

# Thanksgiving, 1885; Dancing was the key

By George A. Parkhurst

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For the past several weeks, newspapers and radio and TV commercials have bombarded us with Thanksgiving specials and turkey raffles. Greeting card counters are loaded with Thanksgiving cards. What used to be a religious and family oriented day of giving thanks for our many blessings has, like everything else, succumbed to commercialism. But it was not always so.

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## The way it was

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One hundred years ago, long before the advent of the hard sell that we are subjected to today, the holiday was celebrated in its original context. Families gathered for the traditional feast and, after stuffing themselves beyond all sensible limits, either slept it off or indulged in a mild form of exercise. Dancing provided an enjoyable activity.

So it was that the Chelmsford column of the *Lowell Weekly Journal* — the only local news media at that time — announced to the citizens of this small rural community that "There will be a grand ball at the town hall Thanksgiving evening, Nov. 26, under the management of the Village Improvement Association. Music by the American orchestra. This announcement should be sufficient to insure a large attendance, as these parties under the auspices of the association are always conducted in a manner to please the most fastidious."

As usual, a special railroad train had been engaged to bring the patrons from Lowell and return them to the city after the ball.

The following year, the anticipated medicinal benefits were stressed when the *Journal* announced: "Symptoms of dyspepsia, the result of too hearty indulgence in Thanksgiving turkey (and) mince pie, can be removed by participating in the dance Thursday evening at the town hall."

These holiday parties became a time-honored tradition that continued through the 1930s. (This) writer recalls being chairman of the committee that ran one of the last of the Thanksgiving balls at the town hall.

The dances were conducted in a decorous, almost formal, manner. The hall was decorated with crepe paper streamers and one corner was furnished with comfortable chairs for the two or three distinguished couples who had been invited to serve as patrons and patronesses.

The hall floor was prepared for dancing by sprinkling it with a powdered wax and allowing the dancing to polish it. If the janitor was over generous with the wax, the result closely resembled an ice skating rink on which walking, to say nothing of dancing, was extremely difficult.

A member of the committee, serving as floor manager, announced the dances and organized the grand march. Refreshments of ice cream and cookies were dispensed at intermission in the lower hall on the ground floor, there then being no basement hall.

Times have changed.

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