

DEC 14, 1995

Cows were a familiar sight on the street when Wilson's dairy farm was in business

By George Adams Parkhurst
Independent Columnist

Picture yourself in this situation for a minute. You're driving through Central Square when you decide to go to Lowell. You start down Chelmsford Street, but before you've gone but a short distance, you have to come to a screeching halt because a small herd of cattle is strolling leisurely across the street. You might find this surprising but, within the memory of our older citizens, it would not be considered unusual.

You see, John Wilson, whose house was at 39 Chelmsford St. (roughly between Papa Gino's and CVS today) operated a small dairy farm. His pasture was on the other side of Chelmsford Street, beginning where Bill and Andy's gasoline pumps are and extending down to the point of land where the railroad track crossed the street near Fletcher Street. It was the triangular piece of land between the street and the railroad track and, obviously, there were no buildings there at that time.

He would drive his cows over to the pasture daily and back to the barn, situated on the gradually rising ground behind his house, for milking in the later afternoon. When the cows had eaten all the available grass

in that pasture, John would use his other pasture, where the Little League baseball diamonds are today. He could either drive the cows down Chelmsford Street to the new pasture, or, as he more frequently did, run them into the pasture across the street (mentioned above), down to the other end of the pasture near Fletcher Street and out the gate there and diagonally across Chelmsford Street to the second pasture. In either case, cars would have to stop. Animals, like pedestrians, had the right of way.

Turn of the century pictures of the First Parish Church show a row of horse sheds between the church and the cemetery. When the horse and buggy had been displaced by the Model T, the sheds were no longer used and Mr. Wilson acquired them and moved them to his farm on Chelmsford Street and used them to store farm machinery. There was very little space for hayfields on his farm, so he hayed the field where the Elk's Club is on Littleton Road and stored the hay in a barn in a corner of the field.

Like all dairies at that time, John Wilson packaged his milk in glass one-quart bottles and delivered them to his customers daily. It was, of course, raw milk with lots of cream on top. (Smaller farmers couldn't afford pasteurization). These bottles with the Wilson

name embossed on them are now collector's items.

History tells us that part of the Wilson house had been a "noon-house" about 300 years ago. Back then ministers seemed to pride themselves on their lengthy sermons and services. After a few hours of preaching, the congregation would "break for lunch." That is, they would go to a nearby "noon-house" for food and a chance to get warm. There was no heat in the early churches. Some of the more affluent might have had small foot-stoves that held hot coals; some others put their feet under their family dog, while the majority just suffered from the cold and long sermons.

After a short break, the members of the congregation returned to the Meeting House for a few more hours of afternoon preaching. A part of the Wilson house is reputed to have been one of these noon-houses. John Wilson was active in community affairs and is particularly remembered as a trombone player in the Chelmsford Band.

Farms such as Wilson's are nostalgic to old-timers, but it is fortunate that this farm was phased out. Drivers on Chelmsford Street have enough obstacles without adding a bunch of milk cows.

George Parkhurst is a local historian and former Chelmsford resident.