

Over a century of July 4th celebrations

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Fourth of July celebrations are nothing new to Chelmsford. They go back a century — and maybe more. A hundred years ago, the celebrating was pretty much confined to boys with firecrackers and torpedoes. However, many of the older folks went to the top of Robin's Hill and enjoyed ice cream at the Summit House in 1886.

Newspaper reports in 1893 state that "nearly 300 villagers, from toddlers up to grandparents, assembled at Warren's Grove for an informal social gathering in the nature of a basket picnic." The picnic meal was preceded by a program of sports and contests.

An innovative event the next year was an "Antiques and Horribles Parade," which paraded most of the streets in the Center. For some reason which eludes this writer, the event took place between 6 and 8 in the morning. Although probably not a very long parade, it was made up of two divisions, complete with a mounted chief marshal and four aides. All entries were of a comic nature. Sports events scheduled for the afternoon were cut short by a heavy shower.

It was in 1895 that the town's first real parade took place. The bells were rung at daybreak, a salute was fired, and the flag raised. "At 9 o'clock people began to arrive from the city and from the other villages, to see the parade, the event of the forenoon. Probably there were from 6000 to 8000 present during the day." (Chelmsford's population was then about 3000.)

It was reported: "Two or three real policemen from Lowell arrived to keep the peo-

The way It was

By George A. Parkhurst



ple in order, a circumstance that greatly amused the good people, who have long been in the habit of keeping themselves in order."

The column was headed by two mock policemen on horseback, then the chief marshal and his three staff members, followed by 15 aids, all mounted. First came the trades division consisting of 34 horse drawn floats representing local business firms. The second division — antiques and horribles — had more than a dozen entries. A sports program and a baseball game completed the program.

Probably the next big celebration was in 1907. The parade included the Chelmsford Band and was constituted much as in previous years, but decorated automobiles replaced a few of the wagon floats.

The horribles division, as usual, drew the most applause from the crowd. A sports program, band concert and fireworks, as well as "a modest midway" on the common added to the celebration.

The 1923 and 1924 Fourth of July celebrations, remembered in detail by this writer, were the last until the present

annual events were started 19 years ago in 1968. The former was organized by the Center V.I.A. (Village Improvement Association) and the local Girl Scout Troop. The midway opened on the Common the "night before" and remained open all night and the next day.

Included in the program was a truly mammoth parade, band concert, sports program, cavalry exhibition, baseball game, and a pageant on the high school field.

In 1924 the celebration was planned and executed by the officers of the Village Improvement Association. At midnight the "night before" the huge "bonfire" was ignited before a large crowd.

The parade included, in addition to National Guard and Organized Reserves units, several cars carrying Civil War Veterans. The usual floats entered by local organizations and merchants completed the first division. Then came the "Horribles Division," something that no parade ever omitted.

Sulky races were held at the Trotting Park in the Westlands in the afternoon. The parade and horse racing was recorded in a movie film, a copy of which is owned by the Chelmsford Historical Commission.

This brings us to the celebrations from 1968 to the present day, activities that are familiar to most of our citizens.

But, for many years, that's the way it was.

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