

**PAULINE
LAMBERT
(CLARA PALMER)
1890-1979**



**BROTHEL
OWNER LIVED
A DOUBLE
LIFE**

Tulsa's most talked-about address at 326½ East First Street displayed a small blue-and-white sign above the business and gave little hint to what occurred inside. Clara Palmer, a devoted mother, operated the infamous May Rooms, under the alias Pauline Lambert – and her family never knew.

Clara Gillion was born in March 1890 in Finley, Tennessee. Her father William sold his cotton farm and moved to Henryetta. Clara married Scottish miner George Stenhouse in March 1911, but he abandoned her and sons George and John during the Depression.

In 1930, Clara was living with Jimmie Palmer, and soon made her way to Tulsa. She heard she could make a living managing boarding rooms. From 1936 through 1979, Lambert operated a bawdy house of second-story rooms at First Street between Detroit and Elgin.

Customers would walk up the narrow stairs, triggering a bell. The current owner of the property – now part of the Blue Dome District – found Pauline's original chair at the top of the infamous staircase. On the arms of the chair were numbered buttons, running from the chair down the long hallway to corresponding numbered rooms and attached buzzers.

At the peak of her success, Tulsa judges called Lambert "a living legend" and "an unforgettable character". One judge said, "In the 1930s and 40s, coaches and alumni arranged victory celebrations for their high school players at the May Rooms."

Brothels were legal in Tulsa at that time, but the city cracked down in 1941, with the opening of the Douglas Aircraft bomber assembly plant. Over the years, the police regularly raided the May Rooms, but the girls quickly bonded out of jail and were soon back in business.

Over the years, Pauline was charged with vagrancy, income tax evasion, and using the telephone to bring girls to Tulsa. A West Tulsa resident remembered Lambert visiting her next-door neighbors with "sacks of money". The house belonged to Clara's son George Stenhouse.

At age 88, Lambert was finally forced to close her doors in February 1979 when Tulsa's most renowned madam was convicted of pandering and faced three years in prison. "Lambert had a good run thanks to Tulsa's oil boom," said Judge Ken Brune.

District Judge Graham agreed to delay sentencing during her appeal. In December 1983, when her appeals ran out, her bondsman was ordered to produce Lambert, or forfeit the bond. After months of searching, he discovered Lambert had been dead more than four years! Even her attorneys were unaware of her death.

Lambert had died on Halloween 1979. Her obituary the next day used her maiden name Clara Palmer, with no connection to Lambert. Judge Hopper dismissed all charges, with no conviction nor prison time for the notorious bordello queen.

Jim Wilkerson, a 1940s taxi driver, described two sides of Lambert. He drove her between her respectable life in Red Fork to her "place of business" downtown. "She was a very nice lady," Wilkerson said. "She could have passed for somebody's grandmother. I was amazed that lady would be in that business."