

# Have winters become milder, or do modern conveniences just make them seem that way?

By George Adams Parkhurst  
*Independent Columnist*

It has been said that our winters today are nowhere near as snowy as those in the 19th century, December 1995 being the exception.

Although this might be true in a few cases, it is more likely that our modern equipment and conveniences allow us to make these New England winters more bearable.

Be that as it may, life in the snow months has changed appreciably. Before the advent of the automobile, the main roads were not plowed down to the loose gravel "pavement," but the snow was compacted by large horse-drawn rollers to make it easier for Old Dobbin to pull the sleighs and sledges. Even after the automobile had displaced the horse, some local businesses reverted to sleighs for making deliveries following a major snowstorm. E. T. Adams in the Odd Fellows building (Shawmut

Bank today) delivered groceries to his customers by sleigh for a few days before the snow melted off the roads. Harry L. Parkhurst Coal Company and the Cushing Grain Mill hooked workhorses up to their large sledges, making it possible to deliver tons of coal and bags of feed to farms off the traveled roadway.

The grain mill sleds were popular with the young people who could jump on and off or stay on and ride to the customer's house and back. "sleigh ride parties" were popular with both young and old when a local farmer would cover his flatbed sled with hay and horse blankets to keep the riders from freezing as they enjoyed a trip on a starlit evening. Sometimes the first stop would be at a restaurant or private residence for refreshments and a chance to warm up; then back to their starting point.

The present writer recalls the last sleigh ride he organized in the mid-1930s. Although the roads were

plowed, an inch or so of snow would remain on the pavement for a couple of days. Before the snow stopped falling, I had hired a farmer and his team and telephoned the members of a church group. The driver, Ted Emerson, met us that evening at the First Parish Church and drove the singing, yelling crowd over several miles of back roads between Chelmsford and Carlisle, finally ending up at the Ox Bow Tearoom where arrangements had been made to serve coffee, cocoa and sandwiches. After a short refreshment "break," and before the horses cooled off too much, we piled back onto the sled and returned to the church by a rather circuitous route.

The efficiency of the highway plows and great amount of traffic would preclude these enjoyable parties today.

During the 1920s and '30s, many of the young people in Chelmsford Center would take their Speedway or Flexible Flyer sleds to Bartlett Hill

(Bartlett Street behind the Adams Library). Bartlett Street was not a one-way street then.

If there was an icy glaze on the road surface, it would be possible to coast from the highest point of the street right down through Central Square and up almost to Billerica Road. Fortunately, automobile traffic was almost non-existent.

Caring adults would sometimes sprinkle sand on the street just before Acton Road so the sliders would be stopped before being exposed to traffic, but it was a very short time before the young people had covered the sand with fresh snow and continued their fun.

These examples may seem quaint to some young people today, but life was fun even without snowmobiles and expensive ski-tows and children became self-reliant and learned that they could have a good time without depending on commercial sources of entertainment.

JAN. 4, 1996