

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown heroes who have made a difference.

Capt. Philip H. Monninger



For nearly half a century, the winery founded by Capt. Philip H. Monninger “at the north end of Seventh Street” in Terre Haute was a favored destination for leisure and entertainment.

Born Sept. 14, 1831, in Albersweller, Rhine Province, Germany, Monninger attended Prussian military schools before embarking for America in 1849. Three years later, after brief residencies in Cincinnati, Madison and Indianapolis, he came to Terre Haute, where he managed the White Hall saloon. During the Civil War, he was captain of Company E of the 32nd Indiana (“First German”) Regiment but was discharged due to disability. In 1863 he acquired acreage 20 blocks north of Wabash Avenue (now the northwest corner of Seventh and Buckeye streets) to establish a vineyard with plants imported from his homeland.

Monninger also built a brick-arched 50-foot by 20-foot wine cellar with a 14-foot ceiling. Using winemaking skills passed down from his father and European ancestors, he earned a regional reputation for the quality of his wines. Encouraged by the popularity of his suburban haven, Monninger leased adjoining land. On Sept. 24, 1874, he began constructing a magnificent two-story 42-room brick European-style retreat called “The Tivoli,” which he said meant “palace of pleasure.”

According to newspaper reports, “fully 1,200 people” attended the grand opening of P.H. Monninger’s “Elegant and Incomparable Tivoli” on Sept. 6, 1875. Carriages lined Seventh St. for nearly two miles and dust generated by the buggies was so dense that visibility was impaired. The central attraction was the Tivoli’s 63-foot by 43-foot ballroom with a 20-foot ceiling, flanked by a dining room on the west side and a billiard room on the east. On the building’s north end was a “ladies’ bowling alley.” On the second floor, overlooking the dance floor, were 20 wine-tasting rooms and several sleeping rooms. The south entrance faced a garden brilliantly illuminated by ornamental gaslights. A mouth-watering supper was served at 11 p.m.

Lamentably, in the early morning hours of Dec. 12, 1876—barely 15 months after it opened—the Tivoli was engulfed by flames. No water was available to fight the blaze. Monninger initially vowed to rebuild but instead salvaged bricks from the ruins to erect a palatial 14-room residence facing Seventh St., which became the winery headquarters. By 1880 the P.H. Monninger & Sons vineyards were producing pure Traminer grape juice and a variety of wines: Catawba, Reisling, Claret, Port, Sherry and Madeira. Eventually, the vineyards encompassed more than 100 acres.

Capt. Monninger married twice, producing 11 children by each marriage. For two years after Monninger’s death on July 2, 1907, son Louis P. Monninger operated the winery. However, in 1910 appreciable assets were sold and the winery was closed. Son Gerhardt erected a stucco home at the site and in the early 1940s converted the original wine cellar into a restaurant/nightclub called “The Devil’s Den.” Son Albert was co-owner of the saloon at the Great Northern Hotel. Son Herbert became a prominent Terre Haute jeweler. Several descendants reside in the Terre Haute area.

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