

Wira, Drwal, Engel: women who helped shape Edison

Potts, Swales played role

By David C. Sheehan

Fast-tracking a career, women's rights, women's liberation, juggling home, career, children and family responsibilities — all ring of life in the '70s, '80s and '90s. While it is true that these are legitimate concerns and concepts of today's women, it may be said that these notions and concepts were not invented in recent decades.

There are many women in the history of Edison Township who have shown that these concerns were also factors in their lives — at the turn of the century, in the 1920s, during the Second World War and into the 1950s.

Of one of the most notable of these Edison women, it can be said that without her, Edison truly would not be Edison. Johanna Wira, known in histories as Mrs. Charles Wira, led the drive in 1954 to change the name of the town from Raritan Township to Edison Township.

Wira and the Women For Edison, a group she formed and headed, circulated petitions and collected more than 3,000 signatures supporting the name change. While many current residents find it hard to believe that the community, home to the world-famous inventor, Thomas Alva Edison, and birthplace of the incandescent lamp, could be named otherwise, some 1950-era citizens believed that the town should retain its Raritan appellation. Others advocated calling the town Nixon.

The Edison campaign was hard-fought and fraught with bureaucratic obstacles. Wira and her group went door to door to obtain signatures and present their case to Raritan Township residents. Wira explained that by renaming the town as Edison, the community could most properly honor the memory of Thomas Edison's life here and acknowledge the hundreds of inventions he created in his Menlo Park laboratories.

Additionally, she argued, it would end the confusion with other New Jersey towns also named Raritan. Further, Edison would not favor the name of any one of the sections of town — namely Nixon, Stelton, Oak Tree, Clara Barton or Menlo Park.

The Women For Edison even went so far as to have bumper stickers printed with "Lights On! Vote for Edison, N.J." and "Change Raritan Township to Edison, N.J."

Then, having garnered the required number of signatures on their petition (the first signatory was then-Mayor James C. Forgiore), the question was placed on the ballot, and Raritan Township changed its name on November 10, 1954, to Edison.

Wira's activities and contributions to the township were far from over with that victory, however. She was responsible for setting in motion the establishment of a central post office facility for the already-burgeoning population of Edison.

Her first victory in that regard was in the successful drive to change the name of the Stelton branch post office to the Edison post office. That post office was not a central facility which she knew was so essential to cementing the community's identity. That took many years of dealing with an unyielding federal bureaucracy and even a trip to meet with the postmaster general in Washington, D.C., and a letter to President John F. Kennedy seeking his support.

"What's in a name?" we often ask. If your name is Johanna Wira, even the name of your town's train station is important to the life and identity of your community.

In 1956, Wira and the Women For Edison prevailed upon the Pennsylvania Rail Road and the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities to rename the Stelton train station to reflect the still-new name of the entire town. It was, after all, where the electrically propelled locomotive was invented and first operated by resident Thomas Edison. It was for this reason also that the train station should reflect the Edison name, they felt.

Wira, whose husband, Charles, was also dedicated to the community in his service to the Edison Police Reserves and Boy Scouting, had still other interests.

She was founder of the Edison Teen Age Council and served as president of the women's auxiliary of Boy Scout Troop 25 and as a Girl Scout leader of the Metuchen-area council, township chair of the United Fund and a member of the Clara Barton Woman's Club. She organized the Edison Friends of the Library and became that group's first president.

Wira worked on civil defense and as an aide to the director. For her efforts in changing the name of the township to Edison, she was named a special member of the Edison Pioneers — a group,

according to Wira's Edison Pioneers certificate, which was "the inventor's associates and those who desire to pay tribute to his transcendent genius."

She also received a letter from Thomas Edison's grandson in 1954 thanking her for her successful efforts in naming the town after his grandfather. A stage play, *A Message of Love*, authored by Wira, was produced by the Clara Barton Woman's Club in 1951. Shortly after the name of the township was changed to Edison, she presented the township with a framed portrait, obtained through the cooperation of the Edison Pioneers, of Thomas Edison, which was to be displayed in the Municipal Court chambers in the old Municipal Building.

In the early 1960s, Wira was called upon by Mayor Anthony Yelencsics, chairman of the John F. Kennedy Hospital board of trustees, to serve as the first chairwoman of the auxiliary of the John F. Kennedy Medical Center Foundation. Under Wira's first year as chairman, the auxiliary's membership grew to 453.

Another woman who made her mark in the history, development and protection of Edison was Ruth Swales.

It was in 1917 that the community's then-year-old volunteer fire department installed a large gong on Swales' front lawn. In her home was a telephone dedicated to receive reports of fires. Swales would record the nature and location of the fire and go out to her front lawn and repeatedly sound the gong to alert the volunteers.

Swales performed this duty until 1922, when an air-horn alarm was installed atop the Plainfield Avenue fire station.

In recognition of her years and service and devotion to duty, she was the first and only woman to be named an honorary volunteer member of the township's Raritan Engine Company No. 1.

Nellie Potts, an Edison nonagenarian, is a lifelong resident of the township. Notable in that she is a direct descendant of one of the first six European settlers of the area, Edmund Dunham, Miss Potts is another woman who has made significant contributions to our community.

She is a member of Edison's centuries-old Stelton Baptist Church and served for many years as superintendent of the congregation's Sunday school. Further,

she served as the Stelton Baptist Church's first deaconess.

When Edison's Camp Kilmer was an active staging area for U.S. Army troops going to fight World War II in Europe, Miss Potts, and other members of the nearby church, would invite "the boys" from the camp to attend church services there. Many soldiers would be invited also to share Sunday dinners before shipping out to the war zones.

Miss Potts would write to many of these guests while they served overseas and made it her habit to include inspirational Bible tracts in her correspondence to sustain them through the combat duties. One soldier, Nelson Smith, current sexton of Stelton Baptist, fondly remembered the dinner and Miss Potts' letters and returned to Edison after his Army hitch overseas and married one of the congregants, Ruth Smith.

The Smiths and Miss Potts remain active members of the still-growing congregation and played vital roles in the compilation of the church's written history for the congregation's 300th anniversary celebration in 1989. Miss Potts also has served as a valuable resource of information and facts regarding local and church history for the Edison Township Historical Society.

No history of Edison Township and certainly no chronicle of the women of this community would be complete without the inclusion of Dora Engel. Wife of Middlesex County Sheriff and Raritan Township Mayor Julius Engel, Engel listed among her accomplishments and interests her founding of the Edison Women's Democratic Club, the Clara Barton Democratic Club and the Edison Young Democrats.

She continued her interest and activity in local government even at age 90, when, as a resident of Roosevelt Hospital, she would, when needed, register to vote new patients at the hospital.

Arguably Engel's most significant, far-reaching, farsighted and long-lasting civic accomplishment began in 1926 when she became founder of the Edison (then Raritan Township) Public Library Association. Engel, Mrs. Doll and Mrs. Willmott gathered 246 books and set up the township's first library in 1931 in various rented storefronts until 1939, when it moved to the upstairs of the old Municipal Building. She later

served (from 1963 through 1987) as a library board trustee.

It was in January 1987 at age 90, shortly before her death, that she was named "Lifetime Member Emeritus of the Edison Public Library Board of Trustees" by Yelencsics. Further, the recently-expanded main library's children's room was named the Dora Engel Children's Library in recognition of her years of service to the library and the Edison Township community.

Referring to Mrs. Engel at the library dedication ceremony, Edison Township Councilwoman Dorothy Drwal said, "She's never too busy to lend a helping hand or word of kindness."

Drwal, too, was an energetic and beloved contributor to the life and history of our community. Following her death on July 25 of this year, friends and adversaries alike remembered her fondly.

Mayor Thomas Paterniti said, "She meant an awful lot to the town. She did so much for everyone. ... No matter what she undertook, she did it and did it very well."

Her fellow councilman, John Hogan, eloquently described Drwal as "an idealist, a dreamer and a gentle lady."

Drwal was a lifelong resident of the township. She and her late husband Matthew (after whom the Edison High School football stadium is named) were both teachers in the township school system. Her elected political service began in 1976, when she was elected to the Township Council. In 1978 and 1979, she served as council president.

Her many years on the council provided depth to the governing body and she lent her strong and sometimes dissenting voice to its deliberations and actions. Thus, just prior to Yelencsics' death, Drwal launched an independent campaign for mayor. She was reported to have continued her campaign work even while hospitalized during the critical part of the campaign season. Although she was well known to be a high vote-getter, her campaign for the mayoralty was unsuccessful.

An active teacher for 23 years, she served on the Benjamin Franklin School PTA and the Edison High School PTSA, and was, in 1969, recognized under Gov. Thomas Kean's Governor's Recognition Program as Teacher of the Year.

She was also former president of the Edison Friends of the Library, the Edison Young Democrats and the Board of Health, and was a member of many township Democratic clubs. She was one of the driving forces in the foundation of the Edison Sheltered Workshop.

Other civic organizations that benefitted from her service was the New Jersey Division of the American Cancer Society, where she served as president and member of the board of trustees. She was a member of the John F. Kennedy Medical Center Foundation Auxiliary.

Drwal often related her pride in serving as chairman of the Citizens Committee to Close Kin-Buc. She and that group were instrumental not only in the closure of that notorious toxic waste dump but in its eventual placement on the Environmental Protection Agency's priority list of Superfund sites.

Later, as a councilwoman, she served as council liaison to the township's Environmental Commission. Long a supporter of the township's three all-volunteer first aid squads, Drwal acted as council liaison to the squads. Mrs. Drwal was also an active member of her church community, Guardian Angels Roman Catholic Church, where she regularly served as lector.

In 1981, she was listed in *Who's Who of American Women*, and in 1988 was inducted into the Douglass (College) Society for Distinguished Achievement.

Current Township Council president Sidney Frankel described Mrs. Drwal as "a very unique person. ... She gave of herself to her family, friends, church and community."

Like many contemporary women, these were some of the women who have shaped local history with their vision, ideals, faith, energy and dedication. These women are women of strength and substance whose lives serve as fine examples to the women, the men and the children who call Edison, New Jersey, home.

David C. Sheehan is president and co-founder of the Edison Township Historical Society. This is another in a series of articles by society members on the history of the area.