

# New Year's, 1946: when tragedy struck

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New Year's Day has long been recognized not only as the start of a new year on the calendar, but also the beginning of a new period in everyone's life with great expectations for a marked improvement over the past. For most people it is a happy time; a time for joyous celebration.

However, joy is not universal in the real world. This was brought home forcefully to the local residents 42 years ago, on the morning of January 1, 1946, when Chelmsford suffered one of its most tragic events: the loss of four lives in a dwelling fire. Three other persons miraculously survived, one by jumping from a second-story window to escape the flames.

The Fire Department was summoned at 9:30 a.m. to the residence on Boulter Terrace, off Billerica Road near the present Town Offices building, by a neighbor, Earnest Byam, whose daughter had been awakened by an explosion.

Byam was later Chief of the Fire Department (it.)

Several neighbors arrived at the site of the fire within minutes but none were able to enter the building because of the intensity of the flames that engulfed the dwelling all at once.

Fire 1, under District Chief Wilhelm T. Brown, made the short run from Central

## The way It was

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Square in record time and immediately brought several hose lines into action. But it was more than an hour before the flames were brought under control by the "call firefighters," of which the present writer was one.

An investigation determined that there had been no indication of fire when a neighbor passed the house a short time before.

It was learned that a cigarette had earlier ignited a cushion on an upholstered couch and, after supposedly extinguishing the fire, the cushion was taken to the sun porch.

According to the newspaper report, "It was considered possible that the fire in the cushion had been only partially extinguished and that it smoldered for several hours on the confined porch until it burst into flame and sent fire roaring up the front of the semibungalow. An explosion followed within a few minutes and by then the entire interior of the house was an inferno."

The victims included the owners of the residence, Mr. and Mrs. James MacIver and their infant daughter; also a relative, Thomas W. Cobery, whom, it was believed, perished in an attempt to reach the MacIvers in their second floor bedroom. Mrs. Cobery was injured when she safely eluded the flames by jumping from an upstairs window.

Two other guests at what had been a reunion of former Marine Corps buddies were Mr. and Mrs. Henry W. Crocker, who had been sleeping in a room on the ground floor. They were awakened by the crackling of the flames and, after attempting to alert the others, escaped unscathed through the back door.

In spite of the tragedy, one family was very fortunate.

George Reynolds, brother of Mrs. MacIver, also lived in the house but, with his wife, had gone to a New Year's Eve party in Lowell after leaving their baby with its grandmother. They returned in the early hours of the morning to find their home completely gutted.

Let's hope that this history never repeats itself.

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