

# History of the Marguerite

*Bring this program to life by giving everyone a marguerite to hold. OR bring a vase and some greenery and have everyone else bring a single marguerite for assembly into a nice floral arrangement. Conduct a drawing to see who gets to take it home! OR have everyone bring a small arrangement of marguerites (<\$5 each) and conduct a random drawing so that everyone goes home with a different bouquet than they brought.*

In the very beginning of our P.E.O. Sisterhood, Alice Bird wrote the oath and the Constitution and Alice Coffin chose the star as our emblem. In 1888, “old gold and white” were selected as our colors. Because gold was not easy to find for decorative purposes, yellow was freely substituted and came into general use. But there was no floral emblem, no marguerite in those days.

During the early years, P.E.O. grew and flourished so that by the late Victorian era – the Gay 90s – there were almost 3,000 members in 67 chapters in 10 states, but we still had no floral emblem.

The Victorian era was a time known for its opulence and graciousness, its lavish and very ornate decorations. Colorful gardens and window boxes holding flowering plants surrounded “gingerbread” houses. As beautiful as these homes were, they were really very uncomfortable – usually sooty in the winter and sweltering in the summer. To create a sort of oasis inside the homes, people began to fill the rooms with plants – lots of flowering and foliage plants. Interest also grew in proper flower arrangements and flowers were sometimes chosen for their symbolic meanings – roses for beauty, pansies for thoughts, daisies for innocence.

Clothing was elaborate and elegant as well. Remember the beautiful big hats trimmed with flowers and feathers? Usually only artificial flowers made of silk were worn, but ladies did carry bouquets called nosegays for special occasions.

In the midst of this flower conscious time, Mrs. Siddie Richards, a member of Chapter Z, Waterloo, Iowa, brought up the subject of choosing a flower at the 1892 Iowa State Convention. The P.E.O. Record in November 1892 carried the first report that there was to be a P.E.O. flower, asking chapters to forward their recommendations. The 1893 report of Supreme Convention in The Record said:

“The floral emblem of P.E.O. is a matter that does not seem to have been considered by all the chapters, and the reports were so few little could be inferred from them. Upon motion the convention proceeded to select from various nominations a flower to be especially ours. The marguerite, yellow and white roses, cosmos, calla lily, yellow and white chrysanthemums and daisy were proposed, and the marguerite selected. As the marguerite and the daisy are essentially the same, whoever has one of them may not fear but that she has the floral emblem, and all pictures or drawings of one or the other, will answer the purpose.”

There seems to have been some confusion about the two flowers ever since.

The name “daisy” is a general term for any flower with a central “eye” and a ring of petals surrounding it. Dozens of flowers fit this definition. Four daisy type flowers are called “marguerite daisy” or simply the marguerite – one blue, one yellow and two different white ones.

One of the white ones is the “ox-eye” which blooms profusely during the summer in temperate regions blanketing fields all across the country. It was the first daisy to be grown in America, arriving as a stowaway in a load of hay from England. The ox-eye closes at night and opens in the morning. It has short petals and a large – not quite clear – yellow eye. This plant has a rather stiff appearance.

The marguerite chosen as the official P.E.O. emblem is sometimes known as the Paris daisy or chrysanthemum frutescens (frutescens meaning bushy). It is native to the Canary Islands. It has been in cultivation in Europe since the 1600s and adopted by royalty as their emblem. It has long been a favorite of florists and in the 1890s was used for cut flowers arrangements and in planters.

The Paris daisy marguerite was chosen for the color – pristine white and clear bright yellow – and the soft fine foliage and graceful stems which give it elegance. It also has special symbolism. Another name for it was “Measure of Love” probably from the “he loves me, he loves me not” test. A Celtic legend considers it sacred to infancy and so it represents purity and innocence. It was also used to decorate graves; so the saying “pushing up daisies.”

In French, Latin and Greek “marguerite” means “pearl.” The name marguerite was derived from two saints, St. Margaret of Antioch and St. Margaret of Cortona, who were sainted because of their many virtues. It seems fitting that this flower named for women of superior merit should be the one to represent P.E.O.

The *Sunset Western Garden Book* includes the following description for the Paris daisy marguerite: “Plant in full sun, in light soil with good drainage. It is drought resistant and has few pests. For continued blooming, prune lightly at frequent intervals. Replace every two to three years with new plants.” Just like the marguerite, the Sisterhood thrives and our members bloom and shine with a minimum amount of care. Our chapters, like the plant, do benefit by division and the new tender chapter quickly flourishes and grows.

When our sisters, many years ago, chose the marguerite as our official flower, what I am sure they did not know was that they had selected, not a flower, but a bouquet of flowers. According to botanists, that which we call the petals of the marguerite are, in reality, individual flowers. These white flowers surround a multitude of yellow flowers called florets. Individually, we are like the florets which form the golden center and the P.E.O. Sisterhood is like the white fringe of flowers which hold us together. Thus when you hold a marguerite in your hand, you are holding our symbol of the P.E.O. Sisterhood.

Those delegates to the Supreme Convention in 1893 really made a wise choice when they chose the marguerite for our flower, didn't they?