

Mirror Lake/Tomlinson Adult Center

709 Mirror Lake Drive
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701

By Jennifer Teeter

Mirror Lake

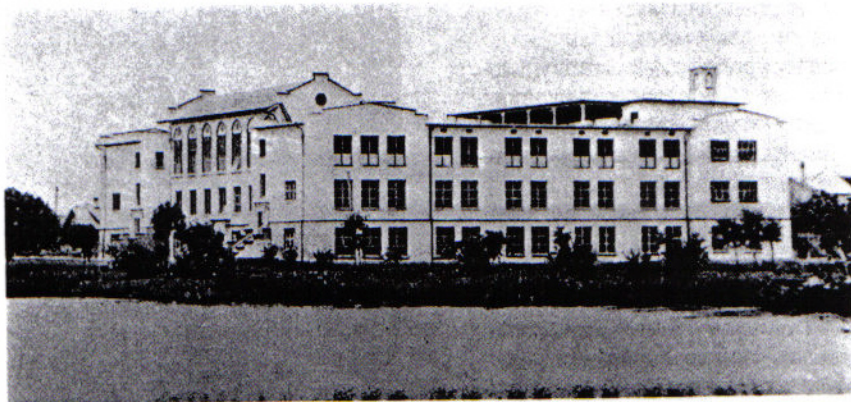
Walking into Mirror Lake Adult Center is like walking into another world, a world belonging to a simpler time. One expects to hear children laughing and running down the hall at any moment. But the children's voices do not come. Instead, a group of adults round the corner and head for the first floor snack bar.

Now an adult school, Mirror Lake was originally St. Petersburg High School. The building was first planned in 1916 and financed by a \$175,000 bond issue. The Cal F. Thomas Company bid \$138,282 for the job, but went broke in 1918 trying to finish the school for that amount. A second bond issue for \$75,000 was obtained to finish the building. By this time costs had almost doubled. The high school moved in from across the lake on November 28, 1919, and the building was dedicated on February 10, 1920.

The original building with its 13- to 14-foot high ceilings seems to have been "built for a hurricane shelter," says Helen Campbell, the head media specialist at Mirror Lake since September 1971 when she was hired by Dr. and Mrs. Louis H. Meeth Jr. The reason Mrs. Campbell refers to Mirror Lake as a "well built building meant to last through all of the hurricanes," is its unique construction. According to Mrs. Campbell, the first floor walls are up to three feet thick; the second floor walls are two feet thick, and the third floor walls are one foot thick, all made of concrete, clay and tile.

What is now the fourth floor was originally an open-air study hall. Six classrooms were later built on the fourth floor to take care of the overload of students, says Mame Smedley. She taught in the Mirror Lake building for 24 years, and many of her classes were held on the fourth floor.

On December 14, 1926, due to the rapid growth of the area, a new



Mirror Lake/Tomlinson Adult Center was built on the shore of Mirror Lake in 1919 as St. Petersburg High School.

St. Petersburg High School, using the same plan as Mirror Lake except twice the size, was opened at Fifth Avenue North and 25th Street. Mirror Lake then became a junior high school for girls while nearby Tomlinson became the junior high for boys. By 1931 both boys and girls attended Mirror Lake Junior High School. It stayed opened in this capacity until 1964 when Riviera Junior High School opened and absorbed its students.

At this time there was an effort on behalf of the city management to have it torn down, says Joe D. Mills, the state director of vocational education, who was then assistant superintendent of vocational, technical, and adult education. To keep this from happening, the School District made every effort to fully utilize the building, says Mills. The headquarters of the Pinellas Opportunity Council was moved into the building, and many specialized programs especially for senior citizens were started. Training programs for women were also implemented. "Pinellas County was [also] the only school system to have the Job Corps program," says Mills proudly.

In order to make the building more useful, minor renovations were carried on during this time, says Mills. The building was cleaned up, and painted; partitions were put up and taken down. They were constantly doing things to make the building look better, says Mills.

In 1967 Dr. Louis H. Meeth Jr., the pioneer of adult education in Pinellas County, was able to secure the Mirror Lake building, and it

opened as the first (and only) day and evening adult school in Pinellas County.

Mirror Lake was Florida's sixth daytime adult high school. Clearwater, Dixie, and Gibbs were already operating night programs for adults. Helen McIntyre, who was later to become Mrs. Meeth, became the first director of the Mirror Lake Adult Center.

The cost of taking classes in 1967 was \$2 for each eight-week course, plus books, or seven dollars for four classes. The school was open year round to anyone 16 years or older, and classes went from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with 90-minute periods.

As is the case today, the classes were open-ended, meaning that an adult could enter a class at anytime and leave when he felt he had met his goal or had completed his high school credits.

Some very popular classes were community interest ones, such as loom weaving, lapidary, painting, woodworking, reupholstery, caning, woodcarving, Spanish and French



Elliot L. Carr, current director of Mirror Lake/Tomlinson

languages, arts and crafts, music (including organ, piano, and community chorus), floral design, Bible history, estate planning, income tax, self-interest psychology, and creative writing.

In 1973 the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) allocated over \$463,000 for major renovations to the facility. The architect was Frederick P. Humberstone of Pinellas Park. The renovations included a new heating and air-conditioning system, rewiring, improved plumbing systems, installation of an elevator accessible to the first three floors, the changing of all doors to make them fire-safe, the replacing of wood frame windows with aluminum frame and tinted solar glass, the lowering of ceilings to eight feet, the installation of tile over the old wood floors, the installation of new light fixtures, the addition of a 400-seat meeting room, and for fire safety, the closing in of the large windows on the first and second floors that used to look into the auditorium.

Nothing was done to the 500-seat auditorium itself, and it remains unusable because the HUD grant — due to the rapid rise of inflation — was insufficient to cover this cost when the bids were finally completed. This, according to Mrs. Campbell, is somewhat of a crime and was one of Dr. Meeths' biggest regrets.

The "beautiful auditorium" has "fantastic natural acoustics," she says. Suggestions have been made that it be renovated in honor of the late Dr. Meeth, but as yet, funds still have not been made available, which is a "real shame," says Mrs. Campbell.

In this auditorium hangs a memorial plaque dating back to the previous St. Petersburg High School and the years 1917 and 1918. It

says the following: "To the boys of this school who made the supreme sacrifice in the World War . . . 'To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.' "

The plaque then names the following former St. Petersburg High students who died during World War I: Clyde Crenshaw Caswell, Edward Theodore Hall, James Abel Johnson, Harold George Myers, William Foster Newell, Seymour Andrews Prestwood, and Paul Other Webb.

Even after such extensive renovations, one thing has not changed since the school was built in 1919. The entrance still bears the name "St. Petersburg High School" engraved in stone.

Tomlinson

Tomlinson Adult Center, located across the street from Mirror Lake Adult Center, was built in 1924 for \$153,770 as St. Petersburg Junior High School. It served as a co-educational junior high until 1926 when Mirror Lake lost its high school students to the new St. Petersburg High School. At this time an experiment was undertaken in which Mirror Lake became the girls' junior high school while Tomlinson became the boys' junior high.

The experiment of separating the girls and the boys lasted for only five years. This program was ended because it was thought that "the boys needed the calming influence of the girls," says Margaret Hillman, who taught at Tomlinson at that time.

When Mirror Lake became a co-educational junior high in 1931, Tomlinson became a vocational high school and was simply referred to as "The Vocational School." Then in May 1935 it was named Edwin H. Tomlinson Vocational School after one of St. Petersburg's greatest benefactors.

"Few men left such a mark on St. Petersburg — or got so little credit for it," says an article in the September 22, 1967, issue of *The Floridian*, a magazine published in the *St. Petersburg Times*.

For the city, he built such things as the Fountain of Youth on the waterfront (just north of the Bayfront Center), a pier into Tampa Bay (in 1900) near the foot of Fourth Avenue South, the original Open Air Post

Office at First Avenue on Fourth Street North in 1905, and the Manual Training Annex on the northeast corner of First Avenue and Fourth Street South, says the article.

It also states that the first hospital in this area, August Memorial, was built by Tomlinson as a tribute to his mother. Tomlinson was quite generous with his money. For instance, he equipped the St. Petersburg High School Orchestra in 1897, and he helped to start the school cadet company in 1900 and the fife and drum corps in 1902, says the article.

He also gave money for the construction of the city's first brick school, The Manual Training School.



Helen Campbell, head media specialist at Mirror Lake since 1971

When the city's vocational school at Mirror Lake was named in his honor, a local delegation went to Tampa to visit Tomlinson. According to former mayor R.G. Blanc, "Tears came into his eyes," and he said, "it was the nicest thing that anyone had ever done for him."

The name was changed three more times before 1959 to Tomlinson Technical Institute in 1945, Tomlinson Vocational School in 1951, and Tomlinson Vocational High School in 1955.

As a vocational school, Tomlinson "collected all the folks that the other high schools didn't want," says Nat Clark, who was principal at Tomlinson from 1953 until 1958. In 1958 Tomlinson's high school functions were taken over by Dixie Hollins High School, at which time it became Tomlinson Adult Education Center, and Joe D. Mills served as acting principal of the school.

Some of the programs being



Mirror Lake/Tomlinson Adult Center, 1987

offered in 1958 when Mills started were machine shop, auto shop, Licensed Practical Nursing program, business programs, health programs, and commercial art.

In 1961 John R. Hill was named director. He remained in that position until 1968. John W. Martin was then appointed director and served until his retirement in June 1971. Robert R. Holmes then became director until he retired on September 12, 1975, when Wendell G. Gingrich came from the adult evening program to become director at Tomlinson.

Mirror Lake/Tomlinson

In October 1978 Mirror Lake Adult Center and Tomlinson Adult Center, the academic and the vocational, were joined together to form one school called Mirror Lake/Tomlinson Adult Center. Helen Meeth became the director, and Wendell Gingrich, who was director of Tomlinson at the time, became the evening principal. Many vocational programs were moved to Mirror Lake to make them accessible to the handicapped, because Mirror Lake had an elevator and Tomlinson did not.

Mirror Lake/Tomlinson Adult Vocational Center (MLT) is a public school, operated as part of the Department of Vocational, Technical and Adult Education. The singular function of Mirror Lake/Tomlinson is to serve the needs of the public on an extended day basis, offering classes from 8 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Friday. The variety of classes given includes vocational programs leading to employment, high school credit or GED review classes, English classes for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Adult Basic Education (ABE), and community interest classes.

The vocational programs offer comprehensive occupational curriculum to enable individuals to develop marketable career skills for adaptability and advancement in the work world. Programs offered include business education, cosmetology, certified medical assistant, industrial sewing, jewelry design, manufacture and repair, travel agency training, watch repair and visual

communications.

Community interest classes are designed to meet community needs in many areas. Courses offered at MLT include the fine arts (painting and drawing), food and nutrition, canning, languages (French, Italian, Spanish), lip reading and sign language, music (guitar, piano, organ, music theory), sewing and custom dressmaking, reupholstery, woodcarving, and woodworking.

When Mrs. Meeth retired in June 1981, Dr. Robert J. Safransky became MLT's second director. Then in March of 1986, Elliot L. Carr became MLT's current director.

As of March 1986 a great many structural changes are taking place at Mirror Lake/Tomlinson. Some of the renovations include the installation of ramps, sprinkler systems, and a new fire alarm system; the redesigning of the bathrooms at Tomlinson to benefit the handicapped; the installation of an elevator at Tomlinson, and the lowering of water fountains and phones for the handicapped.



Dr. Louis H. Meeth Jr., the pioneer of adult education in Pinellas County, secured the Mirror Lake building for day and evening adult education.

Mt. Vernon Elementary

4629 - 13th Avenue North
St. Petersburg, Florida 33713

By Denise Dunbar, Debbie Ficocelli, and Nancy Niemeyer, Edward Rutenbeck (chairman)

In the midst of beautiful acres of farmland during the boom era in

Pinellas County, Heuber Brothers contracted to build a school on the tract known as Mt. Vernon Subdivision. The project began in 1926 under the supervision of architect E.J. Ulrich and designing architect E.J. Hall. The total cost was \$52,000. Construction of the facility was completed that year.

The Pinellas County School Board purchased the land for \$40,000 from Phil Lucas of Mt. Vernon, New York. Mt. Vernon was the last school of the boom era to be occupied, due to economic conditions and the delay of predicted population growth.

On July 28, 1931, concerned parents of the Mt. Vernon district chose Judge George M. Bickner to present a petition with 70 signatures to the School Board demanding the school be opened. This would relieve the crowded conditions at Forest Hills Elementary. The Board approved the request. Mt. Vernon opened its doors September 14, 1931, six years after construction. Local Parent Teacher Association members announced they would take over the responsibility of piping water into the school.

The School Board appointed Ethel Bachman as the first principal. She was, at that time, the teacher with the greatest number of years of service in Pinellas County. She served as principal from 1931 to 1940. After 41 years as an educator in Pinellas County, she became the first Pinellas County teacher to receive a retirement pension. When she began teaching in 1898, this peninsula was still part of Hillsborough County.

In the 1930's Mt. Vernon was a country school surrounded by farms. While driving down Disston Boulevard, now 49th Street, this two-story red brick schoolhouse could be seen. Thirteenth Avenue was just a dirt road, and paved streets were nonexistent around the school.

On the west side of the school down the road a short distance, was a dairy farm. The children would visit the farm each year on field trips. Occasionally, the echoes of clanking cowbells were heard in the distance. Since the area was mostly pasture land, the surrounding neighborhood had few homes. The first pupils to attend Mt. Vernon were very