

# hosting community events

FEB, 22, 1996

## Hosting graduations

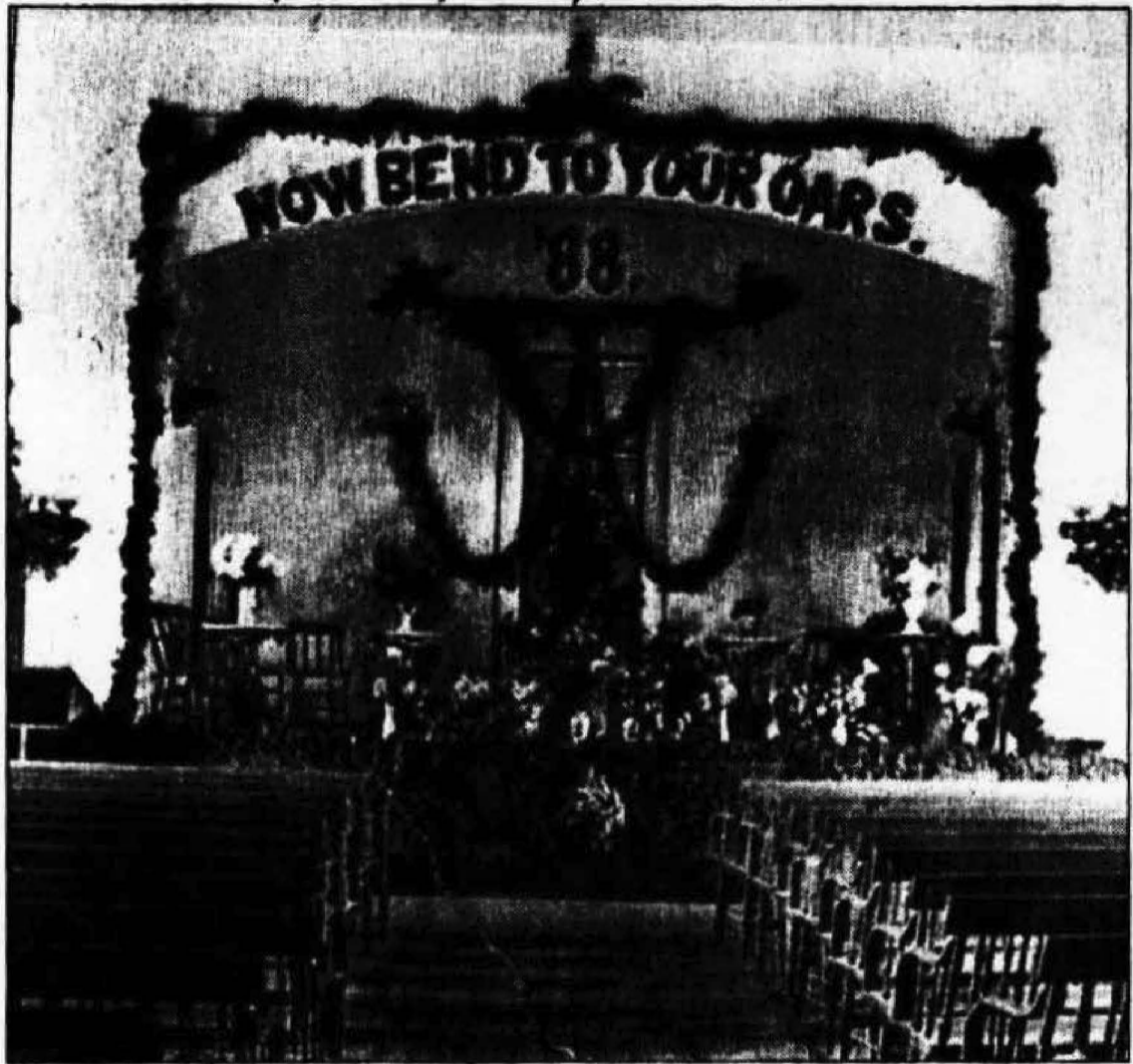
Starting in 1888 (long before my time), the Center High School (there was also a high school in North Chelmsford) held its graduations in the Town Hall, as did the Center Grammar School. I recall my grammar school graduation (1928) and high school graduation (1932). It was customary to hold the high school graduations alternately in the Town Hall and in the North Chelmsford Town Hall. Graduation was held on Friday night in one of the halls and the class reception the following night at the other location. Our Class of 1932, with 77 members, lined up diagonally across the hall and received congratulations from family and friends. At the conclusion of the reception, the first in line doubled back, followed by the others and congratulated classmates. General dancing followed.

The high school also used the hall for parties and dances during the year. It was customary to reserve the right front corner of the hall for teachers and chaperones. A carpet, easy chairs and a bridge lamp would give the area a more "homey" atmosphere. Something that was, perhaps, different from today was the issuance of "Dance Order Cards" to participants so each could sign up their dances in advance.

The Senior Class Play was presented annually, Friday night in North Chelmsford and Saturday night at the Town Hall. I don't know when this custom started; the first I saw was in 1923 when the vehicle was "The Elopement of Ellen." In 1932, I got my first chance to "tread the boards" in Anita Loos' "The Whole Town's Talking." The music department of the high school also produced an operetta each year.

The lower hall was used by the high school for special dinner meetings such as the Athletic Association dinners in 1931 and 1932.

The Center Grammar School had become overcrowded in 1923 or 1924, so the lower hall was utilized for additional space. Chairs and desks were mounted on wooden panels so they could



COURTESY PHOTO

**Chelmsford High School held its graduation ceremony on June 22, 1888 in the former Town Hall in Chelmsford Center. The stage and hanging gas lamps were decorated with greenery, with the words "NOW BEND TO YOUR OARS" over the proscenium arch of the stage. It is the English translation of the class motto, "Nunc Insurgito Remis."**

be moved out of the way when the hall was put to other uses.

The Chelmsford Grange held their meetings in the upper hall before they acquired the former South Chelmsford school. The Chelmsford Water District was another of the organizations that held meetings in the hall.

## Sounding the alarm

It was in 1923 that the V.I.A. gave the town a fire whistle that was mounted on the tower of the Town Hall to summon "call firefighters". Previous to this, the Center fire alarm had been the ringing of the church bell on the First Parish Church. A key was mounted in a glass-covered red box beside the front door to the church. If you had occasion to call out the all "call man" fire department, you broke the glass and used the key to gain entrance to the church. Then you pulled the bell and hoped someone would show up to be directed to the fire. In many cases, a person may have passed

the fire in his hurry to reach the church to get directions. A year or so before mounting the whistle on the Town Hall, the V.I.A. had installed a second hammer next to the church bell so a coded alarm could be produced.

Not many people were familiar with the Police pistol shooting range in the unfinished boiler room in the basement. A box of sand was installed under the back stairs with a heavy steel plate mounted at 45 degrees with the vertical. Paper targets were hung in front of the steel plate; spent bullets hit the plate and were deflected into the sand. Practice firing was done from the other end of the room using a service revolver that had been fitted with a .22 caliber barrel. I easily demonstrated my lack of good marksmanship.

With this heritage, and lots of hard work, the Community Center will be assured of success.

*George Parkhurst is a local historian and former Chelmsford resident.*