

Remembering graduations past at old Westford Academy

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — As proud parents, along with relative and friends, watched sons and daughters at recent graduation exercises switch mortar board tassels signifying that the young students were culminating a four-year stint at Westford Academy, perhaps many a former student remembered his or her "special" graduation with nostalgia — and perhaps in comparison.

Such things as decorating the stage of the old town hall with cedar trees cut from neighboring pastures. The class motto in class colors was lettered on a banner of crepe paper and sung across the proscenium obliterating for the time a plaster bust which was a reasonable likeness of Shakespeare — at least the figure had a goatee.

Such other things as Brigham & Poole's orchestra playing waltzes, fox trots and the one-step at the graduation ball, each dance and partner carefully noted in a tassled card which was long kept as a souvenir. At intermission, Cameron Brothers' or Page's ice cream (in three flavor blocks and always vanilla, chocolate and strawberry) with vanilla wafers was served in the downstairs hall where the assessor's office is now located.

AND THEN THERE was the alumni meeting following the exercises when the new grads were welcomed into the "order" and were served a free lunch, compliments of the trustees. One can taste that chicken pie now. Elva Judd Rollins was the dedicated secretary and it is perhaps her long devotion that has kept the high school alumni association, one of the few in this area, alive through the years.

Herbert E. Fletcher (he was a state senator at one time), a trustee for 55 years, invariably presented traditional awards to students who excelled in languages (including Latin) as well as in music and the sciences. The award was a small amount of money in an envelope, but the

honor was great. Even today, the trustees set aside only \$160 for these very special prizes.

This year, 104 girls and 83 boys, making a total of 187, received diplomas at the 183rd commencement exercises of the venerable school.

But back in 1894, there was only a single diploma handed out, and that to Allan Burton Craven.

But Allan received the full graduation treatment, nevertheless. According to faded lavender printed program, his graduation essay was not a valedictory nor a salutatory, but perhaps a combination of both honors. His subject was not the most timely, "The Atlantic Cable" as this had been laid 28 years previously. Although Allan's studious piece of history may have been saved for posterity by members of the family, it does not seem to be available now for reference.

THE YOUNG GRADUATE, however, must have found the program most gratifying for a bevy of juniors substituted for his non-existent classmates.

In those days, graduation included "declamations" by each student who was supposed to "speak a piece." Allan spoke his and then members of the Class of 1895 filled in the remainder of the program.

Ruth Fisher, who later became principal of the William E. Frost School, took as her subject, "The Wreck of the Kearsarge." She is still living, attesting to the fact the school teachers must be rugged!

William Reuben Taylor read Dickens' "Speech of Sergeant Buzfuz." He remained in town his entire life, was long associated with the Abbot Worsted Co. and the Westford Water works, then a private water system. He is well remembered for his many civic and social participations.

Son of the principal of the Academy, Thomas R. Frost read "The Traitor's Death-bed." His

diploma, as well as the original program, will be on exhibit when the new town museum is opened. Others participating were Anna Hall, John H. Howard, Gertrude D. Fletcher, Florence Read and Alma DeCatur, all of whom were to be called upon the next year to make "declamations" at their own graduation.

Although the new town hall had been built more than a decade, the ceremony was held, as had been customary for over a century, in the First Parish Church, diagonally across the common from the original academy building. It was held on a Friday morning, starting at 9:30.

Sir Edward William Elgar as yet had not written the ever useful "Pomp and Circumstance" processional so often used for such occasions, so the students, led by the sole graduate, marched up the church aisle to a popular "Triumph March" played on the organ by Mrs. Sherman H. Fletcher and her daughter, Julia, played the recessional. There was a piano solo by Hattie C. Sargent, a sophomore, and a duet by Mrs. Merritt and Mr. Adams who seemed destined to appear at every social event.

AT LAST! THE one diploma was handed to "our hero" by Rev. Edward A. Horton, the superintendent. What a very special day for Allan!

The Craven family name has since disappeared from the town rolls. The family lived in the "Bridge House," so named because it sits almost under the railroad overpass in Graniteville, and the father was a superintendent in the local mills of the Abbot company.

Daughter Blanche became a nurse in Lowell and her sister, Gertrude, married Robert H. Elliot of the same city. Allan moved on to Boston to become an interior decorator. Perhaps he used the Atlantic Cable to order goods from London and Paris!