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Longing to return to my little town

Growing up in a country village in the 1920s and 1930s was quite different from the life experienced by Chelmsford's boys and girls today, even though the "country village" was Chelmsford Center.

Chelmsford, at the close of World War I, was still a small residential and farming community, the principal exception being the textile mills in the North village. The first 18 years of the 20th Century had brought little change to our town; life was much the same as it had been before 1900.

The five isolated villages of North, South, East, and West Chelmsford and the Center (frequently spelled Centre then) were separated by open fields or forests. The wooded area between Chelmsford street (commonly known then as Lowell road) and Dalton Road was just being subdivided and built up to become the Westlands.

Automobiles were increasingly numerous but horsedrawn carriages and wagons were still used by some families. Electric streetcars and railroad trains drawn by steam locomotives provided transportation to Lowell for work or shopping.

Airplanes were uncommon here before the grand opening of the Lowell Airport in June of 1928 with its flying demonstrations, air races and "fly-by" of the Navy dirigible, *Los Angeles*. At the sound of a plane overhead, most people would drop whatever they were doing and rush outside to see this rarity and wave to the pilot.

Gravel roads were the norm although a

The way It was

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few of the main thoroughfares were rebuilt with Macadam surfaces in the mid 20s. Each spring the Highway Department dumped small piles of sand every few feet along the sides of the more traveled roads. Then a few days later, a tar truck would spray a heavy black coating over the gravel and men with shovels would cover the wet asphalt with sand from the piles, or what was left of them after the neighborhood children had played in them and scattered the sand.

I well remember how my mother looked forward to the annual tarring of Acton Road, ending the ordeal of having a cloud of dust blow into the house every time a vehicle passed. However, she was then faced with tar tracked onto the rugs from spots that had not been completely covered with sand.

At that time, nearly every home had a front piazza — the word porch was considered an affectation — with its row of rocking chairs (made famous by JFK at the White House) and, frequently, a canvas hammock.

Hot summer evenings were spent rocking and fanning oneself with a palmleaf and greeting those who strolled by. Air conditioning was, of course, unknown and even the electric fan was rare as homes were just beginning to be wired for electricity. The ubiquitous mosquito was as much a pest then as now, making window screens more than a luxury.

Electric refrigerators, likewise, were yet to be available to the average housewife so she depended on the iceman with his wagonload of ice cut on the local pond the previous winter and stored in huge icehouses. A card in the window told the iceman that he should grab a 10¢ block of ice in his tongs and place it in the customer's icebox, shifting the food to make room.

The ice man attracted the neighborhood children as the ice cream vendor does today. Before making his delivery, he would hand out small ice chips on which the children would suck to see who could endure the cold the longest.

The highly organized Little Leagues, with their uniforms and topnotch equipment, that we have come to take for granted were decades away but "scrub" was played on every sandlot baseball diamond.

The so-called "good old days" may be nostalgic but few, if any, of us would be willing to go back to them.

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