

(Peoria, Ill.)

Miss Diamond Lil'

By Norman V. Kelly

Her real name was Parole McNeal Guyette, but here in Peoria she went by the name of Diamond Lil'. Early on, Diamond Lil' was a prostitute, coming here from Toledo, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan. She had two houses of ill repute here that were described as 'Black and Tan Resorts,' meaning some of her girls were Mulattos. She became the madam before long and always bragged about having 'Customers in high places.'

At age fifty, she was a rather stunning lady with iron-gray hair, and a look of sophistication about her. She got her sobriquet because of her smile that showed the bright stones that a local dentist had embedded in her front teeth. Miss Diamond's hot spots were over on Eaton and Second Streets, where she ruled with an iron hand during a time when Peoria was a lusty, wide-open town. Lil' and the other ladies of her ilk were all part of our reputation for more than four decades.

IT ALL ENDS FOR LIL'

Lil' was fast asleep that early morning of September 29, 1930 when all hell broke loose downstairs where Joni Yelm was cleaning behind the bar. Joe Markley kicked in the door, threatened Joni, and demanded to see the owner. Yelm told Joe that Lil' was not there, but the man pushed him aside and headed for the stairs that led to Lil's room. Suddenly, Miss Diamond appeared at the top of the steps. Even in her nightgown she was an imposing figure, wearing a gun belt and holster on her rather stout hips, pointing a six-gun down at Joe Markley.

Diamond Lil' screamed, "Hey... you can't do that," waving the big gun around menacingly. Joe ignored her threat and raced up the steps. Soon the two were engaged in a wrestling match for the

handgun. Down they came, rolling head over heels, crashing to the floor. While the battle was going on, Joni grabbed the shotgun hidden behind the bar. He hurried over to protect his boss, firing one barrel at the enraged man. The blast from the twelve-gauge shell ripped into the flesh of Joe's left forearm.

Lil' broke loose, grabbed the handgun that had fallen to the floor, and ran up the steps with Joe hot on her heels. At the top she whirled and fired. The first slug tore into Joe's thumb, but she kept firing, hitting Joe in the upper chest twice, stopping him cold in his tracks. He fell backwards, rolling down the steps onto the floor, where he died moments later.

MAJOR HEADLINES

Now this was juicy stuff to read while sipping your morning coffee, and it was the talk of the town for weeks. The Holidays came and went and the newspapers told Peorians that the trial of Diamond Lil' and Joni Yelm would begin here in Peoria, Illinois on January 19, 1931. It was the hottest ticket in town and on that cold January morning the crowds gathered, surrounding the old courthouse. Lil' came to trial dressed to the nines, confident and ready to defend herself. To most Peorians it was a clear case of home invasion and self-defense. Joni and Lil' would be tried together, and after three days the jury was picked. Each morning of the trial brought hundreds of people to the courthouse, pushing and shoving in hopes of getting a seat. Of course, many of them were turned away, walking the halls, waiting for news.

As the trial began, the final count for the jury was five women and seven men. Now if those folks were do-gooders, and self-righteous folks, poor Lil' and Joni would not stand a chance. How-

ever, if the jury followed the law as outlined by the judge, the defendants could soon be free. Which would it be?

THE TRIAL

The trial was suspenseful and most certainly exciting. Hundreds of women faced the cold and lined the sidewalk each morning, watching Lil' walk by. She often nodded to them as she strolled by with her friend Joni and the defense lawyers. Hundreds of pictures were taken whenever she stopped momentarily, basking in her new momentary fame.

The trial moved along, with both Joni and Lil' being called to testify in a dramatic fight for their lives. It looked good for both of them even though the state's attorney depicted them as cold-blooded killers. He pulled no punches when it came to telling the jury what these two defendants did for a living. Finally the closing arguments ended and the case was given over to the jury.

LIL' TO APPEAL VERDICT

That was the verdict the newspapers reported, indicating that both Joni and Lil' were GUILTY! Both defendants were sentenced to one to life in the state pen at Joliet, Illinois. Historically that meant from six to twelve years. While out on bail during the appeal, Miss Dia-

mond told reporters that she did not get a fair trial. The Illinois Supreme Court upheld the conviction and soon the two defendants were off to Joliet. Word came to Peorians through our newspapers that Miss Diamond was going to write a 'Tell All Book.' That bit of news upset a few prominent men in Peoria and the excitement was still in the air. Diamond Lil' had often bragged about her 'Prominent Clientele,' and the folks in Peoria were eagerly looking forward to getting a copy of her book. Well, sorry to say that that book was never printed. Suddenly there was nothing but silence coming from Lil's cell. She refused further interviews and told the press, "All that is a closed book." A week after she refused to talk to reporters there was a piece in the local papers. Lil' told a reporter that the Chicago State's Attorney wanted to indict her on some political scam in connection with illegal investments that he accused her of being involved in. Perhaps Lil' thought it best to clam up, serve her time, and disappear. Anyway, that is exactly what she did.

Editor's Note: Norm is a Peoria Historian and author of ten books. He may be reached at norman.kelly@sbcglobal.net

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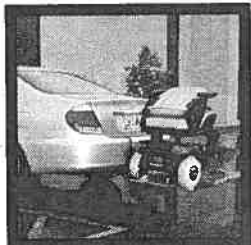
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