

Annual 'Fanny Wood Day' Celebration Is Colorful Showcase for Borough's Downtown

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Specially Written for Our Towns

Although her name does not appear in the history books, and her origins remain veiled in legend, Fanny Wood has come to symbolize the deep pride and affection felt by Fanwood residents for their suburban hometown.

Depicted as an attractive young woman circa 1895 – the year Fanwood was incorporated as a borough – she has been the inspiration for an annual festival which has drawn thousands of visitors to the community each year since its debut four years ago.

Held each September along South and Martine Avenues, "Fanny Wood Day" rings in autumn with a vibrant collage of sidewalk sales, exhibits, refreshments, musical performances, games and activities, souvenirs, contests and raffle drawings.

Also featured are booths and information tables spotlighting non-profit groups and other organizations, plus educational exhibits on topics ranging from child identification to fire safety and health maintenance.

As for the lady herself, Fanny Wood is rumored to have been the daughter of a privileged 19th-century citizen of the area, who christened the area "Fanny's Woods" in her honor. Another story depicts Fanny as having been a magazine writer and poet whose idyllic descriptions of rural Fanwood were used in advertisements to bring people to the area.

Whether born of fact or folklore, Fanny Wood has played a genuine and vital role in helping to promote the community overall, and the business district in particular, through the popular event bearing her name.

Fanny Wood Day was inaugurated by Mayor Maryanne S. Connelly in 1996, the first year of her administration, as a salute to the community's heritage and as a way for people to get a first-hand look at the diverse offerings of the borough's downtown.

While browsing among the many tables and exhibits at Fanny Wood Day, visitors have a leisurely opportunity to sample the cuisine, merchandise and services available in the business district.

Mayor Connelly has described Fanny Wood Day as "a family event" which "really brings together the volunteers, merchants and local government" for the benefit of the entire community.

It is sponsored each year by the Fanny Wood Day Committee, a group of borough merchants, officials and others who have contributed their time and talents to making the festival a success. It is chaired by local accountant Neil F. Schembre.

Capping this year's celebration, which took place September 26, was the long-awaited unveiling of the 16-foot-high Millennium Clock beside the entrance to the historic Fanwood Train Station at South and Martine Avenues.

The Victorian-style, four-faced timepiece, its carillon and an accompanying split-rock wall were paid for entirely through proceeds from past Fanny Wood Day events and with donations from individuals and companies – about \$35,000 over the past four years.

The clock's chime system is programmed to play a variety of tunes, such as the patriotic selections which heralded the debut of the timepiece at this year's festival.

While Fanny Wood Day bears many hallmarks of a contemporary festival, such as sidewalk sales, a disk jockey and the ever-popular Moonwalk ride, its organizers pay equal homage to the borough's past and to the people who made the community what it is today.

Over the last four years, exhibits have included vintage vehicles and equipment used by the Fanwood Fire Company since before the turn of the century, as well as the Fanwood Volunteer Rescue Squad's new ambulance, which it acquired



HOMETOWN GIRLS...Contestants in the second annual "Little Miss Fanny Wood" contest show off their Victorian-era costumes during the Fanny Wood Day celebration in Fanwood's downtown. The event was co-sponsored this year by the Enchantments Gift Shop and the Fanwood-Scotch Plains Newcomers Club. Standing in back of the youngsters are Enchantments owner Helen Ling and Linda Caminiti.

for its 50th anniversary last year.

Squad members gave tours of the ambulance and displayed memorabilia from the squad's first half-century of service to the borough at the 1998 Fanny Wood Day festival.

Another popular exhibit has been a replica of the Battleship *New Jersey*, the most decorated warship in naval history. The campaign to bring the vessel – which saw action in World War II, the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War – home to the Garden State has been championed by a number of Fanwood residents, principally retired United States Navy Colonel William W. Sheppard and his family.

Starting in 1998, the "Little Miss Fanny Wood" contest was added to the festival's itinerary. Sponsored by the Enchantments gift shop on South Avenue in Fanwood, the contest is open to girls between the ages of 3 and 12.

Contestants are invited to don Victorian fashions for the chance to win a crown and gift certificate. Runner-ups also receive prizes, and each of the young contestants is featured in the "Little Miss Fanny Wood" yearbook.

Other activities which have become part of Fanny Wood Day are a pie-baking contest sponsored by the Florida Fruit Shoppe, also on South Avenue, and an antique car show.

A volunteer fair was held at this year's festival, aimed at boosting membership within organizations such as the borough's emergency service units, as well as local boards and commissions.

This was also the year Fanny Wood went "online," as the borough debuted its new Internet site, www.fanwoodnj.com, during the festival. While initially offering basic information about the borough, the site will eventually feature a more comprehensive overview of the community.

Elected officials and members of the Fanwood Downtown Revitalization Committee are working to give the borough's downtown an economic boost through a variety of initiatives aimed at attracting more customers to the area.

A Fanwood business and professional association, similar to the downtown group established five years ago in Scotch Plains, is also reported to be in the works.



"DREAM COME TRUE"...Fanwood Mayor Maryanne S. Connelly stands beside the Millennium Clock, a 16-foot-high timepiece that was unveiled September 26 during the borough's fourth annual Fanny Wood Day celebration. Mayor Connelly called the debut of the clock "my dream come true."



AND THE WINNER IS...Four-and-a-half-year-old Antonia Goehren, wearing her floral crown, was named this year's Little Miss Fanny Wood. Each of the other contestants also received prizes.



FANWOOD'S FIRST LADY...."Fanny Wood," also known as Philathalians actress Tonya Francesca Cama, made her traditional appearance at the September festival which bears her name.