

The 'hard' and the 'soft' of cider

9-25-86

The year 1840 saw the establishment of one of Chelmsford's family industries, one that would continue for well over 100 years. David Perham went into the business of making cider and vinegar on his ancestral farm at 51 Westford Street. (In the name of progress, Route 495 eliminated the ancient farm house and the five cider mill and storage buildings.) This farm dated back to 1664 when John Perham settled here.

"Cyder" had been a popular beverage since the 1600's. History tells us that it was served at public functions, such as the installation of the minister, and it is reported that a barrel of cider was "horsed up" for the benefit of the selectmen at some of their winter meetings. It is possible that "hard cider" had more of a warming effect than fresh.

The business was sold by David Perham to his son, Henry S., in 1872. (Henry S. Perham will be remembered as the author of the first chapter of the *History of Chelmsford* that was completed by the Rev. Wilson Waters.) Walter Perham succeeded his father, Henry, in the business.

Apple pressing in the old days was a long and arduous process requiring 15 or more men to produce an output which was equalled in the mid-20th century in a few hours by means of a hydraulic press, conveyor belts, and electric grinders run by four or five men.

In the old days the apples were shoveled by hand into a grinder powered by two horses walking on a treadmill. The pressing was done by hand and it took several men all day to twist the old hickory screw up to the proper pressure, forcing it around with wooden crossbars. The straw used in the press in those days was later replaced with

Chelmsford Cider Mill was designated by a vote of Town Meeting on May 8, 1975 and subsequently listed in the Na-

The way It was

By George A.
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heavy cloths which were sterilized daily by boiling.

Fresh cider was sold immediately. Since no preservatives were added, it turned into "hard cider" in a relatively short time as natural fermentation produced alcohol. Fresh cider was enjoyed by many but there were those who preferred the "hard" liquid. The rest of the cider was made into vinegar. It was stored in huge tanks for about a year while the fermentation took place, then it was pumped into hogsheads (large wooden barrels) for two more years of standing.

The resulting vinegar was of high quality and Perham Farm supplied vinegar to S. S. Pierce company in Boston for many years.

Apples for the operation were hauled to the mill by horse and wagon, later by truck, from local orchards and from farms in the neighboring towns. Most of the apples were of poor quality of bruised "drops." There was no quality control on the raw material.

Although early varieties were accepted by the mill, "winter" apples such as Baldwins made the best cider. Russet apples produced a particularly desirable cider so they were frequently set aside for processing for the Thanksgiving market.

In the modernized mill of the 1920's and 1930's, where this writer delivered many apples, the fruit was unloaded into a large

The Sam Davis or Davis/Russell House, located at number 10 Worthen St., was built about 1799. At number 14 Worthen St. is

open air bin at one end of the mill from which they were carried upstairs to the grinder on a belt conveyor. After passing through the electric grinder, the apple was dropped through the floor to a flat truck on the first floor. Here the men made what they called a "cheese," consisting of layers of apple separated by pressing cloths and wooden frames.

When the "cheese" layers reached a height of three to four feet, the truck was pushed on tracks to the press and pressure was applied by a hydraulic ram. The apple juice ran down into a trough and flowed into a 1,000 gallon tank. In order to clear it, it was pumped upstairs again where it passed through a clarifier then into a clean tank in the cellar. The solid residue, or pomace, was retained by the pressing cloths.

In addition to operating the cider mill for many years, Walter Perham was the local funeral director and an active participant in town affairs. He served the town for 30 or more years as town moderator, and, at various times, was a selectman, assessor, auditor, and Water District commissioner.

He was a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives and the State Senate as well as serving on the Governor's Council.

Although Perham's was the largest cider mill in town, it was not the only one. Among others, were Karl Perham at 30 Dalton Road and Israel Putnam at 118 Boston Road.

And that's the way it was...

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

by Joseph Reed. The building, housing offices at the corner of Chelmsford Street, was moved there in 1871 from near where the

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