

Entertainment wore a different face

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A century ago, the citizens of Chelmsford and the surrounding towns eagerly awaited the spring announcement of the minstrel show at the town hall. Although minstrelsy is one of the oldest forms of the performing arts, it took on a new image in the mid-19th century, riding the crest of popularity until World War II.

Since then "minstrel shows" have become socially unacceptable with the recognition of their offense to black citizens. However, the minstrel shows staged locally were pure entertainment — rip roaring comedy — with no social implications implied by the producers or inferred by the audience.

The shows were 100 percent amateur, with the cast made up of businessman and other prominent citizens under the sobriquet of the "Chelmsford Coons" before the turn of the century. Later, church groups, the American Legion post, and the Grange turned to this surefire hit as a fund raiser.

The local troupe received unusual publicity in the press. One announcement read: "The coon is a nocturnal animal and, true to their instincts, the 14 Chelmsford members of the species will put in an appearance Thursday evening at the town hall, when they will bring down the house. It is currently reported that the janitor expects to reap a harvest from the sale of buttons gathered up after the performance, and that the grocer and druggist will lay in an extra supply of liniment for sore sides."

It was reported following the production, that "the entertainment was attended by an audience of at least 400, fully testing the seating capacity of the house." Lowell and all the surrounding towns were represented.

Minstrel shows followed a stereotyped pattern, usually of three parts: "First Part,"

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



"Ollo," and "Second Part." The first part adhered to a structured form. The "interlocutor," a sort of ringmaster, was seated in the center of the front row with the soloists on either side of him. At either end of the front row were the "end men." The chorus was arranged in rows behind these.

The interlocutor, usually a person with a commanding personality and a resonant voice, was the "straight man" for the banter with the "end men." Although his announcements and attempts to correct his adversaries were couched in excessively learned terms, he was continually outwitted in the verbal exchanges with the end men.

While the interlocutor was always played straight, the end men and, sometimes, the chorus were in blackface. The end men were real clowns, usually addressed as "bones" and "tambo" because of the instruments they played. The bones were curved pieces of hard wood held between the fingers and shaken to sound like castanets. "Tambo" played the tambourine, demonstrating his dexterity by tapping the drumhead on his knees, elbows, hands, shoulders and head.

At the conclusion of each joke by one "end," his counterpart would guffaw loudly, leading the audience to laughter regardless of how corny the story was and both "ends" would shake their tambourines for added

punctuation. The jokes were interspersed with vocal solos and dances.

The brief "ollo" was "played in one," that is, on the apron of the stage before the front curtain, allowing the stage hands to set the stage for the "second part".

The "second part" was free fantasy — specialities, sketches, parodies of current plays — all of the parts played by members of the cast of the "first part." It frequently had at least one female character (the wench) that produced considerable laughter from the audience since all the actors were well known local men.

In later years, mixed casts of men and women appeared in the entire production.

The quality of the music was excellent; both soloists and members of the chorus were accomplished singers. The tunes were a blend of old standbys and popular music of that time.

The final production by the Chelmsford Coons was a revival on Dec. 12, 1923 with a cast of 23, including three "bones" and three "tambos." Several younger men were recruited to augment the remaining members of the original casts. At that time the Coons' "mascots," a live racoon in a cage surmounted by a stuffed specimen, occupied a table in front of the stage.

The minstrel show was a musical that could be capably handled by amateurs and always attracted a crowd since there was no attempt to compete with professional entertainers and the jokes involved local officials and situations without malice.

How times have changed...

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