ED ON EARLY MAYNARD

“Raivaaja March 19, 1987

When I wrote about the Maynard Finnish business men, I also remembered the usages and customs of past years.

In the early decades of this century, Maynard was a busy shopping center for many encircling towns.

Even after World War I, folks in Acton, Stow and Sudbury did their shopping here, also bringing their farm produce for sale, especially in the summer and the fall.

Shops were very busy on Friday nights and Saturdays. The American Woolen Company paid their employees on Fridays and folks went out that evening to make their weekly purchases. Work went on in the mill for half a day on Saturday. Then you had to do your home chores and get to the sauna before you went to the hall in the evening. Haste was essential.

Shops had extra help on Fridays and Saturdays because of the language problems. The help was usually Finnish or Polish for these were the largest two immigrant nationalities. The British and the Irish were not considered to be immigrants for they spoke English.

Store hours were rather flexible. If there were customers, the owners were in no hurry to close the doors. The police did not interfere with the hours for they had enough to do with the many taverns.

There was a “30 Year’s War” going on between the Finns and the Irish which often called for interference by the police. The Finns were taken to the hoosegow and the Irish were sent home.

Mail was not delivered to the homes, rather you rented a mailbox at the Post Office. There were

two kinds: one that anyone could open and another that had a lock which only you could open as long as you remembered the numbers on the dial. Rumor had it that every now and then a newcomer from Finland would arrive with the post box number as his address.

The two streets, Main and Nason, like all the streets in town, were covered with gravel. When the weather stayed fair for a longer time, the streets had to be watered to cut down on the dust. The horses of the Fire Department were hitched up to a contraption that held a wooden barrel with levers that could be shut off and on.

There were two regular firemen and two handsome horses, the others were volunteers. When the fire whistle sounded, the volunteers left their jobs and headed for the fire. They knew which way to go by counting the number of toots sounded. The horses and their equipment also raced to the scene.

When I came to Maynard, there was only one policeman on duty on a shift. There were some assistant officers who were used when there was something going on. The chairman of the Selectmen was also the Police Chief. Later, as the population grew, more policemen were hired and they had their own Chief.

Electricity was provided by the American Woolen Company for both town and its populace. The street lights were turned off at 11 p.m. If you had not got home by that hour, then you could stumble about in the dark.

The darkness did not increase the crime rate. The population was made up of so many different nationalities and no one knew the customs of the others. Thus, everyone tried to stay with their own group. Sometimes you had to fight in the barroom when someone asked for it. The Finns were no angels when called upon to defend the honor of their fatherland.

There were a lot of boarding houses in Maynard in those years. The Finns had two on Main Street: the Minto House and the Westend House. The British had a sizeable restaurant on Main Street, opposite the mill gate. You could also hire a room there as you could in the Finnish boarding houses.

There were also cafes in various private homes.

There were also a lot of things that have disappeared from modern life. There was bustling and noisy street car and train service. All incoming supplies and outgoing shipments were done by rail. The American Woolen Company used vast amounts of coal to keep the factory running. Lines of dozens of coal cars were a daily spectacle. Passenger trains came through town twice daily.

New inventions have changed our habits and customs. Improvements have been made but much good has also been lost. Firmer discipline is called for. I hope that our world leaders smarten up and stop making threats with atomic weapons.

Ed Helander