

The right of autumn in a simpler time

Warm days and cool, crisp nights; the excitement of the World's Series; flocks of Canada geese in their precision formations, honking like Paris taxi drivers as they wing their way south for the winter — all these are harbingers of the fall season in New England.

Although the autumnal equinox arrives each September at the same time as it has for centuries, some of the resulting activities of our townspeople have changed over the years. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was a time for preparation for winter, not just turning off the air conditioner and turning up the heating thermostat.

Householders knew that the fresh vegetables, fruit, and berries from the garden that dominated nearly every backyard — there were no swimming pools — would not be available again until the following spring. However, appropriate storage and "canning" could help to insure a nutritious menu. The root cellar was filled with carrots, turnips, and beets. Onions, their tops braided, were hung in a cool dry place.

Barrels of apples and potatoes were stacked in the "cold cellar" — a dirt-floored room in the cool, but not freezing, area of the basement. Pumpkins and Hubbard squash were carefully stored in anticipation of steaming, mouth-watering pies during the winter.

While the man of the house attended to these chores, the womenfolk spent their days filling jars with homemade jellies, jams, and pickles. Quart and pint Mason jars were filled with a variety of fruits and

The way It was

By George A.
Parkhurst



vegetables, cooked and carefully sealed to exclude the air, and stored for the long months ahead. (Frozen foods would not appear on the market for many years.)

To provide a special treat, nuts were gathered from the family woodlot — butter-nuts, black walnuts, hickory nuts, and especially chestnuts to be roasted over an open fire when the cold winter winds rattled the windowpanes and snow drifts filled the yard. Unfortunately, the chestnut trees were wiped out by a blight 60 to 70 years ago.

Leaves were raked up around the foundation of the house as insulation. Several cords of stove and fireplace length wood had to be hauled from the woodlot, sawed and split, and carefully stacked in the woodshed.

The remaining leaves from the lawn were piled in the garden area, or along the street, and burned. The odor of burning leaves was not an unpleasant element of the fall season. Of course this was before concern for air pollution became an ecological issue.

(Incidentally, the word "ecology" was first popularized by a woman from this locality. Ellen (Swallow) Richards was born in Dunstable but her family moved to Westford so she could attend Westford Academy

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(1859- 1863). After graduating from Vassar in 1870, she enrolled as the first woman student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and stayed on as a member of the faculty. She married one of her professors, Robert H. Richards. Her particular interest was in home economics, teaching women the close association between the home and nature. She named this relationship "ecology.")

Long before Barbie and cabbage patch dolls and P.C.'s, boys and girls improvised many of their toys. Horse chestnuts, not the edible variety, were highly prized collectibles.

The first frost of the season split open the thick green husks with their sharp thorns, releasing a single shiny, mahogany-colored nut slightly smaller than a golf ball. Young people sought out their "secret" horsechestnut tree and gathered the fruit which they stashed away in cloth five pound sugar bags or shoe boxes.

A hole was drilled through a few of the larger nuts. The end of a piece of string about two feet long was passed through the hole and securely tied. Holding the other end of the string, the nut was twirled in a vertical plane. When top speed was reached, the string was released so that the horsechestnut flew into the air. There was great competition in achieving the highest flight.

A few of our residents may still indulge in some of these activities, but 75 to 100 years ago they were all part of the way of life.

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