

# Extra — read all about Chelmsford

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One hundred years ago Chelmsford was a small town — population 2,600. It had five separate villages, somewhat isolated from each other. As a result each village was a closely knit community where people knew their neighbors and maintained a personal interest in them. The fact that many of the families had lived in Chelmsford for several generations was a further unifying factor.

The "Chelmsford news" in the Lowell newspaper — Chelmsford had no daily nor weekly in those days — carried news items that were different in some respects than what we read in our papers today. They were more personal, going into considerable detail where known individuals (and who wasn't) were concerned.

To cite a random example: "F. G. Pratt of this village, who last winter, was one of the bidders for the job of painting a fifty-thousand dollar structure in Waterbury, Conn., has been notified that his figures have been accepted, and he leaves this week to superintend the work. He will use his new preparation, the quick-drying elastic oil, which has been successfully tested in Connecticut. Mr. Pratt will return in about a week to complete his numerous contracts in this vicinity."

Nowadays people don't usually announce

## The way It was

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in the newspapers that they will be away for a while, from which it could be inferred that their house will be unoccupied, for fear of a possible burglary. A typical new item in 1888 stated: "Mr. and Mrs. Joseph M. Fletcher start this week by carriage for Maine to be absent several weeks." This is not surprising since most people left their doors unlocked.

Personal finances were more freely publicized. Under dateline September 23, 1887: "Under a re-issue of pension, A. J. Lamphere receives a check from Uncle Sam for the snug little sum of \$650."

Donations and bequests were freely publicized in the news and not limited to legal notices. As an example, "The Central Baptist church has just received a second substantial proof of the regard of a former member, now deceased. Miss Miriam Warren,

who died in October, 1889, bequeathed to the church the specific sum of \$500, which supplemented many generous gifts during her life time. It seems that by the terms of her will the church was made one of the residuary legatees, and has been paid the sum of \$1000, with the probability of one or two more on final settlement."

It was very common to report on the illness of any of the townspeople. One of the items on October 28, 1887 was typical: "Mrs. Gilbert F. Wright is rapidly recovering from severe prostration, resulting from heart trouble and a nervous affliction."

In the matter of possible impending death, the news media exercised a frankness seldom seen today. On January 16, 1891, the public was informed that "Mrs. Henry B. Proctor, whose critical illness has been mentioned in this paper, was quite low this morning and apparently can survive but a short time." One cannot help but wonder if Times like this were read to the patient.

Times and the handling of personal news have changed. Chelmsford is no longer "a big family."

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

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