

Town's Police Department is almost 60

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The Chelmsford Police Department is approaching its 60th anniversary as an official department of the town.

It was at the annual town meeting on February 13, 1928 that the voters accepted Section 97 of Chapter 41 of the General Laws which read in part: "Selectmen, who shall appoint a chief of police and such other police officers as they deem necessary, and fix their compensation in an amount not in the aggregate exceeding the annual appropriation, therefor."

The police budget in 1928 was \$6,335 while the Fire Department was given \$7,715. A police chief (John E. Johnson) and two regular police officers (Harold C. King and Bernard F. McGovern) were appointed. Both of the latter two served as chief at a later date. Prior to that, police protection had been in the hands of the selectmen and the constable, plus a few special police.

The 1919 town report shows that payments for police protection totalled \$1,481.5, with the constable receiving \$326.60, and 15 special police getting the balance. Fred Vinal was paid \$395.00; James Gookin, \$276.66; and H. A. Vickery, \$242.00. Several received \$3.00 for the year and one, only \$2.55.

The way It was

By George A.
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Three years later the budget had grown to \$1,700, of which \$1,500 went for payroll, while the remaining \$200 was expended on "other employees, team hire, uniforms, equipment and all other." (The fire department budget was \$6475.)

There was little need for a police department in Chelmsford a century ago as indicated by the newspaper account of the 1895 4th of July parade, which attracted an estimated 6000 viewers. "The crowds began to gather around the common, the depot and other points of vantage. Then two or three real policemen from Lowell arrived to keep the people in order, a circumstance that greatly amused the good people, who have long been in the habit of keeping themselves in order"

The casual manner in which the voters concerned themselves with police matters is illustrated by the action taken at the

Annual Town Meeting in 1924. Article 20 was "to see if the town will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of three thousand dollars, or what other sum, to meet the expense of two special policemen, one at Chelmsford Centre and one at North Chelmsford, to be appointed by the Board of Selectmen." On the first vote, this was dismissed but, on reconsideration, was referred back to the selectmen for a report at a future town meeting.

Article 21 asked the town to authorize the Board of Selectmen to appoint two regular police officers for patrol duty in the North Village twenty-four hours each day of the year and "to raise and appropriate a sufficient sum for that purpose." This Article was quickly dismissed.

Officer Donald F. Adams (killed in 1927 while on duty) was an appointed "regular officer" and was sometimes referred to as "chief," but that was before the department became official under state law.

The police department of 60 years ago was a far cry from the highly trained, well-organized force we have today.

But, that's the way it was.

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