

Match factory lit up South Chelmsford

"For quickness and sureness the public will find,

These matches will leave all others behind;

Without further remarks we invite you to try 'em,

Remember all good that are signed by E. Byam."

This bit of doggerel appeared on each package of matches manufactured and sold by Ezekiel Byam of South Chelmsford in the early 19th century.

Prior to World War II, South Chelmsford was a small rural, residential and farming village with its general store, church, blacksmith shop, and community center — Liberty Hall.

It had never had any manufacturing establishments, unlike North and West Chelmsford and the Center. Well, almost never. There was one exception, the Byam match factory.

We take the common match for granted but it is a relatively recent invention. The Town of Chelmsford was already 25 years old when the English chemist, Robert Boyle, discovered that fire could be produced by drawing a sulphur-tipped splint through a fold of coarse paper that had been coated with phosphorus. And, it would be a hundred years later that this scientific curiosity would become a practicality.

In 1835, Ezekiel Byam (1795-1863), a descendant of some of Chelmsford's earliest settlers, began manufacturing the first lucifer

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



fer matches to be produced in the U.S. His "factory" was a small building set into the bank on Robin Hill Road near where it joins Acton Road, giving rise to the nickname "Brimstone corner" for this area. (The Historical Commission marked the site with a granite monument as part of the Bicentennial celebration in 1975.)

However, the lucifer became obsolete the following year, with the granting of a patent for the friction match and, soon after, the entire patent. He introduced them on the market in 1837.

Realizing that the original price of 25 cents for 100 matches put them out of reach of many, he eventually succeeded in reducing the price to one cent for more than 300. About a year later, the manufacturing operation was moved to Boston, where it stayed except for a brief return to South Chelmsford in 1845.

Byam's son, Ezekiel G. Byam, took over

the business and became a member of the firm of Byam, Carlton & Company. In 1880, he sold the business to the Diamond Match Company.

Fame spread for one brief shining moment from South Chelmsford to New York. According to the "Dictionary of American History: Ezekiel Byam manufactured the 'loco foco' celebrated in the presidential campaign of 1840."

It is reported that a Democratic nominating convention was being held in Tammany Hall in New York when a group of radicals from the Equal Rights faction seized control of the meeting. Their opponents, being in the minority, left the hall and turned off the gas. However, the radicals had anticipated this move and had brought a supply of "loco focos," they lighted candles and continued the caucus.

The newspapers dubbed them the "Loco Foco Party."

Although Ezekiel Byam did not invent either the Lucifer or the friction match, he did pioneer them. As one speaker at a meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society several years ago said, "When I think of my cold fingers on some winter morning, benumbed in fruitless endeavor to coax from the reluctant steel the spark of the day, I always feel like invoking the blessings on E. Byam, whose likeness and autograph were shortly to appear on each wrapper."

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