

# Chugging through rail-trail history

AUG. 6, 1987

Recent talk of using the old railroad right-of-way through Central Square as a bicycle and hiking trail brings to mind the history of this roadbed.

Constructed by the Framingham and Lowell Railroad and opened on August 22, 1871, tracks were laid from the Westford town line at the upper end of Hart (or Baptist) Pond, along the southside of the pond to Maple Road, where the South Chelmsford station and freight house were located (and where Agway is today).

From here they went cross-country by the Byam School and followed Beaver Brook to Chelmsford Center in front of the First Parish Unitarian Church. They then followed Chelmsford Street by the Little League field, behind Bradlees and the Route 3 Cinema on into Lowell.

In the early 20th-century, many New England railroad stations were renamed to reduce the possibility of accidents due to a misunderstanding of a train's destination. With both "Chelmsford" and "South Chelmsford" only a few miles apart on the same line, the South Chelmsford station became officially known as "Byams."

This was a logical selection of a name as the Byam family had been prominent residents of the area and the first station agent had been Solomon Byam, followed by his son, Frank, who, in turn was followed by his son Lyman. Lyman Byam continued as

## The way It was

By George A.  
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agent until the station was closed in 1921. He later worked at the Chelmsford Center station as agent.

The first station at the Center was replaced by a larger building in 1889. In July of that year, it was moved on rollers to its new location on Mill Road where it was converted into a home.

The new station stood on the site of the present Texaco station across Littleton Road from the First Parish Church. It was a one-and-a-half story brick building, the second story housing a 50-barrel water tank. A covered porch extended nearly around the building.

The first floor included the agent's office and ticket window, a baggage room, and a "spacious general waiting room which is a model of its kind, handsomely finished in ash — as are all the rooms — well-lighted, heated by hot water, also by an open brick fireplace." There were also "ladies' toilet rooms" and "gentlemen's smoking rooms and closets".

This building served as the home of American Legion Post 212 after World War I. When the station was sold by the railroad and torn down to make way for the filling station, the Legion moved to its present location on Warren Avenue.

Potential cyclists traveling south from Lowell on the proposed "rail-trail" will find that it's uphill all the way to South Chelmsford.

Long freight trains, pulled by a single engine, found that, if they had to stop before South Chelmsford, they frequently had to backup to Lowell and start again. Sometimes a second locomotive would be attached to the rear of the train to assist by pushing.

Passenger and freight service was provided first by the Old Colony Line and later by the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad.

In 1871 Parkhurst's store stood near where the Town Hall is and partly on the railroad right-of-way so it was moved to its present location at the corner of Chelmsford Street.

Few, if any, other buildings had to be relocated for the railroad.

But, that's the way it was.

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