

Yesterday's Christmases — more yuletide spirit

By George Adams Parkhurst

With the approach of the yuletide season, the question arises as to whether Christmas is a purely religious holiday or is it also a secular celebration?

Leaving this debate to others, it might be interesting to examine how people of our town celebrated it in the past.

The way it was

Actually, it was not celebrated during the first 200 or so years of Chelmsford's history. The early Puritan settlers in New England looked upon Christmas as a pagan holiday and in 1659 the Massachusetts Bay Colony levied a fine of five shillings on anyone who dared keep Christmas by "abstinence from work, or feasting."

It was not until 1856 that Christmas became a legal holiday in this state.

In 1880, the newspaper reported that "The Unitarian Sunday School concert and Christmas party was held in the new Town Hall Friday evening and was largely attended — the other religious societies in the village being well represented." We see also that "The Central Baptist publicly observed Christmas on Saturday evening by a concert and party in their church vestry." Special services and parties became an annual custom.

DEC. 19, 1985

On Dec. 18, 1885 we read that "The several religious societies will hold their Christmas gatherings as follows: The Unitarians in the Town Hall Christmas eve; there will be a short programme of songs and recitations and the usual distribution of gifts from the Christmas tree. The Baptist and Orthodox Societies will meet Christmas evening, the former at their vestry, the latter in the lower Town Hall. Neither will have any formal exercises, but the children will be remembered with gifts and the evening will be spent in a social way. The Episcopal society will hold a social gathering in their chapel Christmas evening."

Approaching more recent times, the Village Improvement Association sponsored an annual Christmas eve program for the benefit of the townspeople. A group of musicians would ascend to the belfry of the Unitarian church, just above the clock, where, in spite of the bitter cold and frequent snow flurries, they would play a program of the traditional carols for an appreciative audience gathered in front of the church and on the town hall lawn.

After the short concert, members of the

choirs of the various churches and other volunteers would gather around the evergreen tree on the common that had been illuminated for the yuletide and sing the well-known carols. They would then be driven to the homes of shut-ins throughout the town who had requested that they be serenaded. On their return, the carolers would join their friends at the V.I.A.-sponsored party in the town hall.

In recent years, Christmas has become increasingly commercialized, losing its old-time flavor. However, a group of interested citizens have brought back a bit of the Christmas spirit in the past two years by placing lights on the trees and shrubs on the common. Lighted candles have been installed in the windows of the town hall and the Unitarian church.

Times have changed — or have they?

George Parkhurst is a noted Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.