

The annual bloom of local politicians

Just as the early flowers burst forth in the springtime, the annual crop of aspirants for Town office appear upon the scene. This is not a new phenomenon; it's been going on for years. However, there have been several changes in the election process.

In the early days, dating back to 1654, the selection of leading citizens to carry on the business of the Town was the most important action taken at Town Meeting.

Although the extensive political campaigns that we have come to expect were unknown a century ago, the newspaper reported on March 20, 1891: "As is not uncommon in the attempt to fill vacant positions, there were more pegs than holes, but the contest though spirited was not acrimonious, and the result was received with cheerful acquiescence."

There was no "town election day" until 1921. Previous to that the election of local officials was conducted along with the annual business meeting, the polls being open between 8:15 a.m. and about 1:30 p.m. The Town Report regularly stated that "The ballot boxes were examined and found to be empty, the registers indicating zero." Beginning in 1921 the policy of holding the election one week before the regular Town Meeting was adopted.

It was in 1887, exactly 100 years ago, that the Town was divided into three precincts (the Center, North and West villages),

The way It was

By George A. Parkhurst



there having been only one before that. Later Precinct 4 (East Chelmsford) was added and, in 1924, the Center Precinct was split into Precincts 1 (Center), 5 (South), and 6 (Westlands). We now have 12.

The ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, in 1920, brought the women's vote. Apparently Chelmsford didn't wait for final ratification because "The ballots consisting of two packages, one containing 1000 ballots for the use of male voters and another package containing 300 ballots for the use of female voters, were delivered to the ballot clerks."

The final count showed that 397 males and one female had voted. The year 1918 brought out 175 men and five women but in 1919, the year before final ratification, 30 percent of the votes were cast by women — 218 out of a total of 727. Then what happened in 1920 when only two female votes were recorded?

It is interesting to note that prospective tax collectors bid for the job and their pay

was based on their bid. For instance, in 1892 the collector was to receive two cents for each dollar collected. This was an increase of a few mills over previous years.

One Town office that is no longer filled (and hasn't been since 1823) was the tythingman. We are told that, "In 1675, Tythingmen were required diligently to inspect the manners of all disorderly persons; to re-clayme by private admonitions or to present their names to the next magistrate or commissioner. Tythingmen were required to have a black staff of two foot long, tipped at one end with brass about three inches as their badge of office. The brass knob on one end of this staff was used to waken men who fell a-dozing in meeting, by thumping them on the head, or to correct the wicked boys, the fox tall or rabbit's foot, sometimes fixed to the other end, was gently brushed against the face of sleeping women."

The local newspaper reporter, George A. Parkhurst, wrote in 1900: "Very little politics creeps into a Chelmsford town meeting. If a man is once elected a selectmen and performs his duty well, as is always the case, he can remain in office by re-election as long as he so desires." The reporter should have known whereof he spoke since he was then in his 31st year as Town Clerk.

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