

Not always the 'season'

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By George Adams Parkhurst

The Christmas season is, nowadays, truly a "season". Commercial interests have made it not a holiday, or a week, but a two-month season extending from about the first of November, when Christmas decorations begin appearing in the stores, to December 25th.

But 'twas not always so. To our early citizens, back when Westford was still part of Chelmsford, Christmas was no different from any other day; work was carried on as usual and there was no feasting or celebrating. Even the church took no notice of the day.

The Puritans that settled Massachusetts, or at least their clergy, were aware that long before the dawning of the Christian Era, pagan festivals had taken place around the winter solstice, when the days began to lengthen, to celebrate the "rebirth of the sun" but they preferred to avoid any manifestation of the Christmas season, unlike many other Christian religions.

Nearly every civilization of the past had held annual celebrations at this time of the year. The ancient Persians celebrated the birthday of their sun-god Mithras on Dec. 24 by hanging evergreen boughs with toys and trinkets. The Romans paid tribute to Saturn, their god of agriculture, with feasting and revelry during Saturnalia, and yule logs were burned by the Druids to provide the dead with heat and light.

Early Greek and Egyptian cultures held similar festivals at this time of the year and the ancient Hebrews celebrated the Festival of Lights, or Hanukkah, commemorating the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem by

Judas Maccabeus in 165 B.C. This observance is continued today by those of the Jewish Faith.

It was in 336 A.D. that we find the earliest record of the seasonal celebration as Christ's birthday and just 50 years later the Pope was warning the faithful against Christmas gluttony. We get the word "Christmas" from the Old English "Christes Messe", or Christ's Mass, which first appeared in 1038, although the present day spelling dates only from the 16th century.

Our Puritan ancestors took a dim view of this year-end festival and deplored it as an "abomination", a "wanton Bacchanalian feast" redolent of popery. Not only was the Christmas holiday ignored by the early New Englanders, its celebration was declared illegal in 1659 when the Massachusetts Bay Colony levied a fine of five shillings on anyone who dared keep Christmas by abstinence from work or by feasting. Seventeen years earlier when the Puritans came to power under Oliver Cromwell, they had banned Christmas celebrations as evidences of anti-religious Royalist sentiment.

This strict prohibition was eroded by immigrants arriving from other countries with their native traditions, but it was not until 1856 that Christmas became a legal holiday in Massachusetts.

While many people feel that Christmas has become too commercial and has lost much of its religious significance and family pleasures, we can be thankful that we can take time off once again to rekindle the spirit of "peace on earth" without running afoul of the law.

George Parkhurst lives in Westford and is a frequent contributor to the Westford Eagle.