The Lemp dynasty: beer, scandal and a haunted mansion

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Lawyers Weekly, October 23, 2025

In 1838, Johann Adam Lemp left Germany and arrived in St. Louis, where he set the wheels in motion for the beer we still drink today.

He also gave birth to an enduring family tragedy and a haunted house. Perhaps the family's most scandalous story involves that of grandson William "Billy" Lemp Jr. and his divorce from Lillian Handlin, "The Lavender Lady," which dominated the headlines in 1909.

Like many business tales, the son takes his father's creation and exponentially expands it, internet sources say. Then, for a variety of reasons, it all comes crashing down.

William Lemp Sr. turned father Johann's beer business into an empire. Creating refrigerated rail cars, his beer, Falstaff, now traveled to all corners of our nation, dominating the market. The son even turned the home the father built into a lavish 33-room mansion, which also served as the brewery's offices.

William Sr. had nine children; of note were William "Billy" Jr. and Frederick, the successor chosen to lead the company in the future. Sickly, young Frederick unexpectedly

died in 1901 at the age of 28. His death plunged his father into a whirlpool of grief in which he slowly drowned, committing suicide in his mansion in 1904.

The reins of the empire now fell to Billy, who, while competent, faced a tsunami of events, some of his making, some not, from which he could not recover.

Some years earlier, in 1899, Billy stayed within his social strata by marrying the wealthy and elegant Lillian Handlin. While some opined it was more a business than a romantic deal, the couple captured the public's attention: a wealthy Billy with a lavish wife gliding throughout the area in her signature well-coifed lavender attire, extending the color to even her riding carriages.

Cracks in the relationship slowly widened until they finally ruptured with Lillian filing for divorce. The shocking allegations sent the staid, upper-crust community into a tizzy. Soon they, and the entire city, sat tantalized, witnessing a courtroom drama in which, for this time only, Lillian uncharacteristically wore black. The battle centered around — what else? — money, and custody of their 7-year-old son, who was named after the defendant.

Lillian claimed Billy beat her, locked her out of her home, had detectives follow her, threatened her with a gun, mocked her religious beliefs, gave undue attention to other women, and was a most disagreeable person.

He, meanwhile, claimed she was quarrelsome with a violent temper and neglected her household duties, as demonstrated by a six-week trip to Florida, leaving behind "but one servant in their home, and [making] no effort to secure others to look after his comfort in her absence." She stayed out late at night without telling him where she was or with whom, and led a flamboyant lifestyle that exposed the family to public criticism — to which she replied: "To hell with the public. [I'll do as I please.]"

He also claimed she wrote to an unknown man to whom she showed affection while denigrating him by writing, "He is going hunting next week, and I wish to heaven he would never return."

While Lillian agreed Billy would have absolute control over the moral, religious and collegiate training of their son, she secretly had him baptized in the Catholic Church. As for

her excessive spending, she told him, which the press gleefully reported, “A Lemp woman must look the part.”

The trial progressed for days, much to the delight of the media and masses avidly following it. Lillian ultimately won the case and not only gained custody of their son but a sizable alimony award.

Epilogue

Humiliated by the trial, and with business falling later due to Prohibition, Billy, like his father, committed suicide in 1922 in the mansion. Two years earlier, his sister Elsa also killed herself, or was she murdered? Charles Lemp, the third son of William Sr., went into banking and finance, never married, and committed suicide in 1949.

The only son of Lillian and Billy kept a low profile, also never married, and died in 1943. Lillian, meanwhile, died in 1960, far removed from the Gilded Age-like existence she had earlier led.

As for the mansion, it is now a restaurant, inn, museum and event venue, and many believe that the spirits of those who killed themselves there remain as ghosts, haunting those who visit.

The tales are aided by the added existence of Zeke the Monkey Boy. Born mentally challenged and physically deformed, he was possibly the child of Billy and a prostitute. He allegedly lived hidden and chained on the third floor, waving to strangers who passed below.

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