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First town cleanup held 100 years ago

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When concerned Chelmsford citizens engage in what was reported in the press as the "second annual Townwide Cleanup" on April 27, most workers will be unaware that this is the 120th anniversary of the first organized "cleanup" in our town.

It was on Arbor Day in 1876 that the Village Improvement Association (V.I.A.) in the Center, which had been organized only the previous year, planned and carried out what they called the first "field day." The project immediately became an annual Arbor Day event, which was carried on for many of the 120 years, although we know there were some years when it was overlooked.

Newspaper reports tell us that the men of the village were asked to turn out with shovels, rakes, etc. to work on streets and sidewalks or make plantings around Central Square or in their own immediate neighborhoods. (The only sidewalks were of packed gravel and had been installed by the V.I.A.)

Excerpts from the May 6, 1887 newspaper account describe a typical field day: "Arbor Day was emphatically 'Labor' day. Never since the formation of the V.I.A. in 1875 has so much solid work been done as on last Saturday. The recommendation of the governor, supplemented by a card invitation from the directors of the association, met with a very general response, and by 8 a.m. there was a busy gang of workers on the seven streets radiating from the Centre. In addition to general repairs, there was a liberal extension of sidewalks on every road. In this latter respect, Billerica street, by reason of the

large force engaged, will bear off the palm. There is now a continuous sidewalk from the Centre to the town's estate (the Poor Farm at 110 Billerica road) and with the new street lamp at the easterly terminus bearing upon its cheerful phiz (physiognomy) the legend 'town farm', the way-faring man, though a tramp, need not err in his quest of that haven of rest where Superintendent Bean graciously dispenses the town's hospitalities to the professional traveler.

"The residents of the lower end of South Street (Boston Road), a mile from the village, improvised a little V.I.A. of their own for the day, and accomplished very satisfactory results in the matter of sidewalks and other betterments. Near the town hall along the railroad line a row of fine evergreens was set out, which will prove an agreeable foil to the monotonous view of rails and sleepers. The fence around Central Square and the vases were painted by A. B. Chapman, who generously gave both labor and material.

"At noon, the church bells summoned the laborers to the town hall, where 150 persons enjoyed a bountiful dinner prepared and served by the ladies of the association."

Picking up trash was only a minor problem in the 19th century. The "throw away" culture hadn't arrived, nor had plastic bottles and containers appeared on the scene. Chelmsford was still a small, closely knit town where everyone knew his neighbors and most people took pride in their neighborhood. Littering was frowned upon.

Barbara Scavezze deserves the thanks of the whole town for putting her time and a lot of effort into carrying on this very worthy tradition.