

# All the world is a stage — in Chelmsford

Amateur theatricals have been with us a long time. In our town, the presentation of "shows" probably dates back to the 18th century. However, the earliest announcement of local theatricals known to this writer gives the "Order of Exercises of the Chelmsford Social Institute, February 2, 1851." The program includes eight plays interspersed with musical selections. The price of admission was 12½ cents.

The "Old Line Thespians" announced in 1859 that they would present a "Dramatic Exhibition." The price had increased to 15 cents for five plays plus recitations, and solos.

All of these productions were held in the Town Hall, which at that time was in the basement of the First Parish Church. Doors opened at "6½ o'clock," while the performance started at "7½ o'clock."

It became common practice for churches and clubs to produce plays for the amusement of their members and to raise funds. However, only a few Chelmsford groups have been organized for the sole purpose of participating in the performing arts.

Of these groups, one was an organization of prominent men of the town who specialized in Minstrel Shows before the turn of the century.

In 1934 a dramatic club was formed that was to continue for 46 years. The Unitarian Players of Chelmsford was organized by a group of individuals from the First Parish who had much enthusiasm but almost no theatrical experience. Starting with non-royalty plays, (e.g. "The Restless Jewel" by Adam Applebud) the group began its gradual advance to Broadway hits.

Within a very short time the club had attracted theatrically minded individuals from outside of the church and from the surrounding towns. The original name was

maintained until 1963, then was changed to "Chelmsford Players" as it had been community oriented for many years.

The first plays were presented in the

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## The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



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church's parish hall. Tickets were priced at 35 cents with reserved seats 45 cents. Riding the wave of its early success, the club moved to the auditorium of the Center Town Hall in 1937 without suffering the financial ruin predicted by some of its more conservative members.

The club's initial attempt at a musical was in 1940 when Gilbert and Sullivan's "HMS Pinafore" was presented jointly with the First Parish Church of Westford in two one-night stands, Thursday night in the Westford Town Hall and Friday in the new Chelmsford High School (now the Town Offices building on Billerica Road). Anyone who has worked with volunteer stage crews can appreciate the heartaches of striking the set, transporting, and erecting it for the first time on a new and much larger stage between midnight and the following evening.

With the opening of the High School on North Road (now the McCarthy School) in the fall of 1959, the Players moved their base of operation to the improved facilities of that stage.

The Players soon became a local institution, receiving acclaim for their professional-

ism in the theater arts. Among the more ambitious vehicles that they produced with marked success were: *Death of a Salesman*, *Damn Yankees*, *Auntie Mame*, *Flower Drum Song*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Miracle Worker*, and *The Music Man*.

In addition to semi-annual major productions, the Players also presented plays for school children including, among others, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*.

A spin-off from the club came when a group of the Players formed Camelot Players to do dinner theater at the Speare House, at the same time continuing participation in the Chelmsford Players. Camelot is still an active community theater group, most of their productions now being presented in Westford.

The Chelmsford dramatic club was one of the founders, in 1950, of the Little Theater League, an association of Community Theater groups throughout Massachusetts and this writer served as its first president. The League was the predecessor of the New England Theater Conference (NETC) that annually conducts a four-day play competition at Brandeis University which is judged by a professional adjudicator from Broadway. Both the Chelmsford Players and Camelot Players have received awards from NETC on numerous occasions.

Ten years ago, Patchwork Theatre became Chelmsford's newest theatrical group. Here, youths learn about acting and stage crafts by working on and performing in their own productions under the supervision of Joan Kennedy, organizer of Patchwork and a former member and president of the Chelmsford Players.

That's the way it's been.

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