

Pomp, circumstance of graduations past

JUNE 19, 1986

School graduations in Chelmsford have changed over the years in some ways and in others they are similar today to what they were nearly 100 years ago.

The most obvious change is in the size of the graduating classes. In 1893 there were three graduates from the High School in the Center while this year saw 502 diplomas handed out. (There were also probably 6-8 graduates from the High School in North Chelmsford in 1893.)

It was not until the fall of 1917 that the Center and North High Schools were combined. Graduations and other activities had been held entirely separate before then. So the class of 1918 was the first to receive their diplomas from "Chelmsford" High School. That year the policy of holding the graduation in the Center one year and in North Chelmsford the following was instigated and was continued until the 1930's or later.

While we take high school graduation as an annual event, it was not the case less than 100 years ago.

According to the *Lowell Weekly Journal* of June 29, 1888, June 22 of that year saw the first graduation in town since the days of Chelmsford Academy 60 or so years previous.

"The decorations of the town hall — the work of the graduating class — were abundant and arranged with excellent taste. Upon the arch over the platform, in large letters of evergreen, was the translation — "Now bend to your oars" — of the class motto, "nunc insurgite remis."

"The arch and sides of the platform were bordered with evergreens, and over the window in the recess was the number '88' indicating the class year. Potted plants and bouquets made attractive the front of the platform and at the rear of the auditorium,

The way It was

By George A.
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the national flag was festooned along the front of the gallery, in the center of which appeared a fine group photograph of the members of the class."

The academic procession included all of the high school students as well as the 13 graduates. Each of the graduates read an essay, following which the chairman of the school committee, Mr. J.A. Bartlett, conferred the diplomas.

This writer recalls the 1923 graduation and the problem that arose.

Apparently, the custodian of the North Town Hall had varnished all of the wooden chairs a few days before the graduation on June 20th. Unfortunately, the weather had been hot and very humid and the varnish had not dried properly. The audience dutifully stood as the graduates marched into the hall and the hinged chair seats came up with them. One of the young ladies who delivered an essay during the program reports that when she stood up to give her speech, she heard the sound of tearing cloth. Since she wasn't sure how much of her dress might be missing, she backed back to her seat on the platform after her presentation. (No, the dress hadn't torn.)

A reception to the graduates the evening following graduation was another annual tradition started in 1918.

the reception was held at North Town Hall

when the graduation was in the Center and vice versa. The graduates formed a receiving line and greeted friends and acquaintances. Then, at least in 1932, the line doubled back on itself so that each graduate could say goodbye to each of his, or her, classmates. Dancing was enjoyed the rest of the evening with refreshments served during intermission.

Starting in 1919, high school students were not the only ones to receive diplomas. The report of the School Committee that year included the following: "A new plan has been inaugurated this last year in granting diplomas to grammar school pupils. This has been done to create a new incentive to the grade pupils, to not only complete this first cycle of their training but also to seek higher laurels in the sphere of education."

For many years, two grade school graduations were held each year: one at the North Town Hall and one at the Center Hall. Students from the Princeton Street, Highland Avenue, and West Grammar Schools had a joint ceremony at North and those from the Center Grammar School, in the Center.

In later years, when the East Chelmsford and Westlands Schools had eight grades, they graduated with the Center Grammar School.

Graduation from the eighth-grade in those days was a milestone in the lives of many of the boys — they got their first long pant suit just for the occasion. It was usually made of navy blue serge, which soon developed a high shine on the seat of the pants, or dark blue wool chevot.

Things have changed.

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