

'You can lead a horse to water...'

JULY 30, 1987

"You can lead a horse to water...." as the saying goes.

You can, that is, if you have a suitable water supply.

In the 1880's and 1890's, Chelmsford residents recognized that some provision should be made for old dobbin to have a drink when he left the farm and went to the village. Out in the country, it was a simple matter to drive through one of the numerous "fords." These were short stretches of road over which the wagon could be driven through the shallow water, bypassing the bridges and allowing the horses to assuage their thirst.

One such ford was located in River Meadow Brook, beside the bridge on Bille-rica Road near its juncture with Riverneck Road. But there were no fords in the populated villages.

To meet this need, public-spirited citizens raised, or donated, funds with which to install watering troughs.

Probably the earliest one was, and still is, located at the upper end of the small park in Central Square. History tells us that it was donated to the town by N. M. Thresher in 1880. In fact this information is carved into the stone. This one, like those that were to follow, was a large piece of cut granite, hollowed out to form a basin.

Originally, a well supplied the water, since town water wasn't available until 1914 when the Chelmsford Water District began operation. Within the memory of the

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



present writer, a white porcelain bowl with a bubbler was mounted on the backside of the trough for the benefit of the general public.

It was particularly popular with little boys who would place a thumb over the outlet, producing a stream aimed at any of the other children who approached to drink.

The bubbler and the water supply to the trough have long since been removed but the stone trough remains as a reminder of the more romantic past. Adaptive restoration has turned the old trough into a colorful flower bed, helping to brighten Central Square.

The demand for equine drinking facilities must have increased by 1891 when the local newspaper reported that a well was being dug at the point at the south end of the park and suggested, "Now if some public-spirited citizen, or non-resident interested in the old town, would, like a former inhabitant a few years ago, add a suitable stone watering trough we could all say, well and good."

On July 3, we read: "With commendable

liberality and public spirit, Mr. L. A. Young has given a new stone watering trough for the new well at the foot of Central Square, and it is now in process of construction at the works of Andrews & Wheeler, Lowell. With a fine watering basin at either end of the square, no local or travelling 'Black Beauty' will now have cause to complain of the lack of thirst-quenching facilities in the Central village."

The trough ran into the usual delays but finally arrived September 16 and was placed into position.

"It was no light matter to handle it, as its weight is nearly four tons. It stands four-feet high and horses can quench their thirst without being unchecked." (That is to say, the horse could lower his head enough to drink without having the check rein unfastened.)

Cut into the front of the stone was the inscription: "A gift from L. A. Young, Aug. 19, 1891." This writer recalls a wooden pump adjacent to the trough but does not remember a connection to the water main. The trough is no longer there.

Watering troughs were also located in South Chelmsford (and, are still there) and in the North and West villages.

And, that's the way it was.

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

AUG. 6, 1987