

PEOPLE

Rocco Doto delivers a packet of information to each family new in town. He did some reading and got hooked.

Wenonah newcomer keeps local history alive

By Leslie Harshbarger
PHOTO BY HERBIE STAFF

Rocco Doto likes knocking on doors.

Each time a family moves into Wenonah, Doto shows up on the doorstep with a packet of information about his adopted community.

"We're a jewel, but so many people aren't aware of just how special we are," said Doto, who moved from Washington Township eight years ago. "I think Wenonah's small scale — it's only one square mile — is what helps make it so special. Why do we not even have a traffic light in town?"



Rocco Doto sits in the main hall inside the old town hall in Wenonah, discussing the town's local history. He and his wife moved there from Washington Township eight years ago.



The old train station is no longer in use, but its historic charm is part of the appeal of Wenonah for Doto and others. The historical society hopes to turn the station into a museum.

Information

The Wenonah Historical Society meets at 7:30 p.m. the second Friday of each month at the former train station, 2 N. East Ave. Phone: 856-415-1215.

With a population of 2,231, according to the 2000 census, the place hasn't changed that much from the early 20th century, when the Wenonah Realty Co. sold plots of land to people eager to live in the country, said Doto, who joined Wenonah's historical society when he moved to town.

"I think of myself as a cheerleader for the town," said Doto, who takes it upon himself, as society president, to welcome newcomers. "In the two years, I've been knocking on doors... a lot of younger people have been moving into Wenonah, and most of them don't know too much about Wenonah's history. Hopefully, with more knowledge about Wenonah, they'll become involved in the community."

Doto figures he has knocked on more than 50 doors.

"Since Wenonah is a walkable town — another reason that I like Wenonah so much

1883 after separating from Depford Township. Unlike some other South Jersey communities, Wenonah was always intended to be a year-round community, not a summer resort.

Thomas Capaldi, Wenonah's mayor, is glad that Doto and his wife, Colleen, and their home in Washington Township, where they had lived for 18 years, and moved to Wenonah.

"Compared to many of our other residents, Rocco has only lived here a short time, but in that time period he has made Wenonah and its history top priority," Capaldi said.

The municipality was founded in the 1860s by a group of Philadelphia railroad magnates who extended the rail line to what is now Wenonah, then sold building lots. The community was incorporated as a separate municipality in

"After I was laid off, I thought I would never work in the corporate world again," Doto said. "I still needed to own a living, but I wanted to do that by working for myself."

The couple bought the Queen Anne Victorian, one of Wenonah's original houses, fixed it up, and rented out the two apartments. Later, they bought other rental properties, including apartments, in Wenonah, Washington Township and Pitman.

"Within six months after being downsized, I bought three properties," said Doto, who also buys buildings to refurbish and sell.

Sull, after restoring the Vic-

torian, Doto made joining the historical society a priority.

"Up to the time I moved to Wenonah, I can honestly say I didn't like history that much because I thought of history as all dates and wars," said Doto, who joined to meet people. "But in a small town it's so easy to relate to history."

Currently, society members are focused on the former train station on North East Avenue, which they hope to turn into a museum by spring.

"The train station is our signature building and the center and focal point of Wenonah," Doto said. "The train station is a jewel and so important to Wenonah because the community was born out of the train station."

The station was built in 1893 to replace one razed in 1871 and eventually moved across

the street, where it now houses a flower shop. The second structure, a two-story Tudor-style building, was the Borough Hall from 1976 until last month, when a new municipal building opened.

The municipality bought the station for \$3,000 from Corrali in 1976. It had been boarded up shortly after passenger service ended in 1942.

"It was a grander station than what was normally built perhaps because so many of the early developers of Wenonah were wealthy," Doto said of the structure, which still features the passenger platform, with its original cast-iron columns and walkway.

The building, also used as a community center, will be used mainly by the historical society but will continue to be a meeting spot for borough organizations.

"We've been starting articles about Wenonah's history in our basements for years because we never had a proper place to display them," Doto said. "With the opening of a museum, everything will be in one place for the first time."

Contact author at lh@philly.com or harshb@philly.com.

Book *Wenonah Group* by Robert B. Smith, 2003, 200 p., \$19.95, ISBN 0-971-121-12-1.

Genealogy *Wenonah* by Robert B. Smith, 2003, 200 p., \$19.95, ISBN 0-971-121-12-1.

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