

# Fourth of July in bygone days

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

July 4th, our nation's birthday, has been celebrated in one way or another by the people of Chelmsford for the past 100 years. This is as it should be according to John Adams in a letter to his wife, Abigail, in July, 1776 when he wrote, "I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great annual festival...It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bonfires, and illuminations..."

Chelmsford has had some outstanding Independence Day celebrations during the past twelve years. Built around the annual parade, they have included many other activities such as band concerts, square dancing, country fairs, holiday breakfasts, art exhibits, and road races. The biggest celebration took place in 1976, the Bicentennial year. Most of our present residents are familiar with the recent programs but have no idea of what took place years ago. So let's take a look at the past.

It is not clear when news of the signing of the Declaration of Independence first reached the 1341 people that lived in Chelmsford in 1776 but the Rev. Ebenezer Bridge, minister of what is now the First Parish Church, wrote in his diary, "After service P.M. Read y declaration of independence of ye United States of America in y pub. congregation, agreeable to y order of y council of this State." (Each minister was required to read it on the first Sunday following receipt of a copy of the Declaration.) Bridge's entry is dated Sept. 1, 1776.

What type of celebration, if any, marked this memorable date prior to the late 1880's is not known to the present writer but there are newspaper reports of the day's activities from then on. As a rule the celebrations in the 1880's were informal and unorganized. They consisted mainly of little boys with big firecrackers and other devices for making the "night before hideous to the more staid portion of the community," and also included family picnics on the Fourth. In 1886 "there was a gathering at the 'sumit house' on Robin Hill by invitation of the Village Improvement Association to informally dedicate Mr. Simons's new structure. There was a very satisfactory attendance and a constant demand for mine host's ice cream and other refreshments. There was also a display of fireworks."

We often think that juvenile delinquency is a product of the 20th century. However, on the night before the Fourth in 1888, "the door of the Unitarian vestry was forced open by a gang of hoodlums, the well-kept interior defaced by filth and a lamp broken and the contents poured upon the floor." At that point the janitor arrived and the culprits fled—apparently to the Town Hall where they broke in and tipped over several fire extinguishers. And that was 92 years ago!

Without question the most tragic Independence Day in Chelmsford's history shocked the natives in 1889. Three young men, Walter Simons, Jr., Fred Santom, and Hanson Thurston decided to fire an old cannon on the Common. Due to a misfire, young Simons was struck by the ram rod and killed instantly. Fred San-

tom lost his right arm and two fingers of his left hand as well as the sight of one eye.

The biggest celebration, at least up to that time, took place in 1895. It was estimated that 6000 to 8000 people viewed the parade. Even the special electric cars from Lowell could not handle the crowds. It was reported that "two or three REAL policemen from Lowell arrived to keep the people in order, a circumstance that greatly amused the good people, who have long been in the habit of keeping themselves in order." The parade, as was the custom, consisted of two divisions, lead by the chief marshal and his aides on horseback. Horse drawn floats by the local store keepers and artisans made up the trade division. The second half of the parade was composed of the "antique and horrible", that is, comical units burlesquing current activities. A baseball game in the afternoon concluded the day's festivities.

Two particularly noteworthy celebrations took place in 1923 and 1924. The former included a big parade, with its "horribles division", of course, followed by a sports program, a cavalry demonstration, and, in the evening, a pageant by the Girl Scouts, a band concert and a dance at the town hall. In 1924 the activities opened on the 3rd with the usual midway on the Center Common and, at midnight, there were bonfires at both the Center and North villages. The parade the next day was reported to have been the longest ever.

Celebrations during the next several years were limited to the annual bonfire and, in most cases, baseball games and dances, with a few patriotic exercises on the Common. A resurgence of interest, sparked by Chelmsford's Colonial Minutemen, produced a gala celebration in 1968 and this has become an annual event since then. With the high price of gasoline, it is expected that many of our townsmen will be at home over the Fourth. This should produce an even larger turnout for this year's parade.

Let's hope that Chelmsford will continue to commemorate this most important holiday for years to come!