

When Christmas was illegal

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

Once Thanksgiving has passed, and sometimes even before, thoughts turn naturally to the Christmas season. Children start dreaming about Santa and the toys they have come to expect to find under the tree on Christmas morning, while their parents must contend with shopping, decorating, wrapping, and worrying about the avalanche of bills that are sure to descend upon them with the coming of the new year. The older folks, with more time for contemplation, reflect on the simpler but perhaps more satisfying Yule festivities of their youth and all the while the storekeepers strive valiantly to keep the cash registers ringing, hoping to close out the year with at least a small profit. In spite of the rampant growth of commercialism during the past few decades, Christmas is still a sacred, as well as a secular, holiday; a tie for special religious services and quiet family gatherings.

But 'twas not always so. To Chelmsford's early citizens, Christmas was no different from any other day; work was carried on as usual and there was no feasting or celebrating. Even the church took no notice of the day.

The Puritans that settled Massachusetts, or at least their clergy, were aware that long before the dawning of the Christian Era, pagan festivals had taken place around the winter solstice, when the days begin to lengthen, to celebrate the "rebirth of the sun" but they preferred to avoid any manifestation of the Christmas season, unlike many other Christian religions.

Nearly every civilization of the past had held annual celebrations at this time of the year. The ancient Persians celebrated the birthday of their sun-god Mithras on December 24 by hanging evergreen boughs with toys and trinkets. The Romans paid tribute to Saturn, their god of agriculture, with feasting and revelry during Saturnalia and Yule logs were burned by the Druids to provide the dead with heat and light.

Early Greek and Egyptian cultures held similar festivals at this time of the year and the ancient Hebrews celebrated the Festival of Lights, or Hanukkah, commemorating the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem by Judas Maccabeus in 165 B.C. and this observance is continued today by those of the Jewish Faith.

The earliest record of the seasonal celebration as Christ's birthday occurred in 336 A.D. and just fifty years later the Pope was warning the faithful against Christmas gluttony. We get the word "Christmas" from the Old English "Christes Messe," or Christ's Mass, which first appeared in 1038 although the present spelling dates only from the 16th century.

Our Puritan ancestors took a dim view of this year end festival and deplored it as an "abomination," a "wanton Bacchanalian feast" redolent of popery. Not only was the Christmas holiday ignored by the early New Englanders, its celebration was declared illegal in 1659 when the Massachusetts Bay Colony levied a fine of five shillings on anyone who dared keep Christmas by "abstinence from work, or feasting." Seventeen years earlier when the Puritans came to power in England under Oliver Cromwell, they had banned Christmas celebrations as evidences of antireligious Royalist sentiment.

This strict prohibition was slowly eroded by immigrants arriving from other countries with their native traditions but it was not until 1856 that Christmas became a legal holiday in Massachusetts.

While many people feel that Christmas has become too commercial and has lost much of its religious significance and family pleasures, we can be thankful that we can take time off to once again rekindle the spirit of "peace on earth" without running afoul of the law.