

Holiday fairs 1885:

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Much more pomp and circumstance

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Just as April showers bring May flowers, the early days of December bring Christmas sales run by church groups and other organizations.

These annual rituals serve three purposes:

1. They produce income for the sponsors;
2. They make available unique and handcrafted items for Christmas presents;
3. They help to assuage the craving of the female of the species to shop.

The way it was

Christmas sales are not a new phenomenon. They seem to have been well established in Chelmsford a century ago. Although they were basically the same then as today, there have been changes in some of the details.

Most Christmas fairs nowadays are open

to the public during the morning and afternoon with many of them serving a light lunch at noon. In the "olden days," the selling hours were during the afternoon and evening, in some cases opening the previous evening as well. A regular entertainment was presented during the evening, frequently preceded by a hearty supper. (One report suggests that the meal was designed to attract the menfolk with their supportive wallets.)

The entertainments would be considered very unsophisticated by today's standards but were the standard fare for performances at that period.

Under the date of Dec. 2, 1887, we learn that "the fair for which the ladies of the Central Congregational Society have for some time been making preparations, opened Wednesday evening at the town hall. Supper tables were spread in the lower hall, and here refreshments were served, including oysters in generous quantities. The upper hall was profusely decorated with flags, big and little, agreeably relieving the unattractive appearance of bare walls.

In this room were eight tables, whose displays were designed to please the eye and tempt the purse. The apron table contained an excellent assortment of tasteful patterns. At the dolls' bazaar the little girls, of course, lingered longest. Two tables were covered with a fine display of useful and ornamental articles. The candy table had a tempting array of sweetness, and elsewhere there were pound packages and jars of preserves on sale. Perhaps the most attractive object in the hall, leaving out the fair attendants, was a tastefully arranged paper pagoda, where were sold paper flowers. A mammoth stick of candy, made of pure sugar and weighing several pounds, was the target of many guesses, at 5 cents each, upon its weight."

The program at 8 p.m. on the second evening included piano and violin solos and duets and readings by an elocutionist. The fair closed at 10 o'clock.

Times have changed!

George Parkhurst is a noted Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1655.