

'Shedding light' on Chelmsford's V.I.A

By George A. Parkhurst

Street lights and sidewalks are the responsibility of town government, right? At the present time, yes. However, 100 years ago, and for some time after that, the town did not get involved in these things.

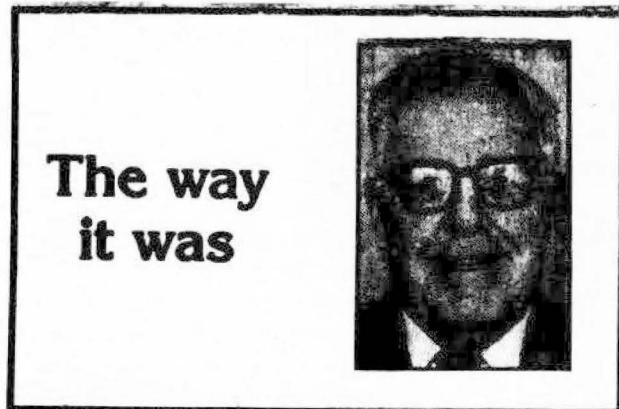
In the Center, at least, they fell to the Village Improvement Association, or V.I.A.

Tradition has it that Chelmsford was probably one of the first communities in New England to have a V.I.A. The local association was organized in November, 1875 by a group of 34 gentlemen and five ladies whose aims were: "To provide for the grading, ornamentation and care of our public squares; to attend to the matter of laying out sidewalks and setting shade trees along the line of our public streets; to provide for the establishment and maintenance of street lights in such localities as the public necessities require and to aid in the occasional publication of a local journal or advertising sheet devoted to the growth and general interests of our community."

The original 23 street lights had increased to 44 by 1887. No, these were not the high intensity lamps that we know today. They were ordinary kerosene lamps placed in glass enclosures mounted on poles.

Each afternoon or evening, depending on the time of the year, the lamplighter would climb his ladder and light each lamp. On the following day, he would collect the lamps, fill them with fuel, clean the chimneys, and trim the wicks so they would be ready that night.

A few of the glass enclosures were set into brackets attached to conveniently located



trees; others were mounted atop posts not unlike the yard lights we see today. The short horizontal rod, copied on today's lamps, passing through the post just below the lamp gave the lamplighter something against which to lean his ladder.

Another project of the V.I.A was an annual "clean-up day."

Each year, on Arbor Day, the V.I.A in the Center Village sponsored a so-called field day. The men of the village were asked to turn out with shovels, rakes, etc. to work on streets and sidewalks or make plantings around Central Square or in their own immediate neighborhood.

Excerpts from the newspaper account of 1887 describe a typical field day:

"Arbor Day was emphatically 'Labor' day. Never since the formation of the V.I.A. in 1875, has so much solid work been done as on Saturday... By 8 a.m. there was a busy gang of workers upon each of the seven

streets radiating from the Centre. In addition to general repairs, there was a liberal exten-

sion of sidewalks upon every road. The residents of the lower end of South Street (Boston Road), a mile from the village, accomplished very satisfactory results in the matter of sidewalks and other betterments. Near the town hall, along the railroad line, a row of fine evergreens was set out... The fence around Central Square and the vases were painted. At noon, the church bells summoned the laborers to the town hall, where

150 persons enjoyed a bountiful dinner prepared and served by the ladies of the association..."

In 1880, the V.I.A. had graded and fenced the little park in Central Square, installed the iron vases donated by J.W. Fiske, of New York, a former resident here, and the stone watering trough at the head of the park, donated by Mrs. Nancy M. Thresher.

Preparing and serving dinners to the voters at noon on town meeting days and to the veterans on Memorial Day became the responsibility of the V.I.A. in later years.

Money was raised by entertainments and dances at the town hall. One of the last fund raisers was the production of "The World's All Right," a show using local talent but directed by a New York production company on June 8 and 9, 1934. The V.I.A., perhaps having outgrown its raison d'etre, was disbanded a few years later.

But, that's the way it was.

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