Merchant Policeman Joseph H. Vonderheide | Cincinnati Merchant Police Force

Age: 63
Served 27 years, 1898 to May 23, 1925

OFFICER

Joe was born in Ohio during July 1861 to German immigrants Joseph and Eliza (Gatterdam) Vonderheide. His father immigrated in 1850; probably due to the failed 1848 rebellions in Europe. His mother immigrated later in 1854. Eliza and Joseph married on October 21, 1860.

Not much is known about Joseph Jr.’s earlier life in Cincinnati. He was the oldest of 9 children and the family lived at 59 Harrison. Joseph Sr. owned the bar at Pearl Street and Broadway and the younger Joseph worked there beginning in

his teens and into the late 1890s.

On May 7, 1896 he married Margaret Julia Crowley, originally of Connecticut. He and Margaret lived at 405 Pearl.

Probably not coincidentally, about the time Joseph Sr. got out of the bar business, Joseph Jr. took a position as a merchant policeman about 1898 in the same area as his father's bar. His "beat" was essentially the east portion of "The Bottoms"; the most dangerous region in Cincinnati.

On March 12, 1923 Margaret died suddenly from a cerebral hemorrhage. Policeman Vonderheide moved to 428 Pike Street, boarding at the home of Anna Liming, probably a fellow St. Philomena Church parishioner.

Policeman Vonderheide was "one of the best known and most popular officers in the city having patrolled the same beat for 27 years." He enjoyed a reputation of being "one of the most fearless officers in the 'bottoms'" and "had been the victor in countless struggles with desperate characters." District 2 Patrolman Frederick Knipps once spoke to Policeman Vonderheide about the dangers of working in The Bottoms and he retorted, "I'm prepared to die. I'm ready at any time."

There was good reason to talk of death. In the 50 years before Policeman Vonderheide accepted this position, there had been only 13 law enforcement officers murdered in Greater Cincinnati; averaging about one every 3¾ years. During his first eight years of service, four had been murdered; one every two years. During the next 18 years, 42 were killed; more than two per year. Policeman Vonderheide became the first of five killed in 1925.

INCIDENT

Kroger Warehouse Night Watchman John J. Conlon, on May 22, 1925, just before 9 p.m., at 216 E. Front Street, was looking for Policeman Vonderheide to pass by as he normally did at that time of night. He saw a male and female approach him from the west and they appeared to be arguing. He lost sight of them due to disinterest and street traffic.

Suddenly, he heard gunshots. He grabbed his revolver and ran to the sound of the shots and found Policeman Vonderheide on the ground in front of 206 E. Front Street. He called Cincinnati Police Station X (police communications at 1430 Martin Drive) and Lieutenant Harley Jones, Sergeant John Reichert, and Patrolman Barney Brummer responded.

Policeman Vonderheide was transported to General Hospital.

DEATH

Merchant Policeman Vonderheide died at 1 a.m. the next morning, May 23, 1925, from shock and hemorrhage due to gunshot wounds to the neck and abdomen. His remains were identified by his youngest brother, William Otto Vonderheide, a Dow Drug Company druggist at 1572 Freeman Avenue.

Policeman Vonderheide was survived by his siblings, Mrs. William Mullholland (of New Orleans), Mrs. Frank Haney (Los Angeles), Robert Vonderheide (Dayton, Kentucky), George Vonderheide (1149 Sherman Avenue), and William Otto Vonderheide. At 8 a.m. on Tuesday, May 26, 1925, a Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated

at St. Philomena Church at 619 E. 3rd Street by Father Charles J. Knipper, pastor of the church and a close friend. He was buried in St. Mary's Cemetery in St. Bernard on May 26, 1925.

INVESTIGATION

When Night Detective Chief (and future Police Chief) Eugene T. Weatherly and Cincinnati Detectives Carney, Kaiser, and James McShane arrived at the scene, confusion reigned. There were several potential suspects at or near the scene. Horace Wood (23) was found crawling from the roof of a building in attempt to escape across the Suspension Bridge. He was in possession of Policeman Vonderheide's revolver, which had some blood on it and it had been fired three times.

At first it seemed that Policeman Vonderheide had been shot with his own revolver. However, one of the bullets taken from the officer's body was a steel-jacketed bullet, likely fired from a semiautomatic pistol. Another suspect, Sonny Jackson or Johnson (30), emerged based on questioning the witnesses. He was said to have a semiautomatic pistol. Five others were detained for investigation.

The initial theory was that the male that Watchman Conlon saw arguing with the female was stopped by Policeman Vonderheide to see if everything was okay and that the male knocked him down and that they exchanged gunfire.

After further questioning and modifications of original accounts, it became apparent that Hattie Berry (20), Horace Wood (23), and Sonny Johnson (30) were riding together in a taxi and drinking. Johnson resented the attention being paid to Ms. Berry by Wood. He pulled his pistol and threatened Wood with it.

Later, the story was revised by the witnesses that Johnson fired two shots at Wood after their argument and that Policeman Vonderheide approached, Johnson turned and shot him twice. Wood said that Johnson ran, and Wood went to Policeman Vonderheide, retrieved his revolver, and chased the murderer.

We have no information on the ending to this tragedy and have found no subsequent account regarding any arrest of Wood, Johnson, or any information regarding this investigation.

If you know of information, artifacts, archives, or images regarding this officer or incident please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum at Memorial@Police-Museum.org.

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