



Customer parking in Central Square was not a problem when Eben Adams ran his general store in the Odd Fellows Building. The present entrance to the bank is under the IOOF sign in the picture. (Photo by Parkhurst)

Diversification personified

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

It has been said that variety is the spice of life. If this adage applies to buildings as well as to people, Chelmsford Center has a leading contender for the spiciest of all. Where else would you find a building that has been the scene of such diversified activities as weekly Roman Catholic masses, dancing classes, Saturday matinee movies, the distribution of Uncle Sam's mail, or the repair of shoes to name only a few?

Would you like to sit up to an old time soda fountain and sip a raspberry phosphate, or hook a slab of corned beef from the brine barrel, or indulge yourself in a shave and a haircut? All of these, and many more, were routine in the edifice in Central Square that was for years known as the Odd Fellows Block.

If your acquaintance with Chelmsford Center doesn't go back that far, you will probably recognize this stately Victorian lady as the First Bank and Trust building.

In 1892 a group of local gentlemen organized Lodge No. 218 of the fraternal and benevolent Independent Order of Odd Fellows (the I.O.O.F.), meeting regularly in the Town Hall. Shortly thereafter they formed a subgroup, the Odd Fellows Building Association, to contract for the construction of their own meeting place in a central location. The site selected on the bank of Beaver Brook in Central Square could not have been any more central, at least historically. As early as 1655, the bridge over Beaver Brook at that location was referred to as the "center of Chelmsford."

The Odd Fellows went ahead and purchased a parcel of land from the Fiske family and engaged the services of an architect. But then things bogged down. In fact the comic section (or "horribles" as it was known) of the 1895 Fourth of July parade has a float by another group that carried a paper representation of the proposed building and chided the I.O.O.F. on the delay. However, construction was completed the following year and a formal dedication was held in November, 1896. This was the same imposing three story Victorian structure that stands today between the brook and the Fiske house.

The lodge hall was located at the rear on the second floor level with a balcony overlooking the main floor. Cloak rooms, a dining area, and offices occupied the remainder of the second and third floors. The ground floor was rented to two or three retail establishments.

Carved on the facade of the building in bas-relief was a three link chain, the I.O.O.F. symbol. This ornament has since been covered or removed when the structure was modernized.

One of the early tenants was Eben T. Adams who, with his son, Ralph, operated a general store that supplied the local citizenry with groceries and sundries. When the Adams family gave up the business, the space was taken over by Walter D. Falls who moved his drug store from the Wilson Block across the square (where Jim's Barber Shop is now located). "Doc" Falls was a typical old time druggist who purveyed homely philosophy and simple medical advice along with his pharmaceuticals. At the same time a clerk might be waiting patiently for a young customer to decide whether to invest his solitary penny in a small wax bottle containing a colored liquid of questionable flavor, or five jelly beans, or perhaps a stick of licorice. Another clerk might be presiding over the large marble soda fountain with its mirrored backbar and nickel plated fixtures, indulging in local gossip and repartee with the row of regular customers seated on the high stools and, all the while, scooping out 5¢ ice cream cones or concocting a chocolate frappe (15¢) or a banana split (20¢). By the mid 1920's the drug store had superseded the general store as an unofficial social center.

The main entrance to Odd Fellows Hall and the other rooms on the second and third floor was near the center of the front with a store to the right that was to have a varied career. At one time it housed a bakery and, during the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson, Postmaster "Pat" Haley presided over the post office here. (In those days the postmastership changed hands following the presidential election and was bestowed upon a supporter of the political party in power in Washington.) When the Republicans regained control, the post office moved out and "Pat" concentrated on his meat market business, later to be taken over by his assistant, George Eno.

While "Doc" and "Pat" were dispensing medicinals, refreshments, and comestibles, two other men were catering to the trade from other locations in the I.O.O.F. building. Tony Mello, a native of Cape Verde Islands, gave his customers a trimming while seated in his barber's chair on the second floor over Haley's Market. Tony was a familiar figure, sitting in the window of his shop and waving to passers by when his tonsorial artistry was not in demand.

Shoe repairing was ably handled by "Cobby" Davis in his shop on the first floor at the rear of the building overlooking the brook where he also carried a limited supply of footwear. The local mothers would outfit their offspring here just before the summer vacation. To reach the cobbler shop, you walked along the porch that ran the entire length of the south side of the building almost over the brook. (This was long before the present Camp Paul office was appended to the structure.)

After the I.O.O.F. lodge was disbanded, the main hall was rented to various individuals for social events and business ventures. One of these was the dancing classes conducted by Miss Josephine Ockington. About 1920 F.W. Park operated a movie theater in the main hall, a lighted sign over the entrance proclaiming "Park Theater."

Chelmsford Grange No. 244 was organized in Odd Fellows Hall on January 7, 1905 and continued to meet there until 1931 when the Town Hall became the regular meeting place. The I.O.O.F. hall was used, over the years, for parties, dances and other activities including amateur wrestling bouts at one time.

The entire building underwent a major change in the early 1940's. The third floor was extended over the old hall and, except for part of the ground floor, the structure was converted to an apartment house. The name was changed from Odd Fellows Building to Colonial Apartments. More recently the First Bank and Trust Company has utilized it to meet its banking needs.