female or coed, can make this claim. Obviously, our founders honored ideals that strike a very deep cord in the human heart. But what was going on in their world that prompted them to concretize their values and ideals into an organization that would transform ideas into action? What is going on in our world that makes the continuation of that organization relevant? And finally, what are we doing to assure that our organization stays relevant?

In the next few minutes I invite you to join me in a brief review of the social and political climate of the 19th century during which our founders lived. Knowing that all of you understand time constrains imposed by very busy lives, I have elected to borrow some comments related to the history from a presentation developed by Kathleen Strack of Chapter DZ for a Founder’s Day Program in 1980. She did a great job and I have never felt the need to reinvent the wheel! At the completion of her review, we will take a comparative look at the social and political climate of our own world. It is my hope that such a comparison will answer any question of relevancy. And finally, we will look at the question of how we, like our sisters before us, can concretize our ideals in a meaningful way in our own world through our association with P.E.O.

Kathleen says: “What was our founders’ world like in 1869, the year P.E.O. was born – so different, yet in some ways, so much the same. There were worldwide problems then, stirrings of things to come.

“On the continent … Russia had been undergoing moderate reform; the serfs had been recently emancipated; the courts were being reformed; a group of radicals had organized for revolutionary action and resorted to violence. Alexander II was Czar . . . In France, 1869 was the eve of another war. The Franco-Prussian War resulted in the defeat of France, who ceded Alsace Lorraine to Prussia . . . In Great Britain, Victoria was Queen and society found the royal family rather dull. Relations with the United States were strained by the recent war in which the English government had first backed the cause of the South because she needed cotton for her mills . . . In Africa, which was largely
unknown, European nations vied with each other for territory and power. Livingston had not yet been ‘lost’ … In Asia, China was still under the Manchus. Girls felt were bound. Russia was applying pressure on China …

“Here at home, we were picking up the pieces after the most devastating internal crisis of our nation, the Civil War. 600,000 men were killed and much of our country destroyed. Then, as now, there was much criticism of the government. Andrew Johnson was serving the remaining days of his term, after the unsuccessful attempt to impeach him instigated by those who wanted to supplant the Executive branch of government by the Legislative. Ulysses S. Grant succeeded Johnson and was inaugurated in the spring of 1869. At his inaugural, a contemporary source said, ‘No one denied the need for reform. The whole government from top to bottom was rotten with the senility of what was antiquated and the instability of what was improvised.’ Grant faced a monetary crisis in 1870 when Jay Gould almost cornered the gold market. Although the president was himself an honest man, his reputation was tarnished by the corruption of his administration.”

There are other interesting facts about he era of our founders. “Immigration into this country increased rapidly. In 1868, immigrants were naturalized in New York at the rate of 100 per day … Women workers suffered … because they were unprotected. Susan B. Anthony was head of the newly formed Working Women’s Protective Association. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was three years old. An abused nine year old child was put under its protection at this time ‘as an animal’ because there was no other protection available … This was the height of the Victorian era and in this completely male-dominated society only boys were considered worth educating. The prevailing attitude was that a young lady’s primary function was to marry as soon as possible and produce children. One writer at the time said, ‘A girl only needs enough reading to study her Bible, enough arithmetic to count her egg money, and enough geography to find her way around the kitchen…’ A woman … had no legal rights, no economic power and no social position without a husband. She could not vote nor could she train for medicine or law or business careers. When she married, she actually became the property of her husband along with his livestock and land. If she inherited money or land, her husband controlled it.”

Such was the world of 1869. And what of 1996? How do these areas of our world compare? How much progress have we made? Today, the entire Soviet Union, and in fact the communist world, has experience huge upheaval which will have lasting effects worldwide politically, economically, and humanely. Even today, the Russian Republic is involved in a bloody prolonged civil war that is bringing suffering to untold numbers of men, women and children.

In the last few years, France and most of Europe has experience a recession that has effected the agricultural as well as the industrial segments of their society, and therefore all of its citizens.
Well, we can hardly say that the British are finding their royal family dull today! Yet what that family is experiencing is only a reflection of the moral crises that face all families in our modern world.

And how can I succinctly describe the horrors that our fellow human beings in Africa are experiencing during our lifetime? Drought, famine, war atrocities, disease, cruel tribal customs for women, are only worlds that do not begin to portray the untold suffering that is the only life that many on that continent know.

Today our Chinese sisters and brothers are subjected to human rights violations while the Chinese government hosts the International Women’s Conference to promote discussion of the rights and place of women in our world.

Here at home we are still involved in a civil war, but one that is potentially more deadly than that of 1863. Our cities are the battlegrounds, our children are the soldiers, and we are all the victims. And though the world has changed in some ways, women in our society still face problems of almost overwhelming proportion: family violence, child, wife and elder abuse; racism; discrimination in education and in the work place; poverty; single parenthood; women’s health care problems.

And what of our government today? I believe we can describe the feelings and impressions the people have for their elected officials today in just a few worlds: suspicion, distrust, disgust, disappointment. We have a financial crisis unprecedented in our history; the reputations of too many public officials are tarnished by greed, corruption and immorality; our judicial system seems to have lost the ability to administer justice; our men and children are unprotected in an increasingly violent society.

Today our populace passes a law that denies immigrants in one of our states education and health care for their children because of the financial strain on the budget, and, I am afraid, because of the fear of the growing numbers of immigrants to our country. Racism is on the rise, and we increasingly see acts of hatred against those of other races or beliefs. And we still require special societies to protect our children and our women. Such is the world we live in today.

How did our founders make P.E.O. relevant in their day? Listen to these familiar words: “To seek growth in charity toward all . . . and a just comprehension of and adherence to . . . faith, love, purity, justice and truth . . . To seek growth in knowledge . . . To obtain all possible wisdom . . . To radiate all light possible by conversation, by writing, and by the right exercise of any talents we possess. . . to aim at self control. . . To consider thoughtfully our influence in the community . . . and a determination to do all we can at all times and under all circumstances to express a loving concern . . . These aims and objectives outlined the path they wanted to take to better the society in which the lived. But not only did they write the words, they also lived them. For their insight, vision, and active dedication to their ideals, we honor our seven founders.
ELLA STEWART, a teacher and a counselor who taught delinquent boys to become successful citizens.

ALICE BIRD BABBB, who worked for women’s suffrage, wrote the first constitution for P.E.O. and the pledge of membership, and was associate editor of THE P.E.O. RECORD.

HATTIE BRIGGS BOUSQUET, who said, “Let’s have a society of our own!” and did much to organize that first chapter.

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN, whose aim was to inspire and encourage talented students to reach their full potential, and through whose encouragement P.E.O. took such a strong interest in education.

SUELA PEARSON PENFIELD, who through the wealth and position afforded her by marriage, became a leader in philanthropic and social circles.

MARY ALLEN STAFFORD, an active participant in P.E.O. all of her life, who especially enhanced the image of our sisterhood while her husband served as president of Iowa Wesleyan from 1891 to 1899.

FRANC ROADS ELLIOT, who was the most progressive and visionary of the founders and had a vivid interest in education, the advancement of women, and the change of social conditions. As a crusader, she counted as her friends the great activists Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Frances Willard, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. We celebrate these women for their contributions.

And how do we make P.E.O. relevant in our day? I believe the words and ideals set down by our founders are just as essential today as the day they were written. We continue to be an independent, strong and committed organization. We have tremendous potential to positively impact our world. In 1983, two sisters from Chapter P in Oregon City pointed out an amazing fact: 215,000 sisters meeting for approximately 15 three-hour meetings between one Founder’s Day and the next, adds up to over 9 ½ million woman hours. What will those hours spent together mean to our world? And to the worlds to follow? If what the Founders did developed into what we are today, what do you think could develop out of those 9 ½ million hours? Think of the possibilities directed toward good through heightening our own awareness and that of others; increasing our personal involvement in our community; speaking out against wrongs; offering support to those in need; protecting the innocent of all kinds in our society; expanding our own tolerance and teaching by our example; and supporting each other in all these endeavors personally and as sisters in P.E.O.

The values and beliefs we hold as sisters in P.E.O. have not changed. Today let us honor our founders, all of our predecessors, our contemporary sisters, and our future sisters by remembering the purpose for which we were founded. Let us strive in our chapters, our families, our communities and our personal journeys to live up to the standards of
womanhood that bind us together and to truly live the objects and aims we proclaim at our meetings.

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With excerpts from Kathleen Strack, DZ, 1980,
Betty McMullin and Mary Elise Diedrich, P, 1983