

# We lost "The Mother of Gay Charlotte"

*We'll take this Mother's Day to remember*

by Leah D. Sepsenwol  
with Gregg Brafford, Vern Ellis

There was not a hint in the obituary to identify her as our matriarchal icon. There was not a clue of the open-armed place she fashioned just for us — a refuge from fire and brimstone think and speak and stance of our Southern city. Nothing written there connecting her to the well-worn spot Charlotte queers gathered for 30 years; where our drag girls strutted and lesbians were always welcome. Not a word acknowledging her legend, her legacy nor the landmark which bore her name — Oleen's.

Martha Oleen Love died April 17 in Lancaster, SC. We never knew "Martha," but everyone surely loved Oleen.

Oleen, an unforgettable vision: always well-bedecked, blonde wig-coiffed — real lady with false lashes, and radiantly real diamond earrings ... and gorgeous gowns aplenty. There was no finer show finery. And don't you know she costumed many a performer — from her own wardrobe. "She was someone very special," said Vern — who met her when he was 26 ... he walked into the bar and stayed, tending bar for 15 years, and befriending Oleen for the rest of her life.

Then

A solitary outside bulb barely illuminat-

ed "Oleen's" written on the door. Patrons squeezed through narrow portal, cramped into an entryway to pay and get stamped. No neon here, but people always found it anyway. It was magnet to our bi-polar, duplicitous lives. Sanctuary, even.

The rough and tumble show bar, with the requisite microscopic dance floor/stage and dingy walls where trussed-up talent, pool-shootin' lesbians and butch/femme in-betweens from miles around would, one time or another, gather.

Everyone was welcome...and greeted by the soft-spoken Southern ma'am herself, Ms. Oleen — enthroned on a stool at the far end of the bar, nightly, blending seamlessly into a sequined parade of rowdy and comfy caricatures.

Oleen's, at the corner of Worthington Ave. and South Blvd., was all about good folks, good tunes, good camp all crammed into seen-better-days-but-who-cares cozy space.

This was never a place for sissies of any kind! In the late Seventies, before moving from Tennessee, a friend of mine and her partner were in Charlotte to meet a professional associate. After a day touring the city's companies, the women, still in the day's dress-to-impress garb, decided to slip into legendary Oleen's. "We lasted about ten minutes, not quite accustomed to substantial 'mountain women' who took an active fancy to us!" she said.

But of course, like the rest of us, she

went back. We all showed up for the friendly frolic, big do's and no don'ts. Swing your leg over a wooden chair seat and scoot it noisily across linoleum to a rare table spot. When it was time to throw it all back, it was time for Oleen's.

### The very first drag show in the Southeast

As Greg Brafford, who managed the bar for 15 years and subsequently became a partner, tells it, the law showed up in full force: ABC alcohol licensing rep, Mecklenburg County Sheriff and Charlotte Police, all poised to shut Oleen's down at the least hint of impropriety. History has it, the law loved it! And so it began, leading to the first drag pageant and more. said, "She held the first drag shows. All the legendary drag queens of the Southeast got their start at Oleen's. Everybody who's been around this community for awhile has found Oleen's."

### Kindness and generosity

"Oleen was always very kind and generous to all her customers and friends," Brafford said. "She held the first benefits at the bar beginning in 1983 to raise money for AIDS and received many awards proclaiming her, 'Mother of Gay Charlotte,'" he said.

And Vern remembers the countless kids she helped, kicked out of their homes when families found out their "secret."

"She loved us all. She looked after everyone. She was like a mom to so many of us who "lost" family. She was my family."



Martha Oleen Love

### Oleen's began at the original Brass Rail

In the mid to late Sixties, Oleen managed the original — then straight — Brass Rail. Gay customers showed up in the later hours. Oleen noticed, made friends and began reserving tables together for them. The idea of a gay place was born.

And on her birthday, May 19, 1970, her longtime boyfriend opened Oleen's, of which she was co-owner. And the rest of thirty years is a history we shall always recount, because it is tapestry of our past.

### Oleen's passing

The land was sold. In 2000 many of us were there again in the din and dust of

see **OLEEN** on 16

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