

The battle of the bells heralded 4th of July

Westford's Fourth of July celebrations were once quite colorful, but the town has planned nothing for many years. This year again, local residents will enjoy family activities and travel to celebrations around the region.

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WESTFORD - Grandfather was forever saying, "What's happened to those good old times?" Were they so good, after all? Maybe not - but different.

Compare the Fourth of July celebrations of today with those of yesteryear. A few things have changed. Celebrations are different.

In grandfather's time, the center of many activities was at the geographical center of the town, the Common. Folks had to either walk or ride in a carriage to these events. They came in large numbers from the villages, often with their lunches, to spend the day watching sporting events, listening to orations and band concerts - and just enjoying good old-fashioned get-togethers.

Young people teased their parents to let them stay out on the "Night Before," to hear the bells ring loudly from perches in the tower of the white church (the old meetinghouse) and the brown church (the Congregational, which at that time was painted brown) to signal in at the stroke of midnight the arrival of the Fourth.

It was sort of a royal battle between two sets of bell-ringers.

Sarsaparilla and cheddar

This was the time, too, when it was open house at the two country stores, facing each other diagonally across the Common.

Sherm Fletcher and Dick Wright rolled out a wheel of Vermont cheese (Sherm was the cheese buyer, and mighty proud of it!) at the Wright & Fletcher store. The counter used for "puttin' up orders" was cleaned, and along with the cheese came Bradt's soda crackers, crispy white thin squares, a delight to the palate.

With this came plenty of soda pop which had been cooling in the big ice chest in the rear of the store, known better as the "back room."

Favorite refreshment in those days was Moxie, birch and root beer, and also sarsaparilla (we had to look up that spelling). Chelmsford Ginger Ale also had come to town with newer flavors.

To their customers, the partners would slip a 7-20-4 or Pippin cigar, sort of Christmas in July.

John M. Fletcher and his son, J. Herbert (Tootle) had similar goin's on at their variety store. If a young lad were quick enough, he could take in both events.

Only the bravest of the female sex showed up at this midnight feast. There was good camaraderie all around.

Alec Fisher, who ran the town slaughterhouse and traded in cattle, always readied his small brass cannon for a few heavy blasts now and then from the Common.

Small boys kept their firecrackers, torpedoes and sparklers for the next day. In youthful exuberance, however, the supply of sparklers was usually gone before dark. Woe to the boy who got his finger jammed in a cap pistol. Those blood blisters could sometimes be pretty sore!

A caution was needed with torpedoes, about the size and shape of a Hersey kiss, wrapped in gay paper and containing a cap which exploded when thrown on a hard surface. Placed in a tight pants pocket, one or two might blow off while sliding into second base.

Members of the newly formed Boy Scout Troop 1, Westford, with Academy principal William C. Roudenbush in charge, would gather early on the Fourth for a flag-raising ceremony at the hand-hewn 80-foot high flagpole.

The old handstand surrounding the pole, erected many years previously, had rotted away. It was replaced with a portable wooden one, designed by Alonzo (Lon) Sutherland, a master of all crafts.

A convenience rail around the circumference kept the musicians (usually the Nashua Military Band) inside and provided a "hangin' on" hold for small boys who wished they, too, were playing the trumpet or beating the big bass drum.

The Boy Scouts erected a tent nearby, where they dispensed the usual. The soda pop was cooled in Mother's galvanized wash tub, filled with cracked ice from Burge's Pond. The last year this tub was used was when a boy let his ice-chipping tool pierce its bottom. Is a further explanation necessary?

There was baseball of sorts on the Common, hardly large enough for a Junior League playoff. But the ball was soft and didn't go very far.

It was in 1910, after Mrs. Mabel Whitney built a new playground between the Frost School and the Academy, that the local boys showed off their prowess at baseball. For a while, the Westford A.A. fielded a team whose major stars were three Sullivan and three Griffin boys.

It was a status symbol for those who were wealthy enough to own a Model T or Maxwell to ring the Common at concert time loudly showing their approval at the end of the rendition of "Stars & Stripes Forever," or every other tune, with a cacophony of Klaxons. Horses were relegated to the church horsesheds.

As we all recall, everyone had a dandy time.