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Dave Sheehan holds up a copy of his book, a history of Edison.

Walt Radomsky/The Home News

Edison: Historical Society Writer Chronicles Edison

Edison Township
340 Plainfield Ave.
Edison, N.J. 08817

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ASK AT DESK

By JENNIFER NELSON
Home News staff writer

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EDISON — It all started with a year's worth of articles in a local newspaper tracing the history of the 308-year old township.

Dave Sheehan of Old Post Road compiled more than 52 articles he wrote from March 1990 to April 1991 for the Metuchen-Edison Review into a book, "Welcome to Edison — An Enlightened Community," published in November by the Edison Township Historical Society.

The book chronicles Edison's growth from a sprawling, rural town with many farms, few buildings and several main roads, to the bustling metropolis it is today.

Sheehan found that Edison has more to it than the inventor for whom it was named. "Edison Township has a history apart from the fame Thomas Edison brought to it," said Sheehan, 42. "If Thomas Edison hadn't lived here it would still be famous."

The book describes the town's first inhabitants (prehistoric fossil fragments have been found there), its famous people (including Edison, inventor of the lightbulb, and actress Susan Sarandon) and its important buildings, including churches, synagogues, schools and medical facilities.

"A lot of the organizations, churches, synagogues were a product of the boom in Edison in the '50s through the '80s," said Sheehan, who works for the township.

Menlo Park, where Edison and his workers lived, was once a vacation spot for New Yorkers weary of the city, Sheehan said. "It would be difficult to find a pleasanter locality where one can escape the dust and turmoil of the city and obtain the rest required after a hard winter's work — rest which cannot be obtained at any of the fashionable seaside watering places," Sheehan wrote.

The site of nearby Roosevelt Hospital was chosen because of its remoteness. "It was free of population and free of any kind of buildings. The closest people to it was one farmer and the nearest population area was downtown Metuchen," according to the book.

The area now houses Menlo Park Mall, Roosevelt Park, and JFK Hospital. Thousands of people travel on nearby Route 1 and 27 every day with residential and commercial neighborhoods pocketed in between.

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Chapters of the 159-page book are devoted to important Edison women — such as Minnie Veal, who worked with the town's underprivileged youth, and Johanna Wira, who pushed for the town's name to be changed from Raritan Township to Edison. The name was changed in 1954.

Other sections are devoted to the military presence at Camp

Kilmer and Raritan Arsenal, and transportation on the Raritan River and the New Jersey Turnpike.

During World War II, Camp Kilmer processed 5 million soldiers leaving for Europe. Row after row of two-story bungalows and several dining halls and movie theaters once stood there. In 1956, the camp became a temporary home for more than 40,000 Hungarian refugees who were fleeing the communists during the Hungarian Revolution.

The arsenal closed in the early

1960s and Camp Kilmer is now an industrial park, home to the Middlesex County Vocational-Technical School and Rutgers' Livingston College.

The idea to write a book about Edison's history emerged in 1989 with the suggestion by the founder and former editor of the Metuchen-Edison Review, Jean Whiston. The historical society had also recognized the need for a book of this kind, said Sheehan, a township resident for 18 years.

"As I kept writing, it got bigger and bigger," he said. "A couple of

months into it I thought it was possible to put this in a book form."

Sheehan did research in local religious institutions, libraries and civic organizations, and also interviewed residents about their reminiscences, he said.

He was surprised to find how many monuments Edison has, including a fountain in Roosevelt Park in honor of Thomas Edison; a tribute to World War II veterans in Bonhamtown-Nixon Memorial Park on Woodbridge Avenue and Old Post Road; and

the Edison Memorial Tower at Tower Road and Christie Street.

As the town grew, churches and synagogues would help each other out by offering use of their building while another congregation's was being built or repaired, Sheehan said. "What impressed me was the wonderful community spirit," he said. "It was a joy to discover these things as I was writing."

The hard book sells for \$10 and can be purchased at Edison's main library on Plainfield Avenue.

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