

July 4, 1886

# 'Let's begin the merrymaking in June'

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Small children, and some not so small, always enjoyed celebrating Independence Day with lots of noise — not only on July 4, but sometimes a week or more in advance.

A century ago, some of the "celebrating" took the form of vandalism.

The Town Hall and the Unitarian Church were broken into and fire extinguishers discharged. Unpleasant as this was, it was nothing to what went on in the early hours of July 4th, 1889.

That year, three young men, Walter Simons Jr., Fred Santom, and Hanson Thurston, decided to start the national holiday with a series of salutes from an old cannon which they dragged to the Center Common.

Following the second successful discharge, Simons and Santom were ramming home the third cartridge when Thurston inadvertently withdrew his thumb from the vent and an explosion took place.

Young Simons was hit in the face by the rammer and killed instantly. Fred Santom's injuries required the amputation of his right arm and the thumb and forefinger of his left-hand. This was, without doubt, Chelmsford's most tragic Fourth of July.

In the 1920's and '30's, celebrating began a week or two before the Fourth in Central Square.

A stone horse watering trough at the southern point of the park set the scene for a group of young men of the village to give the residents a noisy pre-holiday celebration.

A small amount of a mixture of "sulfur

## The way It was

By George A.  
Parkhurst



and potash" (procured from "Doc" Falls, the pharmacist across the street) would be placed on a slab beside the watering trough and covered with a flat rock or heavy steel plate. One of the men would stand on the trough and drop a large rock onto the "charge," at the same time jumping to the ground on the opposite side for personal safety. The ground would shake and the sound could be heard for half a mile.

A variation of this "celebration" was to put this same mixture on the streetcar tracks that went through the square.

As the car's wheels passed over the powder, it sounded like rifles being fired one after the other. Another trick was to place a toy skyrocket in the groove in the streetcar and light it. The rocket would ride the rail up the hill on Boston Road.

The two-inch salute was the largest firecracker permitted in Massachusetts but five-inch salutes could be purchased just over the state line in New Hampshire.

This writer recalls being in the Oxbow Ice Cream Shop on Warren Avenue, now the American Legion Hall, when a fusillade of five-inch salutes was heard outside. In a few

minutes, two local police officers entered and told the shop's proprietor they had received complaints of the noise and, if it didn't stop, the shop would be closed for the night.

The proprietor, knowing these cops to be practical jokers, got them to admit it was they who had fired the salutes as a prank.

Then there was the time the guard, hired to prevent the bell in the Unitarian Church from being rung, left his post for a few minutes for a cup of coffee at the lunch counter in the Square.

Just as his coffee was being poured, the bell started ringing. He deserted his coffee and "high-tailed it" for the church. The bell continued to ring until he put his key in the lock, whereupon the culprits left by another door.

Lest the impression be given that Night Before the Fourth celebrating was limited to noise, two official town events will be cited.

In 1923, there was a midway on the Center Common with locally-run booths (like our present day "county fair") and a band concert. In later years, a merry-go-round and ferris wheel were added. The midway remained open all night.

The next year, a giant bonfire of old railroad ties was ignited at midnight the "night before" behind what is now the Town Office Building.

(How Chelmsford celebrated the actual July 4 holiday will be covered in a future story.)

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