

# Some firsts for the Fourth of July JUNE 30, 1988

"Thousands View Chelmsford's Big Parade And Bonfire." Thus read the headline on Friday, July 5, 1968, referring, of course, to the town's mammoth Fourth of July celebration the previous day.

This year, 1988, will mark the 20th anniversary of that "first" Independence Day parade.

Actually, 1968 was not the *first* time Chelmsford citizens had celebrated the national holiday but only those who had been here in 1923 and 1924 were aware that there had been a hiatus of about 44 years since the previous large scale celebration.

Back in the 1890's, the day had been marked by picnics and social gatherings in addition to the abundance of small boys with large firecrackers. However, an early morning impromptu parade appeared on the town's streets in 1894. According to a newspaper account, "From 6 to 8 in the morning (a rather unusual time for a parade) the Antiques and Horribles held sway, or rather the highway, parading most of the streets (of the Center) with their turnouts." All of the units were of a comic or burlesque character.

The following year, an official town parade was organized, consisting of a commercial division and a "horribles" division, a format that was continued in all future parades in the early 20th century.

Major Fourth of July celebrations were also held in 1907, 1923, and 1924.

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## The way It was

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In 1968, the Chelmsford Colonial Minutemen joined with the newly formed Town Celebrations Committee in reviving the municipal celebration. The opening event that year was a community bonfire on the South Row School grounds at 9:30 p.m. on July 3rd.

The first annual Holiday Breakfast at the First Parish Church opened at 6 a.m. on the "glorious Fourth." At 8 a.m. there was a flag raising ceremony at the Center flagpole and floats entered in the parade were judged for awards at the high school field (now the McCarthy School).

The thousands of people who lined the streets loudly applauded the half a dozen or so bands and the 60-odd floats and marching units that carried out the parade theme, "Americana, 1776."

The parade route was slightly different from what it has been in recent years. After crossing I-495 on North Road, it turned onto

Worthen Street and down Westford Street, passing right through the Country Fair along the common, and thence to Central Square.

The large number of organizations that entered floats and/or marching units shows that the townspeople entered wholeheartedly into the spirit of the celebration.

In addition to the Country Fair on Westford Street, two plays were presented at noon. An old-fashioned Field Day was held on the McFarlin School field from 1 to 3 p.m. A square dance on Westford Street between 8 and 11:30 p.m. brought the festivities to a close.

As originally planned, that "first" celebration was truly a local, family-oriented activity. No political campaigning was allowed in the parade and non-local bands were kept to a minimum. (Many people have commented in later years that they would prefer to see their friends and fellow townsmen on floats or marching in the parade rather than a lot of "impersonal" bands from out of town).

Each year for the past two decades, the people of Chelmsford have been able to enjoy an outstanding celebration of the birth of this great nation without having to travel out of town. Let's hope it will continue for at least another twenty years.

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