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Chelmsford
the present

Byam's 'locofocos' lit convention

Politically speaking, South Chelmsford is a long way from Tammany Hall in New York City. This was not the case in the presidential campaign of 1840.

Ezekial Byam had set up a shop just out of the square on Robin Hill Road in 1835, where he manufactured the first lucifer matches to be produced in this country. The lucifer was superseded a year later by the introduction of a match using phosphorus, chalk and glue on a wooden splint. Mr. Byam, foreseeing the commercial value of this improvement, obtained first the American rights for the manufacture of friction matches and, soon after, the entire patent.

In the meantime, Byam's matches had achieved national fame because of an incident in New York City.

On October 29, 1835, a group of radicals seized control of the Democratic Convention being held in Tammany Hall. Their opponents, being in the minority, left the meeting and turned off the gas used for lighting. But the radicals had come prepared. Anticipating this move, they had brought a supply of the new locofofo (self-igniting) matches with them. Using these "locofocos," they lighted candles and continued the work at hand.

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



They proceeded to nominate a ticket and adopt a statement of principles, which pledged them to a crusade against privilege, and proclaimed their hostility to protective tariffs, paper money, banks and corporations — anything at variance with Jeffersonian strict construction of the Constitution. Their opponents promptly dubbed them "Locofocus."

The leaders of this movement set up an Equal Rights party that for two years challenged the regular Democratic organization in New York City.

New York Locofocoism had reverberations in several states and had an impact on the policies of the national Democratic party. By 1839 the Van Buren administration had accepted the New Locofocos as legitimate

Democrats and were moving the nation toward a hard-money currency. The Independent Treasury Act of 1840, which ended the practice of depositing the money of the Federal government in banks, was a manifestation of Locofoco influence. But in the 1840s, the movement faded as the glue of banks and the need for paper money became increasingly apparent and as the conflict over slavery became the focus of attention.

The Dictionary of American History states that Ezekial Byam of Massachusetts manufactured the "loco foco" celebrated in the campaign of 1840. This was the election in which William Henry Harrison, at 68 years of age, defeated the incumbent, Martin Van Buren. Harrison was elected overwhelmingly on a "log cabin and hard cider" slogan, but he caught pneumonia during the inauguration and died the following April. His vice-president, John Tyler, then became president.

And all this was set in motion, or at least abetted, by a few men in a shack in South Chelmsford.

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