

# Ginger ale and matches put Chelmsford on the map

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This year Chelmsford will celebrate its 335th 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.

## Historical firsts

Historically, the town has had several "firsts." The first matches to be manufactured in the United States 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 Ca-

nal, the country's first traction canal, providing passenger and freight transportation to Boston (actually Charlestown) between 1804 and 1854.

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.)

## Ginger ale brought fame

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 not too long ago 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 Home of CHELMSFORD GINGER ALE*

ENTIRELY FIRE PROOF

DAILY CAPACITY EXCEEDS 3000 CASES

Photo courtesy of George Adams Parkhurst

Chelmsford Ginger Ale is still sold in area grocery stores. The company which flourished in the 1920s was sold to Canada Dry in 1928. The Chelmsford facility was phased out several years later.

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.

The product line was not limited

to ginger ale but also included orange-ade, 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 Ginger Ale Company (originally called the Chelmsford Spring Company because of the spring water used in its

products) was sold to Canada Dry, which 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 Adams Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.