

History of Our Emblem, the P.E.O. Star

Nothing establishes immediate communication faster between two people than a little gold pin. It bridges all the preliminary conversation that usually is necessary to become acquainted with another person. The pin speaks for itself. It breaks through a natural reticence and establishes a basis for further friendship.

That pin is our P.E.O. star.

The history of the gold star is part of P.E.O. lore. The pin has gone through changes over the years, but essentially it remains the same as envisioned by Alice Coffin who suggested the star as the emblem for P.E.O.

The responsibility for creating this pin was given to Mr. Crane of the Crane Jewelry Store in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. The first one was made as a sample and approved by the girls. They were satisfied with the large gold star with the black outline and the letters "P.E.O." in the center. They voted to allow Alice Bird to have the first one. It had the single name "Alice" on the back.

Mr. Crane must be given credit for creating six additional pins on demand in record time for the girls to wear as they marched into that chapel service. It created a sensation that day, worn on the left shoulder of the white calico apron.

For several years, Mr. Crane had various manufacturing firms make the pins which he kept in his own store to be engraved as the need arose. 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 the pin. This varied from \$2.50 to \$3 each. In October 1870, after a troublesome debt at Mr. Crane's had been paid, a bylaw was put into effect requiring that an initiation fee of \$3 be paid and that the society would furnish the pin. So far, the wisdom of that financial pattern has never been questioned.

The Founders gave serious thought as to how the star should be worn. They decided on the left shoulder where, as Ella Stewart wrote later, "It might be touched as a signal of distress or warning." A sister, seeing such a signal, would come to the rescue. This, no doubt, would pertain mainly to social situations where a sister needed deliverance from an unhappy predicament. The star also could be worn as a decoration at the discretion of the member. Sometimes it was attached to a fancy hair comb or displayed in the hair with a chain held by combs. Both Franc Roads and Ella Stewart liked to wear their pins in their hair and all of the Founders occasionally wore their pins on their collars.

It was difficult to enforce rules regarding the wearing of the pin, especially in regard to the girls lending their star to a boyfriend. If caught lending her pin, the owner could be fined \$1. Dillon Payne, a classmate of all the founders, recalled the fracas caused by a P.E.O. who loaned her pin to a boy. The word was out that one of the boys was in possession of a star. Every sister was eager to learn who the guilty party was. Unfortunately, there was no safety catch and the pin was not securely fastened and he lost it. The pin was found by a chapter member who was able to

identify the guilty party by the name on the back of the pin. The owner was called before her sisters for an accounting. She was saved by the young man who gallantly assured the sisters that he had stolen the pin so his lady friend could not be blamed. And so, a crisis was averted.

In order to keep some kind of control over the pins, they were periodically “called in.” Dr. McFarland, president of Iowa Wesleyan, once collected some P.E.O. pins, but assured the owners that they would be returned when their grades came up to standard. Another reason for the pins to be called in was the result of the great rivalry between the I.C.s (Pi Beta Phi’s) and the P.E.O.s at Belden’s Seminary. The rivalry waxed so strong that the president of the school asked that the pins from each society be turned in until the girls got along better. Not all of them complied with this directive as some secretly hid their pins on their slips.

Chapter A started the custom of draping their pins in black for 21 days when a P.E.O. sister died. The custom continued into the early 1920s. The method of draping the pin differed among the chapters with many attaching the pin to a black crepe rosette or ribbon bow.

In 1919 the Constitution and bylaws made it obligatory for an inactive member to forfeit her pin. This ruling was not adopted as a disciplinary measure but rather as an attempt to discourage members from becoming inactive. It did. The next two years there were 1,800 reinstatements.

Then there are the stories of the Founders losing their pins. Alice Coffin lost her pin. Some years later it was recovered by Dr. J. B. Combs of Washington, Iowa, who wrote to Alice’s sister, Mary Skiff of Newton, Iowa, that he found it on the Wilton Junction, Iowa, depot floor around Christmas 1870.

Mary Allen Stafford lost her pin in 1882 while visiting her aunt in Washington, Iowa. In 1924 Mrs. Stafford was the honored guest at a luncheon given by Chapter J, Washington. She was presented with a gift, “a little token of our chapter’s esteem.” In the gift box was her original P.E.O. pin which she had lost 40 years before in the garden of her aunt’s home. It was found by Susie Anderson, the occupant of the house, while she was preparing dirt for her porch boxes. The pin was restored by the president’s husband who was a jeweler and “presented to the happy owner.”

Alice Bird Babb said she lost her pin in 1883 on a visit to Illinois on the train where it was found by a gentleman who, it is reported, refused to part with it.

Ella Stewart and Alice Bird exchanged pins when they were in school, no doubt bonding their friendship in such a manner. This has resulted in various accountings throughout the years as to what happened to their original pins. We know that Alice wore Ella’s pin for many years as she often referred to it in her speeches. Upon Ella’s death her mother sent the pin she wore to Alice. Shortly before Alice’s death, Alice had it delivered to Mount Pleasant in person by her husband. “It is too precious to trust to express,” she wrote. As far as we can determine Ella’s pin is the only remaining pin of the original seven in existence.

There is a glass display case in the P.E.O. Centennial Center in Des Moines, Iowa, where the pins from years past are displayed. They are various sizes – large and small, flat and curved. One can almost judge the economy of the country as the pin went from the original large 1-inch

gold star in 1869 to a small one in 1915 to a larger one again in 2009, and from the changing price of gold as the pin went from 14-karat pure gold in 1869 to 10-karat yellow gold to the gold alloy (gold-plated brass metal) used since 1974.

The emblem is only one part of our heritage, but a meaningful one, to those of us who proudly wear the gold star which proclaims, "I am a P.E.O." Lue Spencer, Nebraska, summed it up best when she said in 1915, "not the size of the star, but the size of the P.E.O. who wears the star is of utmost importance."

How to Wear Your Emblem (from The P.E.O. Record, May-June 2009)

The emblem, available in either button back or clasp version, is worn to all chapter meetings and in public. It is worn on the left side, over the heart and above all other emblematic pins. Nametags and costume jewelry may be worn above the P.E.O. emblem. It may be worn on a dress or suit jacket (including lapels), but not on an outer coat. The P.E.O. emblem is lent to each member for her sole use as long as she is an active member. International takes no position on the wearing of pin keepers or holders and has no requirement for the wearing of gavel guards. The most important thing to remember about wearing your emblem is to wear it with pride!