

Soon after the snow came the sleds Nov. 20, 1986

What would you say if your junior high school daughter arrived home for the evening meal some wintry night and casually remarked that a friend had acquired an old-fashioned Flexible Flyer sled and they had been sliding through Central Square?

The question is obviously a foolish one in 1986 with the Square clogged with commuting traffic, but 60 or 70 years ago it would probably have only elicited an admonition to be careful.

In the 1920's (and many years before that) sliding on the town streets was a common winter sport. Nearly all the streets were gravel roads; macadam construction was in its infancy. The snow melted much more slowly, permitting — in some cases, almost requiring — the use of horsedrawn sleds or pungs for a week or more after a snow storm. Also, there was very little traffic in Central Square, a few sleighs and even fewer motor vehicles.

Each section of town had its favorite hills for sliding. Bartlett Street was the preferred one in the Center. In the interest of safety, the Highway Department would usually sprinkle sand on the street just before it joined Acton Road but this was nullified by the sliders covering the sand with snow.

In good weather, there would be a conti-

The way It was

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nous stream of all kinds of sleds — old wooden bob-sleds that required the rider to drag his toe in order to steer, new Speedways and Flexible Flyers with their steering bars, and "double runners" made to carry 6-8 people on a plank mounted above two bob-sleds, the fancier ones having an automobile steering wheel attached to the front sled for steering.

While these sleds whizzed down the hill, there was an unbroken line of those dragging their vehicles back up to the crest of the hill to another hair-raising descent.

From a running start at the top of the hill, the slide would usually end just above the junction with Acton Road under normal conditions. Or, the turn could be made onto Adams Avenue, continuing behind the library to Boston Road.

But when the surface had been glazed by sleet or freezing rain, it would be possible to

continue down to Central Square and up almost to Billerica Road. On the rare occasion that traffic was encountered from Acton Road or in the Square, prudence dictated that the sled be steered into the nearest snow bank, hoping for better luck next time.

Upper High Street was another good sledding area but was less popular because of its distance from the center of town. Starting at the highest point near Summit Avenue, a reasonably long slide was possible, depending on the slipperiness of the road surface. Then there were many open fields that could be used after the snow had melted on the streets but these were the last choice because the snow had not been packed hard and soon wore down to bare ground.

Another practice was to hook the sled rope onto a horse-drawn sleigh and enjoy true horsepower. This could be very dangerous if the horse became frightened and took off. The only safe way was to pass a rope around something on the sleigh and hold the free end. Thus allowing a quick disconnect in case of an emergency.

Times have changed!

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