

Celebrating 75 years of Girl Scouts

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The way It was

By George A.
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Girl Scouts have been around Chelmsford for many years. On this, the 75th Anniversary of Girl Scouting in America, our local troops are celebrating 69 years of continuous activity.

Mrs. Juliette Gordon Low organized the first troop of Girl Scouts in Savannah, Georgia on March 12, 1912, patterning her new organization on the Girl Guides with whom she had worked in England. Thus March 12th became accepted as the Scouts "birthday" and has been celebrated annually by troops throughout the country.

It was only six years later, in 1918, that a Girl Scout troop was organized in Chelmsford. Troop 1, as it was officially designated, was the first troop in this town and one of the first in the area.

Girl Scouting in Chelmsford began in the Sunday School of the First Parish Church. Nineteen-year-old Miss Esther Dane was the teacher of a Sunday School class of young girls. Wishing to form some sort of a social club for her girls, she decided to start a troop of new Girl Scout organization that was spreading across the country. The original members were Dorothy Davis (Pike), Ruth Jeffs, Gertrude Jewett (Rowe), Barbara Parkhurst (Gladu), Esther Perham (Curtis), Esther Thayer (Hall), Julia Warren (Fogg), and Alice Wilson (Dryden). Of these original eight Scouts, two still live in Chelmsford and five reside elsewhere; only one is deceased. Within a very short time, membership in the troop was opened to girls who were not members of the Sunday School.

The uniform at that time consisted of a skirt and jacket made of a heavy cotton khaki material, worn with long black cotton

stockings and black shoes and a black silk kerchief. The girls wore brown, stiff-brimmed "campaign hats" that we associate with Smokey the Bear and park rangers. These were superseded a short time later by khaki "pork pie" hats with a rolled brim. Khaki gym bloomers replaced the skirt for athletics and camping.

A group photograph, taken in 1919 by the Common fence along Academy Street, with the old yellow schoolhouse in the background, shows 15 members of the troop with Capt. Dane. Miss Dane later became Mrs. Clarence H. Woodward and continued in Scout work for several years.

In 1923 the girls of Troop 1 undertook a major project when, jointly with the Village Improvement Association, they planned and ran the first of Chelmsford's mammoth Fourth of July celebrations, headlined by the press: "Chelmsford Improvement Association and Troop 1, Girl Scouts, Give Town Greatest Fourth of July Observance in its History." The floats and marching units formed a line one and a half miles long.

The parade was only one of many events. After the parade, there was a sports program, followed by a cavalry exhibition. A baseball game took place in the afternoon and at 7 p.m., the Scouts staged a pageant, "The Golden Gift," on the athletic field behind the high school (now the Town Office Building) before an audience estimated at 2,000, with "nearly 100 young people taking part in the tableaux, danced, folk songs and story."

After the pageant, the Chelmsford Brass Band gave a concert on the Common which was followed by general dancing in the Town Hall. The Common was also the site of the midway which opened the night before and remained open all night and all day on the Fourth.

Chelmsford Girl Scouts, with their many dedicated leaders, played an active part in the Lowell Council. One of the outstanding leaders was Mrs. Paul Dutton, who served on the Council for many years. Plays and pageants written by Mrs. Dutton were performed by Girl Scout organizations in nearly every state of the Union.

Her annual productions became an integral part of the Spring rally at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium. In 1930 her historical pageant, "300 Years of Childhood in Massachusetts," with nearly 1,400 in the cast, was presented at the Boston Garden in conjunction with the observance of the 300th anniversary of the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony. A trio of her plays were included in the nationwide Girl Scout radio broadcast in 1938.

And thus did Girl Scouting begin in Chelmsford.

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Included in the 1919 version of Chelmsford Girl Scout Troop 1 were: at front left, Eleanor Parkhurst, now editor of the Chelmsford News-weekly, Alice (Wilson) Dryden (middle), leader Esther (Dane) Woodward (second from right), Evelyn Boyd (kneeling front), Helen (Read) Rollins (front right), Ruth Jeffs (top tier, with hat) and Barbara (Parkhurst) Gladu (far right).