Bob Shryock: Jack Sheppard loved Wenonah

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Jack Sheppard Sr., longtime mayor of Wenonah, died Jan. 1. (Submitted photo)

NEW!

By **Bob Shryock | For NJ.com**

Jack Sheppard frequently rode his bicycle to Wenonah to visit his friend, Tony Marine, while attending Woodbury High School (Class of 1944).

"Come on, Jack, it's a great place to live," Jack recalled Tony telling him one day. "And I said, 'Why not?' I loved the place, too."

So, simply, that's how Jack and his bride, Helen Mae, became residents of the quaint, Norman Rockwell community in 1955. And have remained in the same house for 60 years.

Jack's initial foray into the local volunteer scene was as an original trustee of the Wenonah Swim Club in 1957. During his long life and deep community service commitment, he championed countless causes, including, some forget, the county's volunteer center. He was completely selfless. Jack had a long string of volunteer successes yet wanted no credit.

But none gave him greater joy nor satisfaction than his 28 years on Wenonah council, including the final 24 years as mayor. Employed by Cornell & Co. steel contractors for 43 years, he became one of Gloucester County's first part-time mayors who somehow made it a full-time position. He loved his rapport with the citizenry; accessibility was his strength.

Here's a trivia question: Who did Sheppard replace as Wenonah mayor in January 1966? Answer: Russ Lee.

Lee, too, was a Republican. When you moved into Wenonah in that era, it helped if you were a GOP member in good standing.

Yet Jack Sheppard, a staunch Republican, was credited with burying the political hatchet when he walked side-by-side with Rep. James J. Florio, a staunch Democrat, in a Fourth of July parade. Jack transcended politics. He was a man for the people.

You could author several volumes on Jack's achievements as mayor, but leading the list is the purchase, from Conrail, of the historic railroad station. Jack stumbled across an 1890s deed which showed the borough owned the ground. So, for just $3,000, Wenonah bought the station. In a display of town unity, residents pitched in and helped refurbish the building so it could be used for myriad projects including council meetings.

Said Sheppard, "If you weren't engrossed in the town, you wouldn't have known about the deed."

Known as a "marrying" mayor, Sheppard was uniquely accessible.

He also could be tough. He fought the state on a variety of subjects. A pet peeve was his outspokenness about an Assembly bill which requires state employees to reveal personal financial information. He was worried it could be a death knell for the state's volunteer base.

When Sheppard stepped down as mayor in 1990, at age 64, his greatest concern was leaving his town in good shape.

"I'll be here," he said. "I have a lot of information, a lot of memories. I'd like to pass along my feelings about what's best for the town."

Jack Sheppard did just that for a very long time before his passing on New Year's Day at age 88.

The entire town mourns his loss.

Because no one ever loved a town more.

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