

Pranks, parades and pastimes of July 4^{7/7/88}

By June Kennedy 7/7/88

The real fun began the night before — at least that's how the local "youth" would tell the tale. For it was then that the Wright & Fletcher Store opened its doors and put on a banquet — "all you wanted, didn't cost you nothin'."

Moxie, soda crackers, tubs of cheese and donuts were offered the gang in hopes of offsetting their holiday pranks, or at least making them a little more repentant by 2 or 3 a.m. Some frankly confessed that they usually got cold and were glad to go home by that time anyway.

But not before shootin' off fireworks. Torpedoes, pin wheels, snakes, skyrockets, lady fingers — all could be bought by the bagful in Lowell. And not before raisin' the devil either. An outhouse on the church lawn, corsets wrapped around telephone poles, a bicycle atop the flagpole, a haywagon at the Town Hall, the annual rolling of the cannon balls down Main Street (notice how they are wisely welded together these days), and the ringing of the church bells at midnight — all heralded the coming of the glorious Fourth.

Some years ago, three 80-year-old contem-

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poraries — George Perkins, Otis Day and Ben Prescott — offered similar tales.

"They really used to celebrate up here on the Fourth of July. They'd say you're never going to ring the bell. Well, I can remember we rang the bell every night before the Fourth. One of us would shinny up the lightening rod and get onto the roof of the entry to the Unitarian Church — wouldn't take a million dollars for doing it today.

"Someone unlocked the window earlier in the day. We'd climb into the belfry, pull up the bell rope and attach to it a string

weighted by a rock. At midnight we'd pull the string and ring the bell from the outside. One time the cops was sittin' right on the front steps. We really fooled 'em that time!

"We had fun switchin' horses around too. Now you'd take and go into Spalding's place (near Frost School); he'd have some nice horses there. He'd wake up in the morning and find the oldest reprobates he'd ever seen. He didn't know whose they were.

"It was all twisted. Abbot's horses would land down at the Poor Farm. Then they'd bring them up to the Common to see who owned them — and then you'd see the arguments as to ownership.

"Next to the Congregational Church on Lincoln Street, Tricky Keyes had a harness shop. Chief of Police Finnegan was a harness repairer. There was a little shed connected with the shop; one night before the Fourth we towed it out to the middle of the Common, demolished it and labeled it 'Keyes Hotel'. Finnegan was really tearin' about. (The 1909 news account hinted that the building had been an eyesore to the town for at least two years; few neighbors sympathized with Mr. Keyes).

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July 4 pranks and parades

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"So what we did — we went and got some old lady's clothes — clothes from a big fat woman by the name of Wright. We stuffed them with straw and hung them on the telegraph pole. A posted sign read, 'Here hangs a well-known citizen of the town of Westford who takes a great occasion in being the Chief of police.' Finnegan was wild. If he ever found out who did that, he was gonna kill 'em. He never found out."

After recognizing the unauthorized features of the Fourth celebration, the July 1909 *Westford Wardsman* graphically records the local parade which started promptly from the Common at 8:30 a.m.

"It was the best ever! Joe Wall costumed as a 'big Injun' was marshall, with Harold Hildreth as mounted aide. Wayland Balch and daughter May, as Uncle Sam and Columbia, were followed by an Indian squaw and several girls costumed with flags, and two women in modern dress. The Nashua military band marched next, followed by Graniteville hose company in their red shirts.

"Then came hose No. 1, followed by a float from Minot's corner on which was a spray pump labelled, 'This is what we get.' Hose No. 23 consisted of Julian Cameron's Shetland pony in a light wagon with several young boys helmeted with tin dippers. Their rear guard was two young girls on horseback.

"The Grange team dressed in white filled a large float, followed by a float from Parkerville labelled 'Gilmore's band'. A 'one hoss chaise' representing 1776 was contrasted with a rubber-tired buggy of 1909.

Superintendent of Roads Frank Miller drove a span of horses attached to a dump cart, in which was his force of workmen. The Enterprise Club float was followed by the Thimble float. Mrs. Frank Miller, having accidentally lamed herself in practicing for the ladies' baseball game, very appropriately rode next as a 'wounded suffragette'.

"Bingville's representation were followed by a carriage holding four of our most petite matrons as 'Mellin's food babies'. Four handsomely decorated automobiles here varied the procession with a one 'hoss chaise' containing the chairman of the assessors and his children

Fourth of July Celebration

Westford, July 5, 1909

PROGRAM

Parade 8 A. M.
Base-Ball Game 9.30 A. M.

Shirley A. A. vs. Westford A. A.

Sports on Common 1 P. M.
Concert by Nashua Military Band 2 P. M.

RALPH W. HOLT, Director

Program

- 1 March, "Charter Oak" Claus
- 2 Overture, "Oriental" Bleger
- 3 Cornet Solo, Selected
- MR. R. W. HOLT
- 4 Selection, "The Grand Mogul" Herbert
- 5 Popular Airs Von Tilzer
- 6 Parody on Arkansas Traveler Lovenberg
- 7 Indian War Dance Bellestedt
- Reading of Declaration of Independence, Mr. John Adams Taylor
- 8 March, "Triumphal"
- 9 Paraphrase, "In the Deep Cellar" Lovenberg
- 10 Operatic Selection, "A Stubborn Cinderella" Howard
- 11 (a) "A Kansas Episode" Pryor
- (b) "Turkish Reveille" Michaelis
- 12 Medley, Charles K. Harris's Latest Hits Harris
- 13 Concert Waltz, "Webber's Invitation" Faheloch
- 14 Finale, "Almacks" Rietzel

Star Spangled Banner

A REQUEST

It is earnestly desired for the good of all that no firearms or fireworks be discharged during the Parade and on Common during the Concert.

Huntley S. Turner, Printer, Ayer

A PROGRAM FROM the 1909 Fourth of July Celebration in Westford shows the day began with a bright and early parade at 8 a.m., followed by a morning of sports and a late afternoon filled with musical strains wafting across the grassy Common.

(Courtesy 'Westford Recollections')

in between to contrast old and new methods of locomotion.

"A.H. Burnham's corn harvester was the only three-horse hitch. The local branch of the W.C.T.U. were on the water wagon, literally, as their float was decorated with an old-fashioned well sweep and curb."

The account goes on to tell of the Westford Club scoring two victories — one against Shirley, the other against Milford, New Hampshire. The ladies' teams

— the Suffragettes and Liberty Belles — held a ball game too.

Band concerts and 100 yard dashes seem to have made the day complete, that is, after neighbors joined together to make ice cream in the old crank freezer and enjoy a home display of fireworks.

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.