



Life at the Edge of the Forest

BY DOUG OTTO / Photography by Douglas Bovitt

Whether you call it Shamong or Indian Mills, this slice of South Jersey—with its history of preservation—is worth the trip



SUNSET AT ATSION LAKE

It was a search for that pastoral splendor that drove my wife and me to move to the McKendimen Woods section of Shamong 30 years ago. We were pineland pioneers, caught-up in the township's Go-Go Eighties building boom that pushed construction boundaries up against Route

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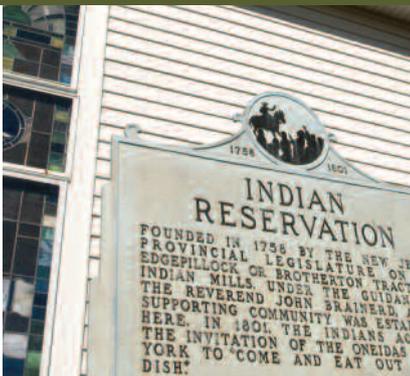
206 and the Wharton State Forest. Noted South Jersey builders, like Scarborough and Bricketto, began clearing lots and assembling pieces of the American Dream for \$41,900 each.

Then Governor Brendan Byrne approved the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan, designed to promote orderly development of the Pinelands and protect the area's significant natural, agricultural, and historical resources. And with that plan, fewer than 2,000 residents moved into town over the next 20 years, preserving the township's country-like setting. "Any new construction has to receive Pinelands approval first. Close to 58 percent of our area is owned by the State through the Wharton State Forest and through our program of land preservation," says Susan Onorato, Shamong Township Administrator/Township Clerk.

It's a smart plan, and a significant achievement when you consider that much of our state wrestles with overdevelopment, traffic tangles, and a disappearing quality of life.

Today the 6,462 residents of Shamong continue to cherish the vast natural beauty and peaceful country life that surrounds them, but they also enjoy lavish home sites and the community amenities that come with them.

At the executive/equestrian community of Saddlebrook Ridge, custom homes beginning at \$1.2 million are built with pristine views of trees and pastures. A 100-acre equestrian center with a 90 by 240-foot indoor arena provides year-round riding and training. The neighboring Wharton Acres cul-de-sac homes are



Shamong is an Indian name meaning **"place of the horn,"** in recognition of the abundance of deer that supplied both food and clothing for the **Native Americans** who originally lived here.

equally as pricey, and include heavily wooded 3-acre lots.

With continued concern for preserving its natural surroundings, the township moves forward, but does so with prudent planning.

Last year, Shamong protected 150 acres of land through an open space tax and a fund called PILOT (Payment In Lieu Of Taxes), where builders give back land to an open space reserve, so land is left in its natural state. No home can be built on a site smaller than two acres.

"It's a very rural, very residential town," Onorato says. "Our residents know they have moved into a country setting, and we don't have street cleaning or leaf removal. We have a huge group of volunteers that help at many levels."

Since development in town is limited, property values have remained relatively high. Shamong is one of a few New Jersey municipalities that don't have a local purpose tax. What it does have is a desirable sense of community, mixed with a strong sense of history.

Farming has long been the most prevalent of Shamong's enterprises, providing a profitable livelihood for its residents. The Valenzano family has lived in Shamong since the early '70s; now a third generation is growing up there. "We always farmed," says Tony Valenzano, co-owner with his father and brother of Valenzano Winery.

Township recreational activities include boating, swimming, and water sports on Indian Mills Lake. You can also rent a canoe from Adams Canoe Rental at Atsion Lake and explore the Mullica River.

The sports complex at Dingeltown Field, where three new fields were installed in the spring of 2007, offers lots of space for baseball, soccer, tennis and basketball. The township's recreational youth sports program, Indian Mills Athletic Association, is well supported by the entire community. During the summer months, many township residents, their families and friends can be found at Dingeltown Field enjoying a baseball game and the camaraderie found only in a community like Shamong.

"I've been here my whole life," says Tony Valenzano. "Now, I'm raising my kids in the same town where I grew up. That's pretty neat."

While parents enjoy raising their kids in the same town where they grew up, some things do change. When Valenzano was a kid, there was no Seneca High School. Today, the new school, built in 2003 as part of the Lenape Regional District, serves families in Shamong, Southampton, Woodland and Tabernacle Townships. The younger children pack the playgrounds at Indian Mills Elementary School for grades K-4 (539 students) and Indian Mills Memorial School for grades 5-8 (436 students).

With agricultural roots so deep, it's not surprising that Shamong is home to a few

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of South Jersey's best kept dining secrets. At Nina's Cafe, on Route 206 below Atsion Lake, Owner/Operator Nina serves you fresh ingredients lovingly prepared in a casual, comfortable, Jimmy Buffet-like atmosphere. Pic-A-Lilli Inn, also on Route 206, is the "King of Wings"—a great place for a family meal or a night out with some friends for hearty food and great live music. As for shopping? "We have a WaWa, a Murphy's Market, and La Campagnola—an upscale restaurant," says Margaret Fanourgakis, another long-time resident. "There are also some small businesses, like the hair dresser and a dance studio. But it's still just quiet here."

At this moment you might be thinking Mayberry, the small fictional town where everyone knew everyone, the fictional setting for the Andy Griffith Show. Truth is, you wouldn't be far off.

Just ask Rev. James Schroeder, of Shamong's Crossroads Church. If you want to catch up on the latest news, stop in to the Shamong Diner on Willow Grove Road any morning between 6 and 7 a.m. You will find many of the local farmers and businessmen congregating around the tables in the back, talking, enjoying their morning coffee, and always welcoming new faces to the conversation.

"My wife and I chose to return to Shamong," he says, "because it reminded me of the stories my grandmother told me about living in South Jersey just after World War II: friendly people willing to make new friends and cheer for each other's kids, beautiful open spaces and the opportunity to venture out to places like the beach and boards, Philadelphia or New York and still sleep in your own bed that night."

Shamong, like many small towns has its loveable quirks and roadside oddities. Coming down Route 206, you can't miss the 20-foot gorilla looming over the Texaco station, enticing you to stop for gas and a bite to eat. "Mighty Joe's is a throwback. A gas station/deli counter/sandwich shop/convenience store/bait shop—and the best custard in town," says Schroeder, who, with his wife, lived in Shamong from 1998 to 2001 and then moved back in 2004.

Preservation is a way of life in Shamong—whether it involves nature, history or community. The township has worked hard to retain its desirability as a farmland environment within a reasonable commuting distance to major urban amenities. It is the embodiment of rural and community life in the age of technology.

"The small town feel still exists here in Shamong," says Lorin Powell, an executive director at Archway Programs, a nearby non-profit agency. "We have large grounds surrounding the homes, and our kids can still ride their bikes and explore the woods. Parents don't worry about congested streets; there's a low volume of traffic and there are no sidewalks."

Life at the edge of the forest, indeed. ■

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