

A four-hour Town Meeting? In 1937... ^{APRIL 23, 1987}

A long-time spring tradition will be continued when the voters gather for Chelmsford's 334th Annual Town Meeting this Monday.

Looking back, we find that the meeting has changed little in the past 100 years, the main differences being in the number of voters present and the size of the appropriations.

It was reported that "there was a fair attendance" at the Friday, March 25, 1887 town meeting and "the proceedings were quite harmonious. The meeting was called to order by the town clerk, Geo. A. Parkhurst, [grandfather of the present writer] who enters upon his 17th year of consecutive service."

The first item of business was the election of Town officials, following which the budget for the coming year was discussed and voted upon. The largest appropriation, \$5,850, went for the support of the schools. This represented 40 percent of the entire budget.

Other items included \$2,000 for the support of the poor; \$3,500 for highway repairs; \$300 for repair of public buildings; \$100 for relief of indigent soldiers and sailors; a total of \$850 for all Town officers and committees; and \$400 for collection of taxes.

Also, \$200 was appropriated for enforcement of the liquor law; a cistern and pumps

The way It was

By George A.
Parkhurst



at the town hall in the north village cost \$100; cemetery improvements were \$300; survey of Town woodlots required \$25; "new town way near I. Putnam's" cost \$50; additional facilities for extinguishing fires, \$500; and miscellaneous expenses, \$300, combining for a grand total of \$14,475.

Of this, \$13,500 was to be raised by taxation, with the remaining \$975 to "be taken from money now in the treasury."

As in previous years, the town refused to license the sale of intoxicating liquors, the decisive vote being 122 to 26.

One other variation from today's Town Meeting was: "At noon the meeting adjourned for an hour to the dining hall, where the inner man was refreshed by a substantial repast prepared and served by the ladies of the Village Improvement Association."

Moving ahead 50 years to the Town Meeting of Monday, March 8, 1937, we find a de-

clined increase in appropriations with a total of \$241,572.60. This was made up as follows: General Government, \$12,886; Protection of Persons and Property, \$21,995; Health and Sanitation, \$4,200; Highways, \$39,300; Public Welfare, \$48,534; Schools, \$102,950 (42 percent of the total budget); Vocational School tuition, \$1,700; Libraries, \$3,400; Cemeteries, \$1,905; Recreation and Unclassified, \$4,702.60.

It was at this 1937 Town Meeting that the Temporary Zoning Committee gave its report and Chelmsford's first Planning Board was elected.

Also, a committee was named "for the purpose of considering the advisability of enacting building laws for the Town."

Another article authorized the sale of a police cruiser and appropriated \$325 to purchase a replacement.

The meeting must have moved right along since it was convened at 10 a.m. and completed all 53 articles, including the budget, by 3:15 p.m. That included an hour out for lunch between 12:15 and 1:15 p.m.

Does anyone think we can we handle the Town Meeting business as expeditiously this year?

Regardless, that's the way it was.

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