

**CLEO LERA MAE
BROOKS THORNE
KELLY
1904-1985**



**CRIMINAL
IN HER
OWN
RIGHT**

Kathryn Kelly had a lust for danger. She masterminded crimes that took her family on a spree from Minnesota to Texas. She encouraged her husband George Kelly's more serious crimes included bank robbery, kidnapping and extortion. She probably gave him the moniker Machine Gun Kelly.

Cleo Lera Mae Brooks was born in March 1904 in Saltillo, Mississippi. By eighth grade, she called herself Kathryn to sound more elegant. At fourteen, she married Lonnie Fry. After giving birth to her daughter Pauline in 1919, she moved with her parents to Oklahoma where she had a short second marriage. When her mother Ora married "Boss" Shannon, they relocated to his farm near Palestine, Texas, north of Fort Worth.

At age 29, Kathryn married Texas bootlegger Charlie Thorne. In April 1928 he was shot to death after a quarrel. Though illiterate, he left a perfectly-typed suicide note but the judge never charged her with murder. Soon after, Kathryn was convicted of robbery, but was released on a technicality. That stash and Thorne's money allowed the widow to improve her wardrobe and enjoy Fort Worth nightlife.

George Barnes Kelly was born to an upper-class Memphis family. His first wife divorced him when he turned to bootlegging. He changed his name to George Kelly and moved to Tulsa. In February 1928 he was sent to Leavenworth, where he learned about the bank robbing business.

After his release, he ended up in Fort Worth where he met "the prettiest redhead I ever saw". They were married in Minneapolis in September 1930. For the next two years, he robbed banks but they were still low on cash due to the third year of the Great Depression so George turned to kidnapping when Tulsa's Barker-Karpis gang received a \$100,000 ransom after abducting beer baron William Hamm in St. Paul in June 1933.

In July 1933, George and Kathryn kidnaped Oklahoma City oil millionaire Charles Urschel and hid him at the Shannon farm. After receiving the \$200,000 ransom, Urschel was dumped in Norman. Because the Lindbergh Act, making kidnapping a federal crime, had just been enacted, the FBI became involved. Urschel's photographic memory helped them pinpoint the hideout quickly. The Shannons were arrested on August 12th. Kathryn offered to surrender George to the FBI to get a lighter sentence for her and Ora. No deal was made.

When caught in September, George yelled, "Don't shoot, G'Men!", inventing the term describing FBI agents. Their half of the ransom was never found. During the trial, the photogenic Kathryn blamed George for everything, when she wasn't posing for photographers on the witness stand in black satin. Judge Vaught sentenced the Shannons and Kellys to life in prison.

Shannon was paroled in 1944, returning to Paradise. Urschel anonymously financed Pauline's college education with Judge Vaught acting as intermediary. George died in Leavenworth of a heart attack on his 54th birthday in July 1954. Kathryn and Ora served 25 years together at a West Virginia prison. They were released in June 1958 when the FBI refused to turn over files on the case.

Kathryn changed her name to Lera Cleo Kelly and they lived quietly in Oklahoma City. Ora died in 1980 at age 92. Kathryn died in 1985 at age 81 in a Tulsa nursing home. Both are buried at Tecumseh Cemetery.