

Memorial Days of old attracted hundreds of residents to parade, graveside services

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This year's celebration of Memorial Day will mark the 108th time that Chelmsford has officially recognized and honored our veterans with a parade.

Memorial Day dates back to 1868 but it was not until 20 years later that a committee of three local Civil War veterans consisting of George A. Parkhurst (grandfather of the present writer), James P. Emerson and Henry S. Perham organized the first official celebration in Chelmsford.

The parade was made up of veterans, members of the Board of Selectmen, school children and patriotic citizens. The program consisted of the G.A.R. ritual, decoration of the graves by the children and a few well-chosen words by the speakers. Following the exercises, the veterans and invited guests marched to the Town Hall where they were served a hearty meal by the ladies of the village. Interest in the celebration grew rapidly in the following years. Just three years later



The Revolutionary War Monument on the Center Common is decorated for Memorial Day in the early 1900s.

(1891), there were 400 marchers, including 91 veterans from Lowell, in the parade.

Memorial Day, no longer celebrated on May 30, has become just one of the several holidays shunted to a Monday to create a three-day weekend to please the business community. It is very unfortunate that the true significance of the day has been all but forgotten, or at least generally ignored. The solemn graveside services, the parade and the program in the town hall were ends

in themselves, not just a place to take the kids on their way to the ball game. Even the veterans who, in the past, were the focus and most ardent supporters of the celebration have become apathetic.

In the 1920s, the parade route was lined with hundreds of spectators. (It must be remembered that Chelmsford had a population of only about 6,000 people then.) In many ways, the parade was a lot like today's, just bigger. The chief marshal and his aids were followed by the Chelmsford band and town officials. Then came a sizable contingent of Civil War veterans, some marching and some in Model T Ford touring cars, veterans of the Spanish American War and then World War I veterans and local Gold Star mothers were in line. Next came the Boy Scouts (I know because I was one of them) and Girl Scouts. Last, but definitely not least, came a large number of elementary school children led personally by the school principal. Miss Susan McFarlin.

Since World War I had been "the war to end all wars," no one could imagine that some of these children would themselves be

veterans in less than two decades.

The parade route, after circling Central Square and the library, included two stops in the cemetery, one at a Civil War veterans' grave and the other at the grave site of a World War I veteran. In each case, a solemn ritual was performed by the comrades of the deceased. The parade would reform and march to the Town Hall, pausing briefly to salute the Revolutionary War monument on the Common.

The program in the hall was always the same. It included musical selections by the band, a roll call of veterans who had died during the past year, a recitation of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (and sometimes the poem "In Flanders Field") and words from the guest speaker. The veterans were served dinner in the "lower hall" — the first floor of the building.

Today we have many more veterans than we did then but fewer who take the time to honor their departed buddies. It's too bad that Memorial Day has become just another day off from work and even the date has broken with historical tradition.