

## A Bit Of "Common" Knowledge

by George A. Parkhurst

The Center Common has held a prominent place in the news lately. Because of this it may be interesting to take a look at the past history of this very controversial piece of real estate from a purely objective viewpoint without entering into the current controversy.

The term "Common" or "Commons" was originally applied to land which had not yet been subdivided and assigned to specific settlers. Large areas of this commonly owned land were fenced off to serve as ranges for pasturing the livestock of the families in that area. Thus two town-appointed offices came into being: Fence viewer, a man who looked after the fences and made sure that they met the standards set by a vote of the Selectmen in 1677 "... to be sufficient against great Cattell" or as the phrase is, "horse high, bull strong and pig tight." Also the Field drivers — men who prevented wandering cattle from doing damage or becoming a prey to wolves, and to impound strays.

As the town developed, the need for common pastures disappeared and the commonly owned land was used for town-sponsored activities such as a muster field. History tells us that, prior to the erection of the Town Hall in 1879, Town Meetings were held in what is now the Unitarian Church vestry. When a particularly important item of business attracted more voters than could be accommodated in the hall, the meeting adjourned to the Common where those voting "aye" went to one end of the greensward and the "noes" to the other.

The Yellow Schoolhouse was opened in the 1850's on the site of the present Central Fire Station with a very limited playground area which was nearly completely eliminated when four additional rooms were added a few years later. The Common was the only town-owned land in the vicinity so it became the school playground and baseball field.

The present writer, recalls that,

during his first six years of school in this building, most of the Common was hard packed gravel with almost no grass. A baseball diamond (or what passed as one) occupied much of the area between the Revolutionary Monument and North Road. Homeplate was near the corner of North Road and Academy Street and the third baseline paralleled the street. In the middle 1920's several seesaws and swings were installed in the corner near the Central Baptist Church.

Before World War I there had been one or more tennis courts on the Common. As in all New England towns, the Common was the site of the bandstand from which the local Cornet Band presented concerts throughout the summer months. According to the "Chelmsford news" in the Lowell Weekly Journal, funds were raised by popular subscription and a new bandstand (probably the last one) was built in 1891 by a local carpenter. Pictures of the period show that the band concerts were well attended although the crowd was not as great as was on hand the night of July fourth this year. Band concerts were also held on the Common for a few years after 1955 with music provided by the Chelmsford Auxiliary Police Band under the baton of Basil Larkin.

The Revolutionary Monument that not only dominates the landscape but also serves as the focal point of the Town Seal, was erected by the Chelmsford Monument Association, a group of interested citizens who raised \$1788.25 by collecting donations from 954 people. On September 22, 1859, the 205th anniversary of the first town meeting in Chelmsford, the monument was dedicated at a ceremony in the "meeting house." This was followed by a parade "round the square" and ending at the large tent that had been erected for the event in the rear of the Unitarian Church where "a sumptuous dinner was served, and toasts were given."

A few yards east of the monument is a beautiful purple beech tree. This was planted by the students of Chelmsford High School (which along with the elementary grades, occupied the Yellow Schoolhouse) in 1891. The photograph taken at the time of the

planting shows the students posed behind a rather scrawny shrub — a far cry from the magnificent tree we see today. Of the thirty-one students in the photograph, only one or two are still alive. By strange coincidence, one is Mr. William H. Fulton who resides at one Academy Street within sight of the tree.

In 1923 and 1924 the south end of the Common was the site of the Fourth of July Midway. A merry-go-round and Ferris Wheel were set up along with several booths selling food and novelties. One of the favorite attractions was a test of perfect balance. A rope ladder about two feet wide was fastened to a large fir tree by a single central rope with the lower end secured to a stake by another single line. A doll was attached to the tree just above the uppermost rung of the ladder. Young gentlemen wishing to impress their lady friends would pay a small fee and try to climb the ladder and touch the doll to win a prize. Although the operator of the concession demonstrated that it was possible, we don't recall seeing many winners; about half way up the ladder would simply turn over with the hapless contestant hanging from the underside.

For many years this same fir tree was decorated with Christmas lights and carolers gathered about it on Christmas Eve as trumpeters played from the Unitarian Church belfrey.

It was in 1930, after the McFarlin School had opened on Wilson Street eliminating the Common as a school playground, that the Common was seeded and landscaped. The sum of \$150 was appropriated at the Annual Town Meeting in February 1928 and, at a Special Town Meeting that June, the voters raised \$6,000 more to cover the cost of improving the Common. The final report of the special committee in February, 1930 announced completion of the project at a cost of \$5,858.96. For the first time in history the residents of Chelmsford had a "park" of which they could be rightfully proud.

In 1952, the stone marker was dedicated in the northeast corner of the Common to commemorate the first successful oral school for the deaf in the United States. This

pioneering venture in the field of education was conducted in the house at 1 Academy Street for a short time beginning in June 1866. The school later became the nucleus of the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Mass. One of the pupils was Mabel Hubbard, later to become the wife of Alexander Graham Bell.

A few years later the granite veterans' memorial was erected opposite the fire station. This replaced the wooden "Honor Roll" on the lawn of the Town Hall on which were recorded the names of the Chelmsford men and women who served in the armed services in World War II.

Thus we see that over the years the Common has been put to whatever use the voters at Town Meeting, or their elected representatives, felt was appropriate. Since it is Town property, is it not right that decisions should be based on the wish of the majority, whatever that may be?