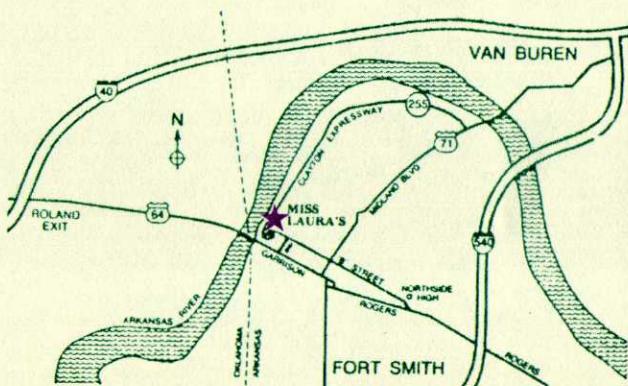


Make us your first stop....we'll give you a tour of this marvelous building and offer lots of ideas and brochures to help you get the most out of your visit. Catch the trolley bus here for an interpretive tour of our historic district.

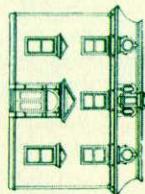
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Our Brothel  
Still Takes Care  
of Visitors!



# Miss Laura's History

At the turn of the century, Fort Smith, Arkansas was a raucous border town perched on the edge of a yet untamed Oklahoma, which was known then as Indian Territory. Cowboys, outlaws, outcasts, as well as God-fearing pioneers, all streamed through this wild little city. Each sought different adventures, different pleasures. An eager-to-please Fort Smith accommodated all requests.

Among the better known outlaws who frequented "Hell on the Border" were the James, Dalton and Younger Gangs, Belle Starr, Cherokee Bill and the Rufus Buck Gang.

Houses of ill fame catered to one of many vices that were practiced, and enjoyed, openly. Fort Smith's bustling Front Street along the Arkansas River, was an infamous red-light district known as "**The Row**". Here in 1903 Laura Zeigler opened a new brothel with money she borrowed from a respectable local banker. Business was good from the start, and she paid off the loan in 17 months.

Originally named the River Front Hotel, Miss Laura's soon became one of the most celebrated bordellos in the Southwest. Her ladies were known to be the most refined and the healthiest of Fort Smith's "daughters of joy". Miss Laura herself was a poised and attractive lady who was known to have occasionally confronted a rowdy customer with a loaded .45.

Life at Miss Laura's was filled with song, dance, gambling and, of course, other pleasures. During a good business month, champagne was chilled in an upstairs bathtub and served at no charge to appreciative customers. Fort Smith's first player piano banged out popular tunes there while patrons of all classes mingled with the ladies. Many prominent local figures also were known to frequent the flourishing bordello, and Miss Laura reaped the profits.

By 1910 the golden days had passed. Growing voices within Fort Smith called for the closing of the commercial houses. Politicians who had tolerated the shady businesses now felt the pressures of a community tiring of the frontier permissiveness. On January 7, 1910, a questionable freak accident aided those who wished to clean up Front Street...Late that night, an oil storage tank near the houses exploded, rocking all of Fort Smith. A mass of flames engulfed the brothels, sending scantily clad ladies and their embarrassed customers into the street. Fortunately, no one was killed. The incident became known as "**the night of the lingerie parade**".

Strong winds that night blew the flames within 75 feet of Miss Laura's. Inexplicably, the winds shifted and blew the fire away from the old house. Two of the town's other brothels burned to the ground in the blaze.

Miss Laura sold the property in 1911 to Bertha Gale Dean for \$47,000.00. Laura Zeigler then dropped out of Fort Smith history and little is known of her later years.

Soon after her departure, business slowed and the neighborhood declined to slum status. Bertha Gale Dean owned the property until her death in 1948. During her ownership, the property became an informal haven for drifters, drunks and gamblers.

The building stood abandoned until 1963, when its owners announced the decaying building would be demolished unless a buyer could be found. Donald W. Reynolds, founder of the Donrey Media Group, saw the need to save this important part of Fort Smith's early days and rescued it from the wrecking ball.

In 1973 the building was selected for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Restoration began in 1983 and Miss Laura's Restaurant and Social Club opened one year later. Miss Laura's had finally become respectable!

The architecture of the house is unique. The clapboard structure is a simple, yet elegant, example of baroque Victorian architecture, with a mansard roof trimmed in wrought iron and oeil-de-boeuf (eye of the ox) dormer windows. Inside, the "guest" rooms are papered in different and decidedly feminine prints. The transoms at each bedroom bear the name of some favored lady. The newly crafted stained glass windows are true to the style that marked the house in its youth. The furnishings are Victorian and much the same as was used when Miss Laura owned it. Another authentic touch is the restoration of the outside to the original colors, forest green with cream trim.

In the fall of 1992, Miss Laura's reopened as the Fort Smith Visitor Center. Under the auspices of the Fort Smith Convention and Visitors Bureau, and operated by history loving volunteers, our brothel still caters to out-of-towners.

We hope you enjoy your visit to this fascinating part of Fort Smith history.