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Chelmsford 1885:

Crimes scarce, much publicized

By George A. Parkhurst

A century ago, crimes in Chelmsford were as scarce as hen's teeth. When there was a situation requiring the services of the constabulary (An organized Chelmsford police department was years away.), it made the news.

The way it was

The *Lowell Weekly Journal* of August 30, 1889 carried the following story:

"Chelmsford Centre received its annual summer visitation from the light-fingered gentry Thursday evening between 6 and 7 o'clock. The house entered is the home of Mr. Ephraim Crosby (14 Crosby Lane) and stands at the end of a town way about 10 rods east of the North Chelmsford road and is about five minutes walk from the post office. The house is a double tenement and only one was visited, that hired by Miss Mary Howard, who has three young ladies temporarily boarding with her. At the time of the robbery, Miss Howard was out of town for the day and the young ladies were making calls in the neighborhood.

The thief or thieves entered by the front door, which was unlocked, and completed their work without arousing the suspicions of Mr. Crosby's family, all of whom were at home. The robbery was discovered by Miss Howard upon her return soon after 7 o'clock, and word was telephoned to the Lowell police station as soon as a partial list of the stolen articles could be made.

Following is an enumeration of some of the principal ones taken:

Two envelopes marked Mary Howard, containing respectively \$76 and \$40; a five dollar bill in a separate enclosure; gold watch and chain marked M.H.; silver watch and chain marked L.B.; silver locket marked M.B.; silver fruit knife marked Mary Howard; gold pin, pearl in center; long pearl pin set in gold; seven gold and silver broochs, one of the latter in the form of an anchor; several silk, woolen and gingham dresses, flannel skirts wrappers and night dresses; a quilted comforter and a book on psychology marked on the fly leaf 'Mary Howard, R.N.C. for the Blind, Westow Street, London, England.'

Thus far, there is no clue to the perpetrators of this bold robbery, but the time of its occurrence and the locations would indicate that the thieves were not unacquainted with the premises and the whereabouts of the occupants."

The value of the loss was set at \$300.

To what extent the police pursued the matter is not known but it was, apparently, solved through the efforts of the victim. On Oct. 18, 1889 the *Journal* reported the solution of the crime.

"The circumstances were substantially as follows:

One tenement of the double house was temporarily occupied by Miss Mary Howard, with whom were spending their summer vacations three young women, formerly pupils at the Royal Normal College for the Blind in London, where Miss Howard taught several years.

The local officers and outside detective skill were put upon the case but no clue could be discovered. Realizing that her charges had the opportunity to commit the act, but without any suspicion of their complicity in the affair, Miss Howard wrote to Dr. Campbell, head of the college in London, who replied, advising her to examine the trunks of the pupils and if no evidence could be found they would be clear of all suspicion. Accordingly last week, Miss Howard and a lady friend visited the Framingham Normal School (where the pupils were attending classes) and made the necessary examination. Upon raising the lid of the trunk of one of her old pupils, Alice Davis, all the missing property was found except part of the money which had been spent for jewelry and clothing. The girl acknowledged her guilt and said she had no accomplice. The afternoon referred to she concealed the property in her trunk while her friends were downstairs. By request of Dr. Campbell the offender was sent to England by the steamer which left New York Tuesday."

The selectmen had offered a reward of \$150 but it is doubtful that it was ever paid, since Miss Davis admitted her guilt and departed willingly, probably without intervention by the court.

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