

## First Town Meeting, 1655

MAY 8, 1986

# Town changes, government stays the same

It's that time again — time for the annual open Town Meeting.

This has been described as the ultimate in democratic government but it can become somewhat unwieldy in a town the size of Chelmsford.

However, Town Meetings have been a very important part of our town each year since 1655.

For many years, the election of Town Officials was held on the same day as the annual business meeting. In 1921 election voting was by precincts for the first time. Previous to that, ballots had been marked and deposited in the ballot box between 8:15 a.m. and 1:15 p.m. on Town Meeting day.

Although the 19th Amendment to the Constitution (Woman Suffrage) had been passed, it had not received complete ratification at the time of the 1920 Town Meeting. (However, it is interesting to note that two of the 534 ballots were cast by female voters.)

One hundred years ago, there were fewer articles on the warrant and the sums appropriated were rather small by today's standards. The Town Meeting was held in the "new" Town Hall on North Road (sometimes erroneously referred to nowadays as the "Old Town Hall").

## The way it was

By *George A.  
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There were no contests for office in 1886 so the election was quickly completed. Each year, the question of allowing the issuance of liquor licenses appeared on the ballot and, in 1886 as in the past, the vote was unanimously "No."

According to the newspaper report, "the following appropriations were voted: Public schools, \$5,000; school incidentals, \$450; school textbooks and supplies, \$400; support of the poor, \$2,300; repairs of highways, & c., \$3,500; repairs of public build-

ings, \$350; relief of indigent soldiers and sailors, \$100; town officers and committees, \$750; collection and abatement of taxes,

\$400; insurance of town buildings, \$300; enforcement of liquor law, \$400; well at South Village, \$75; enlargement of Centre schoolhouse, \$2,500; fire apparatus, &c., \$600; widening of road at West Chelmsford,

\$400; miscellaneous expenses, \$250; total, \$17,775.

"At 12 o'clock the meeting adjourned for one hour to the lower hall, where the time was agreeably occupied in considering the merits of a substantial dinner prepared by the ladies of the village."

While the seats on the main floor of the hall were reserved for registered voters taking part in the business of the meeting, non-participating observers were permitted in the gallery at the rear of the hall. There were usually several onlookers — both unnaturalized aliens and, prior to 1920, women who were concerned with the operation of the town government but were not allowed to vote.

This writer recalls his early indoctrination into the parliamentary maneuvering of Town Meeting from the vantage point of the gallery.

Things have changed to some extent. That's progress.