

John Orff – 1821-1897

By Bob & Carolyn Schmidt

John Orff was born in Bavaria, Germany on January 26, 1821. After receiving a common school education he immigrated to the US in June 1840 at age 19. First he came to Baltimore but immediately headed west to seek his fortune and arrived in Defiance, Ohio. He worked in northwest Ohio as a common laborer for a time on the Wabash & Erie Canal while it was under construction. By the spring of 1841 he found more agreeable work at a local country store in Defiance. He stayed at that job for about a year and a half, until June of 1843 when he decided to move on to the “Summit City”/ Fort Wayne.

John Orff married Johanna Soxosvsky on November 17, 1846 in Fort Wayne. She had come to Fort Wayne from Prussia in 1844. They eventually reared eight children, Amelia (Bedford), John R., Anna L. (Stanton), Charles E., Montgomery C., Flora B. (Rockhill), Louise Ella (Bond), and William R.

In the 19th century, most trade skills were acquired through a period of apprenticeships rather than attending a trade school. In Fort Wayne John learned the milling business from L.S. Chittenden. After a few years of apprenticeship he became Chittenden’s partner. When Chittenden died John continued as a partner with Harriet Chittenden, Chittenden’s wife, until she sold her interest in 1855.

During the mid 1840s Anna Elizabeth Orff, John’s mother came to the United States. She lived in Fort Wayne with her elder son, John until her death in 1875. She, along with many family members, is buried in Ft. Wayne’s Lindenwood Cemetery.

During the same period other members of John’s family came to America. His older sister Elizabeth was married to Julius Fuchs. They settled in Louisville in 1845. John died in 1849. Elizabeth moved to Fort Wayne and married a widower, Henry Schwartz. The Schwartz’s then moved to Huntington to rear their combined families.

John’s brother, Henry Orff, born in 1826, was a musician and music teacher. He arrived around 1846 and settled in Fort Wayne. He practiced his occupation as a music teacher. He married Martha McIntosh on December 27, 1853. During the early days of the Civil War he served as a musician for the 32nd Indiana Infantry, a German unit. He enlisted September 1, 1861 and was mustered out by April 28, 1862. Later he and his wife Martha moved to Richmond, Indiana, where he died in 1900.

John’s brother, Christian Orff, came to Fort Wayne in 1845/46 and became a business owner. In 1851 he married Esther Angeline Heller. Her father, Peter Heller was a physician and later postmaster along the Eel River northeast of Fort Wayne, known today as Heller’s Corner. In 1852 he headed for the gold fields of California. Failing to strike it rich in San Francisco, he returned in 1854 via Panama, then to New York and then back home. In 1855 he built a steam grist mill at Heller’s Corner. Peter died at the home of Christian Orff, his son-in-law, in October 1882.

Christian Orff became a prominent businessman in Fort Wayne. He served on the Fort Wayne School Board from 1863-65. He also became a Notary for the state of Indiana in Fort Wayne on Jan 7, 1882.

THE ORFF FAMILY NAME	BIRTH	PLACE	DEATH	PLACE	FIND-A-GRAVE /CEMETERY	MARRIAGE DATE/ PLACE
Orff, ?						
m. __, Anna Elizabeth	1799	Germany	19 Aug 1875	Ft W IN	84480817	Germany
Orff, Elizabeth	31 Mar 1820	" "	22 May 1892	Huntington IN	72185420	" "
m. Fuchs, Julius	1819	" "	1849	Louisville KY		" "
m. Schwartz, Henry W.	14 Jan 1821	" "	22 Jan 1879	Huntington IN	72185423	25 Oct 1857
Orff, John	26 Jan 1821	" "	17 Oct 1897	Ft W IN	82817896	17 Nov 1846
m. Soxsovskey, Johanna W.	1825	" "	9 Sep 1899	Ft W IN	84480965	17 Nov 1846
Orff, Elizabeth	Died infancy	Ft W IN				
Orff, Amelia	1850 ?	" "	26-Feb-26	Wash. DC		
m. Bedford, Clayton A						
Orff, John R	1850	" "	12 Feb 1910	Ft W IN	60112009	
m. O'Connor, Cornelia F	1856	" "	1935	Ft W IN	60112001	
Orff, Anna L	Mar 1854	" "	1 Feb 1941	Ft W IN	173289803	
m. Tyler, Frederick G						20 Sep 1876
m. Stanton, Clark						
Orff, Charles Edward	1 Feb 1855	" "	15 Nov 1924	Ft W IN	Lindenwood	
Orff, Montgomery C	1857 ?	" "				5 Nov 1894
m. Bulger, Sophia B						5 Nov 1894
Orff, Flora B	24 Aug 1859	" "	5 Jul 1920	Ft W IN	170729144	
m. Rockhill, Hugh M	31 Jul 1853	" "	15 Jan 1941	Ft W IN	20447431	
Orff, Louisa Ella	20 Dec 1862	" "	29 Sep 1934	Ft W IN	170932775	
m. Bond, Albert Snitzer	16 Oct 1863	" "	13 Feb 1931	Ft W IN	170932540	
Orff, William R	1 Mar 1864	" "	23 Apr 1881	Ft W IN	60112502	
Orff, Gottlieb	12 Oct 1824	Germany	19 Mar 1888	Ft W IN	52468903	Germany
m. __, Maria	19 Dec 1828	" "	12 Dec 1892	Ft W IN	52468937	Germany
Orff, Henry	26 Mar 1826	" "	18 Oct 1900	Richmond	81208163	27 Dec 1853
m. McIntosh, Martha	4 Sep 1836	Indiana	14 Jul 1922	Ft W IN	84480929	27 Dec 1853
Orff, Christian	Nov 1829	Germany	15 Jan 1901	Arkansas	65133844	15 Sep 1851
m. Heller, Adelaide	Sep 1831	Ohio	4 Mar 1910	St Louis MO	65134093	15 Sep 1851
Orff, Adelaide	7 Nov 1855	Indiana	8 Feb 1914	Pittsburgh PA		
m. McKinnie, Frank						
Orff, Frank Nicholas	17 Mar 1859	Indiana	9 Nov 1922	St Louis MO	65133919	1890
m. ?, Anna L.	Aug 1861	New York				1890
Orff, Martha E (Mattie)	26 Oct 1864	Indiana				4 May 1887
m. Willis, Lemuel M.D.	6 Jul 1862	Missouri	16 Aug 1919	Arkansas	37363156	4 May 1887

Christian and Esther's son, Frank, who was born in Fort Wayne in 1859, became interested in the local newspaper business and then moved to St. Louis, Missouri. Christian and Esther moved to St. Louis during the mid-1880s to be with him. In the early 1900s Frank became the President of Columbia–Sterling Publications, owner of 5 magazines.

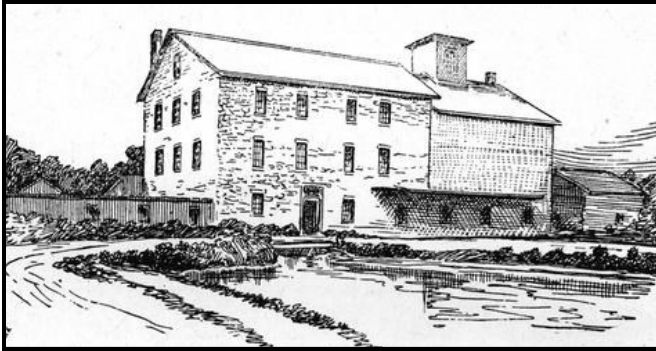
From St. Louis Christian's daughter Martha "Mattie" married a Jackson County Arkansas respected physician and surgeon, Lemuel E. Willis. Christian Orff's other daughter Addie married Frank McKinnie, who was the proprietor of the Anderson Hotel in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

John's last brother, Gottlieb Orff, came with his wife Maria later than other family members. They arrived in Fort Wayne on August 17, 1874. Gottlieb was a carpenter. He died in March of 1888 and Maria died four years later in 1894. They both were buried in the Concordia Lutheran Cemetery east of Fort Wayne.

Many mills that relied on water to power their saws or turn the mill wheels to grind grain were built in Indiana during the early part of the 19th century. Most of them were built along rivers

and streams where natural falls or dams were constructed to create a fall of water that could be harnessed for power. However, by using a canal only a few dams in a river or stream were required to direct water to a level where water could be let out at various points along the route, creating a fall of water. Although many mills could be built along a canal, each mill added to the water loss in the canal so water usage by the mills had to be regulated by canal authorities.

See: **The Hoosier Packet** April 2008 Vol. 7, No. 4



Orff's Mill from B. J. Griswold's *The Pictorial History of Ft. Wayne, Indiana*

From 1827–1885 there were at least 35 mills in Allen County, Indiana. One of the finest of these mills was built on the banks of the St. Mary's River where Main St. crosses the river today. The land in this area was owned by William Rockhill. In 1842 Rockhill, in partnership with Samuel Edsall, constructed a water powered saw mill on

the north bank of the Wabash & Erie Canal at this point. In 1843 Samuel Edsall began construction of a large grist mill on the south bank of the canal near the river. Partnerships at this time transferred frequently. Edsall soon admitted Millford Smith as his milling partner.

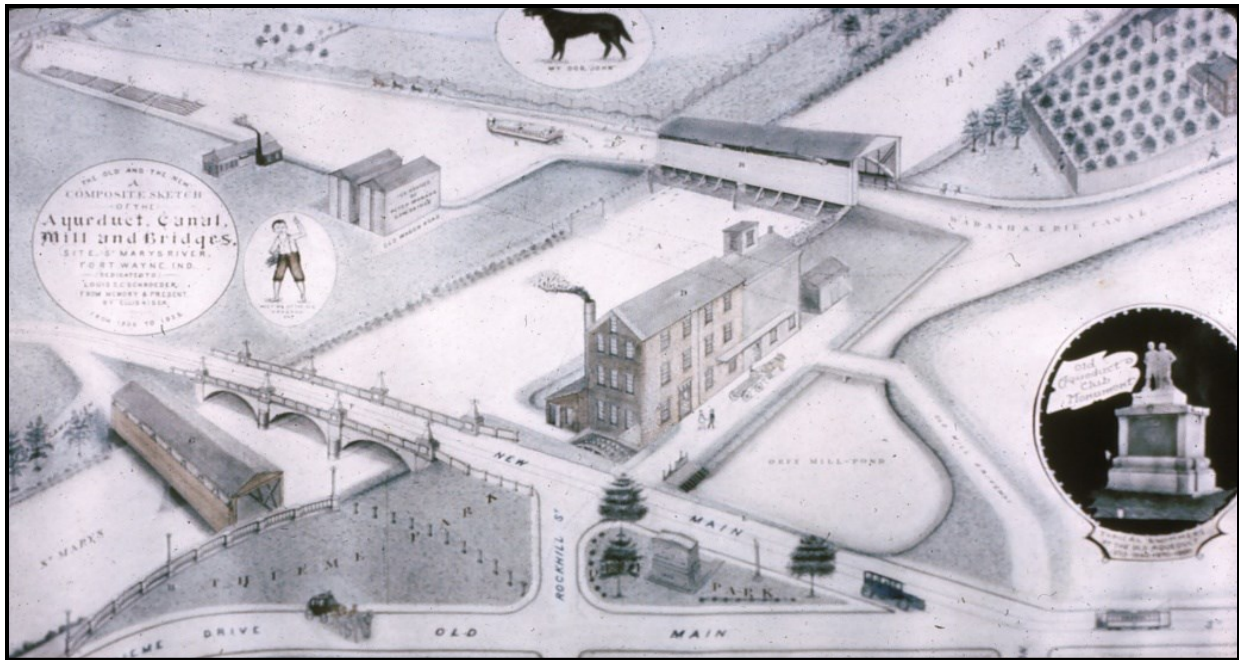
Smith & Edsall operated the mill as the Empire Mill until about 1856 when the mill was offered for sale. John Orff, our subject, formed a 1/3rd partnership, with Armstrong and Lacy and purchased the mill. Lacy died shortly thereafter. By 1858 it became solely Orff Mill when Armstrong exited the partnership.

The Orff Mill stood 4½ stories high and had the capacity of grinding 175 barrels of grain per 24 hours. Water from the canal was taken into a mill pond just east of the St. Mary's aqueduct and run across an overshot wheel. In 1862-63 John added a warehouse adjoining the mill to the east. This warehouse had six bins each capable of holding 5,000 bushels of grain. There were five stones turning 24 hrs. per day operated by 12 employees. His mill competed with the City Mills in downtown Fort Wayne, which also used canal water. At one time City Mills was owned by Pliny Hoagland, who was the engineer for the eastern division of the Wabash & Erie Canal in Ohio in 1838 and, along with Benjamin Tower, rebuilt Lock 2, the Gronauer Lock, in 1849 and Jesse Lynch Williams, Chief Engineer of all of Indiana's canals.

By 1872 John Orff introduced steam operations to his mill. When the canal closed in the 1880s water was then drawn from the St. Marys river instead of the canal. John Orff's three sons, John R., Charles E. and Montgomery C. eventually took over operating the business, but the mill closed in 1897.

John Orff was a public spirited but conservative businessman. He served his community as a member of the National Millers Association, was on the Board of Directors of the First National Bank when it organized in May of 1863 and assisted in organizing the first police force in the city that year. In 1865, when the 13th annual Indiana State Fair was held in Fort Wayne, John

won a Silver medal for his Red Wheat Flour. In 1877 the merchants of Fort Wayne decided they needed a united organization that represented business interests so they formed the Fort Wayne Board of Trade. John Orff was a director on their Board. He also served several years on the Fort Wayne City Council. In 1897 he was elected a County Commissioner, receiving more votes than all other Democratic candidates for all offices. Unfortunately he died in October before the term began on December 1897.



Orff's Mill from B. J. Griswold's *The Pictorial History of Ft. Wayne, Indiana* (See and magnify the enclosed drawing of the mill site) This teardrop shaped piece of land in the foreground became Orff Park. The route of the old street remains on the southeast side of

John Orff was not the only family member in the milling business, Christian and his wife Esther A. Heller were also involved with mills in Fort Wayne. Marshall Wines owned property east of town and he built a saw mill and later another flour mill north of the canal and near the current Hosey Dam on the Maumee River. This flour mill was transferred among a variety of partnerships in the 1840s and 1850s, but in 1861 Christian Orff became a partner with Henry Volland in this mill. In 1863 the mill was again transferred to David Comparet and Washington Haskell. They rebuilt the old dam for about \$5,000. A couple of years later Esther Orff, Christian's wife, following in the family tradition, became the sole owner of the mill and dam. In 1871 the mill was completely destroyed by a huge fire and never rebuilt. The mill was 3 ½ stories high and could store about 20,000 bushels of grain. It employed about 4 people producing 50 barrels per day.

Today, only remnants of the John Orff's mill site remain in Fort Wayne, where the current Main St. Bridge crosses the St. Mary's river. In 1892 shortly before John's death, the city of Fort Wayne decided to straighten the approach for a new Main St. Bridge and purchased the property from John. After using some of it to straighten the road there still remained a 0.2 acre site between the new and old streets.

On November 22, 1912 an “Old Aqueduct Club” was formed by men who, as young boys, swam in the old canal at the aqueduct. An agreement was then made in the 1920s with the city to place a statue called “Let’s Go Swimming” in Orff Park. It still stands there today. This statue was designed by local architect, Marshall S. Mahurin, and dedicated on July 16, 1927. The plaque on the statue lists 327 names of club members. Charles Edward Orff, John’s son is listed on this plaque. The park is the smallest of all Fort Wayne’s 86 parks and recreation areas.



In the mid-19th Century Orff’s Mill, one of the most productive milling operations in Indiana, stood on the banks of the St. Mary’s River. Its power source came from the Wabash & Erie Canal with the waters that the St. Joseph Feeder Canal brought from 6 ½ miles to the north. Although the canal, aqueduct and associated mill structures are long gone, the general site is still undeveloped and remains a parking lot. There you can easily visualize how it once looked by looking at early drawings.

Photos by Bob Schmidt



Orff's Mill as seen in 1889 looking north from the Main Street bridge over the St. Mary's River. The St. Marys Aqueduct has been removed, which stood just before this railroad bridge.

Courtesy Allen County Public Library