

The village blacksmith shop: A relic of the past

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By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

"Under the spreading chestnut tree; the village smithy stands," wrote Henry Wordsworth Longfellow in his well-known poem, "The Village Blacksmith." But the many spreading chestnut trees of the 19th century have long since succumbed to the insidious chestnut blight. Likewise, almost all the village blacksmiths have disappeared from our New England towns for the simple reason there are only a very few horses to be shod. What was once an unglamorous, dirty, laborious livelihood has become, in retrospect, one of the many fascinating aspects of life around the turn of the century.

Over the years, Chelmsford had many blacksmith shops, located in the various villages. The first record of such a shop in our town is in 1698 when it was voted at town meeting that "Zacrah (Zachariah) Richardson of Woburn shall have three or four acres of land on condition he come and dwell in our town and follow the trade of a blacksmith." The site of this shop is not known.

Rev. Ebenezer Bridge recorded in his diary that on September 4, 1770 Widow Rebecca Dutton's blacksmith shop burned and on June 15, 1791 he noted that Isaac Chamberlain's blacksmith shop met a similar fate. The buildings that housed the smithy's trade were particularly susceptible to fire because of the open forges and sparks of white hot iron flying about.

For nearly 100 years, there was a blacksmith shop next to the brook in Central Square right at the beginning of Boston Road. The building was set well back from the street where the Yarn Shop and medical building now stand. At the time it was razed in the 1920's, it was considered by one reporter as being "a picturesque landmark that even those who are glad to see the modernizing of the village buildings will be sorry to have it taken down." This in spite of the fact that it was in an advanced state of disrepair with its "front yard" a veritable junk pile of scrap iron, wagon parts, and other items that might possibly be needed by the blacksmith at some time in the future.

The shop was a one and a half story structure that had originally been a barn which had been moved to

this site from behind the First Parish Church about 1828.

In 1842 N.P. Dadmun took over the business which remained in that family for many years. (The Dadmuns resided in the house at 6 Boston Road that currently houses several medical offices and owned the land on which the blacksmith shop stood.) At one time E.H. Marshall joined Mr. Dadmun in partnership but later the partnership was dissolved and Mr. Marshall became a traveling salesman, introducing a mechanical device he had patented for resurfacing millstones, a hard and tedious operation that was then done by hand.

During the joint ownership the shop was enlarged. It is told that a local man sawed the shop in two from ridgepole to base and the shop was made longer by inserting a new section between the two old ones.

For years the old forge had its coals brought up to working temperature by air from the big bellows but later a smaller, more modern forge was installed in its place and the bellows became obsolete, part of the old equipment was an "ox-sling." This was an open stall arrangement with a stanchion into which the ox was driven and securely fastened. A side of leather was put around the ox and it was swung off its feet. Then, as the shoeing was done, each hoof was fastened to a side support with a chain. This was a necessary precaution because the oxen, especially the young ones, made shoeing a dangerous vocation by their kicking and thrashing about.

Another frequent job of the blacksmith was the retiring of wagon wheels. These were not pneumatic tires but steel hoops. After rolling a strip of iron into hoop of the appropriate diameter, the blacksmith would lay the wheel on the millstone beside the building's entrance with the hub falling into the central hole. He would then heat the tire to expand it until it would drop onto the wooden rim of the wheel. As it cooled, it contracted to make a tight fit around the wheel, insuring that it would not come off while traveling over the rough roads that were the rule, rather

than the exception, then.

Chelmsford's blacksmith shop was a busy place in the early days. Being located on the stage coach route between Boston and New Hampshire, there were many jobs to keep the horses shod and the vehicles in repair. Also, the blacksmith was the town's metal worker. He manufactured and repaired plows, spades, and all kinds of tools. Nails were made by the blacksmith, too. Because of the labor and cost required to make nails enough for even the smallest building, they were valuable possessions. For that reason, buildings no longer needed would be burned down and the nails recovered from the ashes.

Blacksmithing, whether horseshoeing or fabricating wrought iron, was always an interesting "spectator sport" for the local youths. The present writer recalls that, when a student in the early grades, he would sometimes pay the smithy a visit while on his way home from school. When he failed to arrive home at the usual time, his mother knew where to look for him; she would find him seated on a nail keg enthralled by the dexterity of the smith in shaping and fitting the iron shoes to a horse.

The demise of the old blacksmith shop on September 8, 1923 was quick and unexciting. After removing a few internal braces, a team of horses was attached, by a long chain, to one end of the building. On the command of the driver, the team took a few steps and the shop collapsed in a cloud of dust.

Time had taken its toll and Chelmsford had lost another of its historic buildings. In this case greatly improving the appearance of the neighborhood.