

# **History of Shaffers' Nursery and Kindergarten**

**1950 - 1983**

**5659 Shore Boulevard South  
Gulfport, Florida**

When Shaffers' Kindergarten and Nursery was founded July 1, 1950, the majority of women with preschool-aged children did not work. Therefore, most of the students who first attended the school established by educators Joe and Valentine Shaffer came for the socialization it afforded them and for the break it provided their mothers.

In the beginning years, along with operating the day school, the Shaffers occasionally kept children over night for parents. They also boarded students for short periods of time. For several of the inaugural years, Mrs. Shaffer provided day care for infants less than two years of age.

The family also offered an evening and weekend babysitting service with their daughters, Joan and Pamela, and co-worker Helen Mengerink's daughter, Sally, serving as the main sitters. Friends of the three girls were engaged as backups for particularly busy evenings, such as New Year's Eve. As the years passed, the younger sisters, Megan and Wendy, became the primary babysitters with their friends as fill-ins.

School began at 8:00 a.m. and closed at 4 p.m. (Later on, to accommodate working mothers, the standard school hours were extended.) The Shaffers' co-worker, Helen Mengerink, met the earliest arriving children on Gulfport beach, making use of the city's playground equipment (swings) until 9 a.m. Mr. Shaffer would assist Miss Helen (as she was known) in bringing the students to the schoolyard at 5659 Shore Boulevard South. Once the yard itself began to fill with its own equipment, the beach playground was no longer utilized.

The children followed a daily routine. After free play outside from eight to ten o'clock, the children went into the classroom for story hour, juice, and potty time. Mr. Shaffer would ring the school bell indicating it was time to come



indoors. He conducted the "story hour." It began with the child-of-the-day being selected randomly to lead the Pledge of Allegiance and to select the story book to be read (either from the school's vast collection, the Gulfport Library, or one that a child had brought to share). One of the all-time, favorite books was "The Camel Who Took a Walk." The Dr. Seuss series was also very popular. On the day a student's birthday was being celebrated, this child automatically became leader for the day during story hour. Songs were sung accompanied by records (The Itsy Bitsy Spider, the Alphabet Song and many others). Concepts such as numbers, colors, designs, (polka dots/circles, plaids, stripes, triangles, rectangles, squares, etc.) and short poems were taught (i.e., "Remember your name and address and telephone number, too. So if some day you lose your way and don't know what to do, go up to the kind policeman and simply say, 'I've lost my way and don't know what to do.' And he'll be kind and help you find the dear ones who wait for you.") There was also a "Show and Tell" segment which helped teach public speaking. Some days, to help teach the children rhythm, hand-held store bought and handcrafted musical instruments were played to phonograph music.

When the "big school room" addition was built in 1960, seating for story hour was arranged in graduated heights according to age. The youngest children sat in the front row on specially constructed low benches, followed by wood crate-like boxes painted gray, then an assortment of standard wooden chairs, old high chairs without tray tables, and finally the oldest and most well-behaved students sat atop tables at the rear of the room.

During story hour, pupils were called in small groups by Miss Helen to have a glass of juice and go to the restroom. Every child had his own patterned and/or colored glass which he/she used again at lunchtime. As a student progressed from the "twos," "threes," "pre-kindergarten," and finally "kindergarten," a different style of glass was issued for the year. The youngest children had plastic glasses. The other children used various patterned (floral and other designed) Kraft cheese glasses. The three year olds used current styles, the pre-kindergarteners and kindergartners drank from the collectible older styles.

Plates also differed for the age groups. The oldest students ate from "Golden Wheat" plates (these were "premiums" that came in boxes of Duz laundry detergent purchased at Parker's IGA food store in Gulfport in the late '50s) and the youngest from plastic plates. The pupils in between were served on jade green glass plates with ribbed edge borders.

On fair weather days, the younger children went outdoors to play after story hour and the kindergartners had class indoors or went outdoors to the side yard (the then empty lot to the west of 5659 Shore Boulevard) to play games such as "Duck, Duck, Goose" and "Red Rover." The pre-kindergarteners could join in the games if they wished. If the weather were inclement, the kindergarteners would have class



in the other side of the building and the other children would make puzzles or play with indoor toys on tables that were later used for eating lunch. For most of the school's existing years, kindergarten was taught by Mr. Shaffer. In the later years, Mrs. Kate Pape was the teacher.

Following class and/or yard play came hand washing and lunch time. In the early years, meals were carried on large trays across the street and eaten at the picnic tables beneath the wooden cabanas at the beach. In later years, weather permitting, meals were served and eaten outdoors at picnic tables in the school yard beneath the two towering Phoenix Reclinata palm trees. These tables were designed by the Shaffers, custom built, and had seating permanently attached to them.

Lunch was a "seven course, hot meal" consisting of fresh fruit or raw vegetable cut into bite -sized pieces, a meat/seafood/egg or cheese dish, a starch, a cooked vegetable, a mini sandwich, milk, and dessert. Mrs. Shaffer was in charge of menus and prepared most of the meal. She believed in introducing and serving a wide variety of foods to the children. Mr. Shaffer made the chocolate milk and mocha, most of the desserts, and specialty dishes such as chipped beef in cream sauce. Each week the parents received a copy of the week's menu. Years later, many of the parents of former pupils continued to remark on how their children had learned to eat a great diversity of foods at Shaffers', many of which they had never cooked or eaten. They considered this to be a big plus in their children's upbringing. They also expressed appreciation for the fact that their kids had had a full meal at lunch, so if they were too tired to cook some supper evenings and serve only sandwiches they did not feel guilty in doing so.

Holidays and birthdays featured special meals, but perhaps the unique ones were birthday celebrations. Each birthday child was given a very distinct privilege at lunchtime. He or she was permitted to select three friends to sit at the "birthday table" with the honored guest. This was a card table covered with a red checkered (oil cloth) covering. Perhaps the most honored of all traditions was being given the "double XX" spoon.

The history behind this spoon dates back to when the school began. A jeweler friend gave the Shaffers an assortment of mismatched sterling silver spoons. When more were needed, Mr. Shaffer picked up odds and ends of stainless steel spoons at second hand shops. Among the latter group was one that had a decoration on the handle that looked like two capital X's (XX) side by side with a line across the top and the bottom. One day when the spoons were randomly passed out to the children, one gleefully mentioned having received the "double X spoon." From that day on, every child checked to see if he/she had that spoon. Because it became so popular, on birthdays the spoon was bestowed on the birthday child. Years later the spoon disappeared. The children were so



disappointed that the Shaffers decided to take a plain spoon and have two Xs scored into it. The tradition of the spoon thus continued until the school closed its doors in December of 1983.

Following lunch, one by one the younger children were called indoors for 1:00 p.m. naptime by Miss Helen. Each was given a few books to look at until all were settled onto their child-sized cots. Then it was heads down for a rest. The older children sat outdoors in the shade of the palm trees at the picnic tables and quietly played table games such as Old Maid, Crazy Eights, and Memory. On rainy days, the non-nappers went to the kindergarten classroom and did the same activities.

Each child was given a homemade popsicle to eat in the yard following naptime. They were allowed to select their choice of flavor. There were generally several fruit flavors and root beer from which to choose. The latter was probably the most popular throughout the years. Then the children played on the equipment in the yard until their parents came to take them home.

In the beginning, the yard was covered with grass and no fence bordered the property. Gradually an open-ended, sectional, picket white fence built by Mr. Shaffer surrounded two sides of the property on Clinton Street and Shore Boulevard. Playground equipment was added, beginning with a swing set, tricycles, wagons, monkey bars, and a sand box. As time passed the grass that had once covered the yard vanished under the constant wear of little feet and the play area became one large sand box. The tricycles disappeared and were replaced by a rickshaw which strangely enough traversed the sandy soil fairly well. It became quite popular. When the school closed, there were four swing sets, two play houses, a train with an engine and three box cars, a jungle gym, a boat, a rope swing which hung from one of the Phoenix Reclinata palms, and the original sand box and monkey bars. The rope swing was probably the most popular piece of equipment on the playground. Children would stand patiently in line to take turns on it.

Along with being the main meal preparer, Mrs. Shaffer also had a teaching background. She established the educational tenor of the school. It was her belief that young children felt secure in a loving, structured environment. "The Mrs." as the children referred to her, insisted they learn manners, say "please" and "thank you" when appropriate, and be considerate of others. She felt that in nursery school children should learn the essentials for good behavior, acquire listening skills, and cultivate an interest in learning. This worked well through the years as the Shaffers frequently received glowing feedback from first grade teachers at Gulfport Elementary about their graduates and how well they were doing. They said they could follow directions, were attentive in class, were polite, and had acquired a love for books and learning.



A special graduation program was held during story hour each year for kindergarten children. The police chief of Gulfport was normally the guest speaker. The graduating students were each given a "penny" bank. In the latter years, the **bank was a metal one in the shape of a globe.**

As more mothers began entering the workforce (either by choice or single parenthood), the Shaffers instituted "after school care," a rarity at the time for children attending public schools. A taxicab would pick children up from Gulfport Elementary and Most Holy Name of Jesus Catholic School when their classes were over and take them to Shaffers' to be supervised until their parents picked them up after work. It was after Shaffers' closed that the City of Gulfport began their after-school recreational program for children.

The closing of Shaffers' Nursery and Kindergarten was brought about by the hospitalization and the subsequent death of Mr. Shaffer on January 24, 1984. Helen Mengerink passed away on June 18, 1998, and Mrs. Shaffer on April 5, 2002. Even after the school ceased to exist, people would approach her daughters and tell them how much they missed seeing the children playing in the yard.

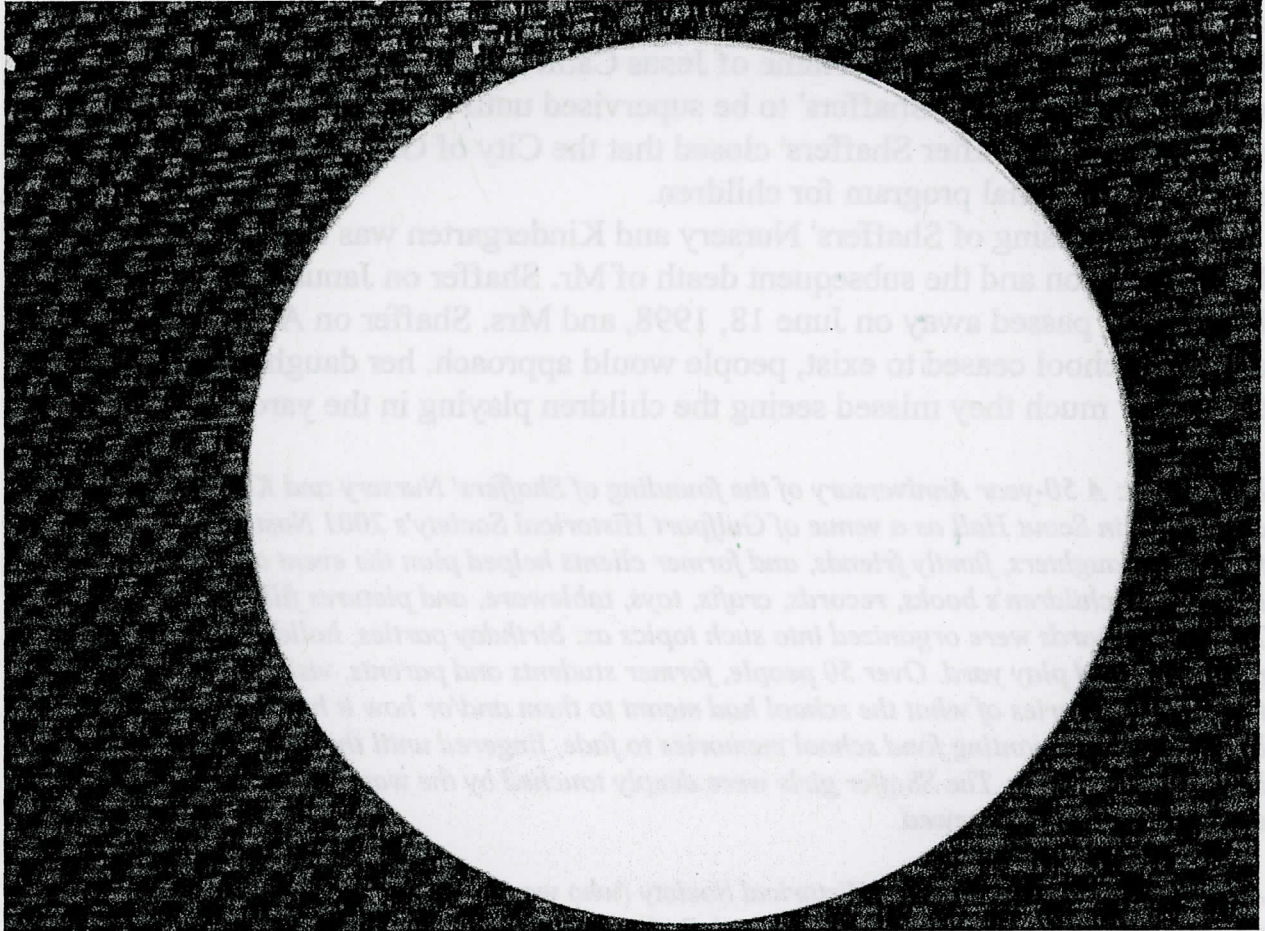
*Post Script: A 50-year Anniversary of the founding of Shaffers' Nursery and Kindergarten was celebrated in Scout Hall as a venue of Gulfport Historical Society's 2001 Nostalgia Day. The founders' daughters, family friends, and former clients helped plan the event and exhibition. Displays of children's books, records, crafts, toys, tableware, and pictures filled the entire Hall. The photo boards were organized into such topics as: birthday parties, holidays, graduations, personnel, and play yard. Over 50 people, former students and parents, visited and brought with them special stories of what the school had meant to them and/or how it had influenced their lives. Some, not wanting fond school memories to fade, lingered until the closing hour of Nostalgia festivities. The Shaffer girls were deeply touched by the warmth shown by the visitors and the friendships renewed.*

*A past curator of the Gulfport Historical Society (who was also a former Shaffers' school parent) was invited to come after Mrs. Shaffer had died and the house and school rooms were being cleaned out, to select items that had been used during the 33-years this school operated in Gulfport. Some of the memorabilia donated (highlighted in the history) were: the school's sign, school bell, records, books, puzzles, popular toys, loom & materials for making pot holders, a sample of a weekly menu, "golden wheat" and jade green, ribbed-edge plates, the "double-XX" etched spoon, different styled Kraft cheese glasses, metal globe bank, samples of student work/pictures, the rope swing, photographs of some of the students and school yard, and handmade instruments. These included 10-inch pieces of dowel onto which two or three sets of metal soda bottle caps were fastened with a nail through the center allowing room for them to slide loosely up and down and make a tambourine-like noise; blocks of wood to which sandpaper was attached to create a scratching noise; colored rectangular blocks which were clapped together; and colored dowels pieces that were hit together to the beat of the music.*



A special graduation program was held during story hour each year for kindergarten children. The police chief of Gilroy was normally the guest speaker. The graduating students were each given a "penny" bank for the future years. The bank was a metal one in the shape of a piggy bank.

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By Pamela Shaffer Lanning

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