



This antique photograph, supplied by George Adams Parkhurst, shows the "Novem Club." Its members, all men, dressed in women's clothing and wigs for the July 4th parade in 1895.

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Independence Day '95 marks 100 years since the first Chelmsford celebration

By George Adams Parkhurst
Guest Columnist

When the Fourth of July parade steps off this year, it will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of what was probably the first organized "official" Independence Day parade in Chelmsford, in 1895.

History tells us that nine years earlier "many of the older folks went to the top of Robin's Hill and enjoyed ice cream at the Summit House" and in 1893 "nearly 300 villagers, from toddlers up to grandparents, assembled at Warren's Grove (near what is now 62 Bartlett St.) for an informal social gathering in the nature of a basket picnic... preceded by a program of sports and contests." The following year, there was an antiques and horribles parade along streets in the center of town. For some reason, the event took place between 6 and 8 in the morning.

It was in 1895 that the town's first real parade took place. The church bells were rung at daybreak, a salute was fired and, according to the *Lowell Weekly Journal* of July 12, 1895, "the stars and stripes were thrown to the breeze. At 9 o'clock the people began to arrive from the city (Lowell) and the other villages to see the parade, the event of the forenoon. Probably there were 6,000 to 8,000 present during the day." Chelmsford's population was then about 3,000.

"The parade formed and started promptly at 10 o'clock from Littleton Street and Central Square. Ahead of the line there were two mock policemen on horses, and then came the Chief Marshal, Charles E. Bartlett" and the three members of his staff, followed by 15 aides, all mounted on horseback. After Detachment Two of Troop F Cavalry (a local organization) and the Talbot Mills band from Billerica, came the trades division consisting of 34 horse drawn floats entered by local merchants and farmers.

"The second division was composed of the antique and horribles. It was headed by the 'Chelmsford Cornet Band, reorganized.' It was a strangely wonderful band, in which the drums drowned out the instruments. Arthur Adams, dressed as a girl, was the standard bearer, while Fred Nichols, in a tall hat and Louis XV costume, was the leader. Levi Howard, in Continental uniform, rode a horse. The Odd Fellows Block (the Shawmut Bank in Central Square) that isn't built was represented by a paper building showing the plans on the outside. Walter Stevens and Byron Lamphere, disguised beyond recognition, drove the 'Chelmsford Heavy Artillery.'

"The Novem Club of wheelmen had a fine feature in 'the new woman.' The nine young men wore bloomers, shirt fronts, gloves, hair that was done up high, and hats of most pronounced style. The next several floats included a take-off of the laying of the cornerstone of the Odd Fellows building; also, a gaily decorated hay cart filled with bright misses from North Chelmsford representing the lasses of 1776." The "Household of the Future" was shown by a float on which a woman addressed the public while her husband remained at home to care for the baby.

The floats were judged and prizes were awarded to the winning entries in the amounts of \$3 and \$2. At noon the village church bells were rung again and there was more firing of cannon. The afternoon was taken up with sports events on and around the Common and a baseball game in the presence of another crowd, for special cars were still bringing people from the city. It is interesting to note that the winning team was awarded a bat, a ball and a bushel of peanuts.

Probably the next big celebration was in 1907. The parade that year

included the Chelmsford Band and was similar to the 1895 event but decorated automobiles replaced some of the wagon floats. The horribles division, as was always the case, drew the most applause from the crowd. A sports program at 11 a.m. on the Common was followed from 2 to 4 p.m. by a concert by the Chelmsford Band (25 pieces) on the Common. At 4:15 there was a baseball game at McCoy's Field between the married men and the single men.

The Chelmsford Band gave another concert on the Common from 6:30 to 8 p.m. According to the printed program of the day's events, there were "Fireworks at Adams' Place at 8:30 p.m." The Adams Place was the residence of Timothy Adams on the site of the present Town Offices at 50 Billerica Road. Timothy Adams, like several other local families, rented rooms to visitors who chose Chelmsford as a summer resort.

There were no 4th of July celebrations reported again until 1923, when Troop One, Girls Scouts and the Village Improvement Association (V.I.A.) sponsored a mammoth parade, band concert, sports program, cavalry exhibition, baseball game and a pageant on the high school field behind the present Town Offices. A midway on the Center Common opened in the afternoon of the 3rd and remained open all night and all day on the 4th. A similar celebration was held the following year with the addition of a giant bonfire "the night before" and sulky races at the Trotting Park in the Westlands (behind the present Chelmsford Mall). The parades both years had large horribles divisions.

The present series of 4th of July parades, which have become an annual event, began in 1968.

George Parkhurst is a local historian and former Chelmsford resident.