

What is it that's put Chelmsford on the map?

By George A. Parkhurst

This year Chelmsford will celebrate its 332nd birthday. In all that time, it has developed from a frontier settlement to a community of small farms to a comfortable bedroom town. However, a review of the town's history fails to uncover any single event that could make it famous. Unlike Concord, we have no historic battlefield, nor do we have great institutions of learning like Cambridge. We can't point to a renowned "mile of cotton textile mills" as Lowell can.

Perhaps Chelmsford's fame is based on something more abstract; recognition that it has good schools, many churches, convenient shopping facilities and is within easy commuting distance to major high tech and military installations — an ideal place in which to live and bring up a family.

Historically, the town has had several "firsts." The first lucifer matches to be manufactured in the U.S. were produced by the Byam Match Factory in South Chelmsford (1835). The first school in the country to teach lip reading and speech to deaf children was established at No. 1 Academy Street in 1866. Chelmsford was the northern terminus of the Middlesex Canal, the country's first traction canal, providing passenger and freight transportation to Boston (actually Charlestown) between 1804 and 1854.

In 1820 the Rev. Wilkes Allen published the first *History of Chelmsford*, reputed to have been the first hard-bound town history published in the U.S. Chelmsford granite was used to construct the first building of the Massachusetts General Hospital in

Boston (1811) and was shipped as far south as Savannah, Georgia for use in the construction of a church there. The Merrimack Manufacturing Company, the first of what would become Lowell's great cotton mills, started production in East Chelmsford in 1823. (It was three years later that this area seceded from Chelmsford and became the Town of Lowell.) Then there was the Chelmsford Glass Works (early 1800's) and later the worsted mills in North Chelmsford.

Each of these contributed to the development of the town but they were not of sufficient importance to make the town famous. There was, however, one product that put Chelmsford on the map: Chelmsford ginger ale. This was demonstrated recently when an out-of-state resident who had lived around Boston many years ago remarked, "Chelmsford, that's where the ginger ale was made."

Although the product was distributed interstate as well as locally in freight car lots and by the company's large fleet of trucks, the factory was community oriented. The second plant, erected in 1912 following the destruction of the first building by fire, still stands today on Littleton Road opposite Forefathers Cemetery. It forms part of the present warehouse.

The building was L-shaped with the base running along the railroad track and the vertical part of the "L" perpendicular to the street. The tower at the vertex contained the mixing room. It was here that the syrups were mixed in large copper kettles and piped to the bottle filling machines.

C. George Armstrong, founder and

principal owner of the company, took great pride in the appearance of the building and landscaped the grounds to complement the residences along the street. At a time when few industrial plants bothered with lawns and flowers, Armstrong installed a fountain and flower gardens in the large lawn in front of the plant, making it a showplace.

In addition to the main plant, there were subsidiaries in Boston and Worcester. The product line was not limited to ginger ale but also included orangeade, root beer, birch beer, sarsaparilla, lemon and lime, cream soda, and "noxola." In the early days of the operation, "Old English Ginger Beer" had been bottled and sold in

stoneware bottles, but the opaque bottles became illegal so the production of ginger beer was suspended.

In 1928, the Chelmsford Gingerale Company (originally called Chelmsford Spring Company because of the spring water used in its products) was sold to Canada Dry who continued to use the facilities for several years to manufacture the Chelmsford line of soft drinks. In time Canada Dry discontinued production at the local plant but they still market a product known as "Chelmsford Ginger Ale," giving the town a somewhat tenuous hold on its claim to fame.

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

Chelmsford, Mass.

- Incorporated May, 1655
- Location Eastern Mass., 24 mi. from Boston, 40 mi. from Worcester
- County Middlesex
- Population 29,843
- Registered voters 16,368
- Party affiliation 5,339 Democratic - 2,883 Republican - 8,146 unenrolled
- Land area (square miles) 22.54
- Form of government Open Town Meeting
- Assessed valuation, real estate \$1,341,689,860.00
- Assessed valuation, personal property \$30,577,252.00
- Tax rate \$14.90 per \$1,000
- Annual election First Tuesday in April
- Annual Town Meeting Last Monday in April
- Number of precincts 12
- Polling places Town Offices, Parker School, Harrington School, Byam School, Westlands School, McCarthy Middle School, Chelmsford High School, South Row School
- Town clerk (info on seeking office, annual reports) Mary E. St. Hilaire, 50 Billerica Rd., 256-4104

THIS STORY ORIGINALLY PRINTED IN 1986 "COMMUNITY GUIDE"

RERUN IN 1987