

Christmas in Chelmsford half a century ago

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

Carolers in their heavy coats with colorful mufflers and mittens, gathered around a lighted outdoor Christmas tree, singing the old traditional Christmas carols as snowflakes lazily fall on their shoulders. This is not just the description of a picture on a Christmas card, it accurately describes an annual scene on the Common in the Center.

For many years after World War I, the Chelmsford Center Village Improvement Association ushered in the holiday with a special Christmas eve program. A group of musicians would make their way to the belfrey of the First Parish Church, just above the clock, where, in spite of the usual bitter cold and frequent snow flurries, they would play a program of the traditional Christmas carols for an appreciative audience gathered in front of the church and on the Town Hall lawn. In 1928 the brass quartet consisted of G. Thomas Parkhurst and Herman Olsen on the trumpet, Thomas Beckvold, horn, and Herbert M. Sturtevant, trombone.

Following this short concert, representatives of the various church choirs, augmented by any who wished to join them, gathered around the lighted community Christmas tree on the Common for an old fashioned sing-along. The accompaniment was provided by one or more brass instruments. At the conclusion of this part of the program, the carolers were driven, in automobiles provided by V.I.A. members, to the homes of shut-ins throughout the town who had requested that they be serenaded. Upon their return, the singers joined their friends at the public Christmas party by the V.I.A. in the Town Hall.

The community Christmas tree mentioned above was a tall evergreen growing in the corner of the Common nearest to the Town Hall where the stone wall is today. Each December it was decorated with strings of electric lights, powered by wires suspended over the street and connected to the lighting panel in the balcony of the Town Hall. This tree was a casualty of the landscaping of the Common in the late 1920's so the V.I.A. erected and decorated a temporary one each year to take its place. When the V.I.A. went out of existence a few years later, so too did the custom of caroling around the community Christmas tree.

It was not until 1952 that the center of town again had its lighted tree; no longer on the Common, but in small park across the street from the Fiske house. That year the local firefighters began a tradition that has continued over the years. In the beginning, clear glass bulbs were dipped in special dyes each year to produce an unusually vivid display and, to avoid any appearance of commercialism, the tree was not lighted until Christmas eve.

During the years prior to World War II, Christmas lights began to appear in an increasing number of private homes but were nowhere nearly as common as they are today. One of the earlier lighted spruce trees was in the field at the corner of Bartlett Street and High Street on the property of Charles E. Bartlett.

Except for these small public programs and the special Christmas services and parties in the various churches, Christmas in Chelmsford has always been a family celebration, especially where there were young children. The gifts that were exchanged were apt to be rather practical with a reasonable number of dolls and toys mixed in. There were, of course, no electronic games in those days, the nearest approach being an electric train that traveled around a small circular track. Two of the most popular gifts were sleds and ice skates, if the ground was snow covered, and it usually was. Christmas afternoon found scores of young people flocking to the neighborhood hill to show off their new "Flexible Flyers" and challenge their friends to a downhill race. Many of the older ones, and several

adults, took their sleds to Bartlett hill, forming almost a continuous line of coasters from the highest point on Bartlett Street to the center of town with a second line dragging their sleds back up for another exhilarating ride. In a short time the snow would be packed hard in the middle of the street so that, under ideal conditions, it would be possible to coast almost to the beginning of Billerica Street.

Fortunately, there was very little traffic and what there was moved much more slowly than today. However, the coasters had to be prepared to steer their sleds off the road into the snow bank if they were surprised by a car or horse drawn sleigh entering their path from Adams Avenue or Acton Road. Both automobiles and electric street cars had to be avoided in Central Square. Because of the ever present danger of an accident, the Town usually sanded the street just above the Acton Road intersection making sliding impossible at that point. Sometimes they would also sand the steeper section of the hill so cars could ascend, whereupon the coasters would get their snow shovels and cover the sand along one side of the street with snow so they could continue their sport.

In the context of today's high speed travel and volume of vehicles, it is difficult to believe that young people could safely slide on Bartlett Street and on into Central Square without the area being closed to traffic.

Although Christmas has become more commercialized and the majority of our gifts are more sophisticated, yule celebrations today, both religious and social, are not much different from what they were fifty or sixty years ago, proving once more the truth of the adage that the more things change, the more they remain the same.