

## Chapter 1: ORLAND

Northern California plays a significant role in the world of the theatre organ, as two of America's most prominent theatre organists would begin their lives here, some twenty-five years and eighty miles apart: Jesse Crawford, "Poet of the Organ," hailed from Woodland, while George Wright was born in Orland, a tiny agricultural town of 1600 located 100 miles north of Sacramento, surrounded by rice farms and groves of almonds ( "ammands," to the locals).

### George's Grandparents

"During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many pioneer settlers took adventurous paths while traveling great distances on "The Road to Orland." One of those making the long journey was George Ephraim Wright.

He was born October 23, 1865, near Epworth, Dubuque County, Iowa, the son of Elizabeth Tripp and Ephraim Wright. Five years later, the family moved to London, Ontario, Canada, where he was educated and acquired the rudiments of the blacksmith trade.

At age 15 , Wright "decided to travel and see something of the world." Family tradition records that he left the East Coast aboard a ship and came around the Horn of Africa, "landing in Los Angeles (1885) with \$20 in his pocket." His first employment was at Rancho Santa Anita, shoeing thoroughbred race horses for the legendary Elias Jackson "Lucky" Baldwin (1828-1909). After working at several

other odd jobs in Pasadena and the Bay Area he was anxious to see more of the world, and left San Francisco for South America with some \$1,500, “saved from his hard labor.”

Returning to California, he found work in Alameda, where he met and later married Anna Carolyn Schroeder-Martin (1871-1952) in 1891. A year later, the newlyweds came to Glenn County, where George set up a blacksmith shop at Elk Creek. Later selling his forge, he worked a summer in Newville and finally came to Orland in 1893. The town owed its existence mainly to the “Orland Water Project”. This included the 92-foot-high East Park Dam (1910), the Stony Gorge Dam and Reservoir (1928), the Rainbow Diversion Dam (1914), the Northside Diversion Dam (1913), and a canal and distribution system with 17 miles of canals.

Wright first formed a partnership with Adelbert James “Del” Harelson (1859-1948), opening the Harelson & Wright blacksmith shop on Walker Street. When John Washington Lake (1848-1938) bought out Harelson’s interest, the firm became Wright & Lake. Eventually Wright dissolved the partnership and became sole proprietor. Purchasing property along both sides of Fifth Street, he built a shop and sales room near the northeast corner of Mill Street, becoming an agent for Studebaker wagons, buggies, Oliver plows, and Simpson tractors.

In August of 1917, Wright sold his wagon-making and blacksmith business to his foreman, B.A. “Ben” Bonham. A skilled worker and businessman, Bonham took over the shop then occupied by Harry Strawn (1882-1960), who would shortly build his own blacksmith shop a half-block further south on Fifth Street. Wright was now able to concentrate on his wagon and implement business. Harry Keene reported in

the *Orland Unit* that Wright was “simple swapping work in old material for work on the brand new article, which he believes will be more to his liking.” George E. Wright would retire from his Orland Hardware & Implement Company in 1939 when he sold it to Joseph Baugher and his partner Paul Blacet.

According to his 1896 voter registration, Wright was a large, rawboned man who stood 5’11, with gray eyes and brown hair. He was noted for his trust in his customers, his extensive gun collection, and his oratory skills. In November 1909, he helped incorporate the town of Orland and was elected chairman of the first city council, also serving two terms as mayor. He owned 20 acres of walnut trees east of town and took an interest in the formation of the town’s fire department, becoming an honorary member. He also belonged to the local Odd Fellows, was a Past Master of the Masons, and Past Patron of the Eastern Star.

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George and Anna Wright were the parents of three children: John Charles Wright (1895-1983), Ethel Wright Walton (1897-1977), and Florence Wright Leonard (1907-91).

George E. Wright suffered a severe heart attack at his home on Yolo and Marin Streets and passed away on January 25, 1942. He may have taken the long road to Glenn County, but, once settled, his roots were firmly planted in the Land of Orland.”<sup>1</sup>

Although Wright was a lifelong Republican, his wife Anna had a somewhat independent streak and was listed on the local voting roster as a Democrat.

Carol Baugher, a Wright cousin, related that

*“Grandpa George...claimed the Wright Brothers were his cousins. He remembered going to family picnics and the Wright Brothers were there.” Clearly, great men were often present in the Wright clan.....Nana had nine kids, but only three survived.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **George’s Father**

When John Charles Wright was born on November 25, 1894, his father was 29 and his mother was 21. John’s sister Ethel Alberta was born on February 6, 1897; his sister Florence was born on February 20, 1907. As the only son, John was expected to take over the family’s farm implement business.

John showed musical aptitude at Orland High School school, graduating in 1912. It was said that he was so musically talented that he could play almost any instrument. Shortly afterwards he enlisted in the military and rose to the rank of sergeant.

### **George’s Mother**

Lulu Spears was born January 12, 1900 in Tallula, Illinois, the daughter of carpenter/builder James Judy Spears and housewife Gladys Evelyn Shelton Spears (born 1871 in Missouri). The Spears were married on November 24, 1886, and had nine children over the course of 28 years.

Lulu was the fifth of the four boys and five girls. Her father was 39 years old when she was born, her mother 30. Uncle Martin owned the first automobile in town. Lulu’s sister Velma wrote —“Note powerful engine in back. Uncle Martin had

to fix up some dingus to give the boys a shock when they would grab the rear end and keep him from taking off...P.S. Sorry this was taken in the poorer part of town.”

Another early picture of the sisters, captioned by Velma, reads “Lulu Spears and her baby sister Velma—taken in Tallula, Ill. Our mother was always humiliated about this picture because someone came and took it without her knowledge, and we were not looking our best. You can see by the expression on the younger child’s face that she was terrorized and dominated by the older girl (Lulu)—probably being pinched, and that is why she has that unhappy look or was suffering from a stomach ache” She also noted, “We were always snappy dressers.” Clearly, the Spears girls were high-spirited, intelligent, and very conscious of class and appearance.

In February 1913, the family arrived in Orland after a cross-country trek of some 2,000 miles. Their presence was noted in the paper:

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*The population of Orland was increased by 21 persons during last Wednesday and Thursday, when three new families came here to locate. Two of these families, J. J. Spears with a family of nine, and his son-in-law, A. W. Emery, with a family of four, arrived here last Wednesday night from Illinois and expect to buy irrigated farms here.”<sup>3</sup>*

Lulu was clearly a very popular girl. During her days at Orland High School, she played the positions of guard and team captain in basketball, served on the student government finance committee, and was in charge of the alumni portion of the yearbook. Orland resident Keith Baugher remembers that Lulu

*"...was kind of a society lady. She was a very attractive lady. She was tall and slender, and was the type that could've been a movie star, maybe. She had a sister, and those two girls were both beautiful--outstanding looking."*<sup>4</sup>

## Marriage

Given the fact that John Wright was away serving his country, the impending nuptials had to be carried out when he could return home for the ceremony. We see the stars aligning when reading that

*"Sergeant John Wright is home from Ft. Worth, Texas for a fifteen-day furlough. Sergeant John certainly looks as though army life agreed with him, and he likes it as well as it likes him. Of course, his parents, Mr. and Mrs. George Wright, were crazy to see him. Others too, were mighty glad to see Sergeant John Wright. Miss Lulu Spears is visiting at the Geo. Wright home, having arrived from Sacramento last Monday."*<sup>5</sup>

*"Sergeant John C. Wright came home yesterday from Camp Cody, N.M., on a 15-day furlough. John looks just like the John of old, but is muscled up even better than before. He claims to like the service but acknowledges that it seems good to get home again. He will be here about a week, allowing plenty of time for getting back within the time prescribed."*<sup>6</sup>

*"Sergeant John Wright, son of Mr. and Mrs. George Wright, was married in Willows last Tuesday afternoon to Miss Lulu Spears, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Spears. The wedding comes as a happy surprise to their many friends. All knew that the young couple were contemplating taking the fatal step at some future date, but few surmised that Sergeant Wright's furlough was engineered by Dan Cupid. The*

*young couple motored to Willows in the afternoon and were married by Judge William Finch.*

*The young couple are too well known in Orland to need an introduction. Mrs. John Wright is one of Orland's most popular young ladies. She is an accomplished musician and has a host of friends not only in Orland but in every town on the west side. Sergeant Wright who is also musical, enlisted about nine months ago and is with the quartermasters' department, in the truck department. He is now stationed at Camp Cody and has more than made good, rising to the rank of sergeancy (sic). Before enlisting he was associated with his father in business here.*

*Young Wright will return to camp shortly and expects to leave for France in a few weeks. The bride will make her home in Sacramento until Sergeant John completes the job of driving his truck down Crown Prince Alley and into Kaiser Boulevard in Berlin. The Register joins in congratulations.”*

At the end of John's 15-day hometown visit, the paper noted that

*“Sergeant John Wright who has been home on a furlough, left yesterday morning to report for duty at Camp Cody. Wright expects to be ordered overseas at once. Mrs. John Wright will remain in Orland for a time with Sergeant Wright's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Geo. Wright.”*

When John Wright returned from military service, the couple settled down in a house that Lulu designed on Yolo Street in Orland, just a few doors away from Grandpa George and Nana's residence. Two sons would be born to them, George on August 28, 1920 and Elbert on July 16, 1922.

George's birth was overshadowed by two tragic events when his mother lost both of her parents within a short time. Just 39 days prior to George's birth, her father succumbed to a longstanding period of ill health, aged only 59. Mother Gladys suffered a gallbladder attack on what likely was the day George was born. Following an operation, she suffered further complications and had to undergo additional surgery, dying in a San Francisco hospital at age 49.

Lulu now had to deal with the birth of her first child as well as the loss of both parents. This, and the future family problems that would arise, would have a lifelong impact on her eldest son.

### George's Childhood

George weighed in at twelve pounds, 22 inches long. At 5 ½ months came his first words, "Ma Ma" and "Na Na." The latter followed two months later. Around June 10, 1921, he sprouted his first tooth and began to crawl a month later. Lulu noted on July 28 that George now "walks with assistance." Her wit shone through in captions for photographs of baby George, celebrating other babies' birthdays..."At both parties, the boys and girls helped their mothers eat ice cream and cake."

George received his very first toy in August—"Pink and white rattle from the Ebbesens. Baby first played with his rattle when about two months old. He just looked at it and admired it." Perhaps a harbinger of George's penchant for snappy dressing, his first shoes were "Black patent leather bottoms with black kid tops. They were button shoes. The first shoes were size 0, but he outgrew them in a month, and had to have size 1."



From his earliest years, it became very clear that the child was a musical prodigy. According to Carol Baugher, “When he was four years old, his mother was having a card party. And he came in the room and he told the ladies...‘I want everybody to be quiet! I’m going to play a song I wrote called *Cracked Ice.*’ And he sat down at the piano and played.”

Upon entering school, George would show himself a capable student, earning As and Bs in first grade from his teacher Emma Lachenmyer. While George’s music grade was initially a B, he thereafter maintained top grades in what was to become “his” subject.

His behavior at school varied widely throughout the year, likely due to the unstable situation at home and his own highly emotional nature. Though never tardy to class during first grade, George missed 10 of 25 days during one month, for reasons unknown. Except for this lapse, his attendance would remain exemplary during this year of his life.

For his fourth birthday, his grandfather presented him with a redwood seedling and allowed him to plant it in his front yard. That tree still stands as a living tribute today, towering high above the modest Wright home.

George attended Orland Grammar School and later joined the school’s orchestra, playing cello while continuing his piano studies with his Aunt Velma throughout these years.

While Lulu played piano for the silent movies in the cozy Orland Theater, “Home of High-Class Motion Pictures,” her husband was busy but unhappy working at the Wright Farm Implement Company. He would much rather have studied

law, but his iron-willed father forbade it, insisting that he continue in the family business. Resentfully, John soon took to drinking heavily and became abusive to his wife and children. Thereafter, George and Elbert spent a great deal of time at their grandparents home just up the street.

Lulu continued to earn extra money for the family playing at the Orland Theatre, and also helped to keep the boys away from their unstable father for awhile. Due to the unpleasant situation at home, she suffered emotionally, financially, and perhaps physically. Her good friend Lilah Hazleton and sister Velma provided comfort while “Nana” Wright was a strong supporter of her grandchildren, paying for George’s first formal piano lessons at age 6, taught by his Aunt Florence.

His talent was unmistakable and prodigious, and he made his début at age 8, playing piano for Velma’s wedding to Marshall Lane. The *Orland Unit* reported,

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*“At a pretty wedding, performed at ten o’clock Sunday morning, at the home of the bride’s sister and brother-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. John Wright, Miss Velma Spears and George Marshall Lane were united in marriage.*

*An arch of ferns and chrysanthemums in copper shades formed a beautiful setting at the end of the living room and here, to the strains of the wedding march played by young George Wright, nephew of the bride, the wedding party took their places.*

*The bride was attended by her sister, Mrs. John Wright, and the groom by his brother, Elbert M. Lane.”<sup>10</sup>*

On June 28, 1929, George was in the audience for the opening of the San Francisco Fox Theatre, an event that would ultimately shape his life and his very being. He related later:

*“How well I remember being taken to the opening of the new Fox Theatre in San Francisco in 1929. The front sidewalk, covered in plush red carpet into which a nine year old sank ankle-deep—the ornate main lobby where Mrs. William Fox had spent too much of the stockholders’ money on plush, gold leaf, French antiques, gold brocades, gold tassels, huge vases which formerly belonged to the Czars, more gold and still more gold. The high point in the program was when Doc Wilson rode up on the elevator astride the Wurlitzer and played his first organ solo. Then and there I knew that someday I would be the organist of the Fox Theatre and that was that.”<sup>11</sup>*

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Though George’s life was now clearly set on music, his brother was a different sort. From childhood, the boys had never connected. Elbert was the mechanically-minded rough-and-tumble type, while George preferred listening to music on the radio or phonograph for hours on end, playing the piano by ear, and chatting with his mother and other adults. Carol Baugher remembers, *“They didn't get along at all. George would spend his young life going neighbor to neighbor having tea with all the old ladies, whereas his brother was shooting rubber (toy) guns.”*

*“We always had Christmas dinner at Nana's house right down here on the corner, and I can remember one Christmas, the boys made a big to-do for the little kids about Santa Claus. I don't know what they did on the roof, but they made it sound like reindeer on the roof for the little kids, and they loved it! I was old enough that I didn't fall for it (laughter).”<sup>12</sup>*

Sometimes the brothers would spend time at the Orland Theatre, George sitting with his mother as she accompanied the films, while Elbert operated the clanking projector up in the booth.

But the differences between George and Elbert were minor compared to the growing tensions between their parents that would ultimately lead to a separation. Before that happened, however, another big change would come to the Wright family.

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## Chapter 1 NOTES:

1. *George Ephraim Wright*, by Dr. Gene Russell
2. Conversation with Carol Baugher, October 16, 2013, Orland, CA
3. *Orland Register*, February 22, 1913
4. Conversation with Keith Baugher, October 16, 2013, Orland, CA
5. *Orland Register*, Wednesday, August 28, 1918; Vol. 20 No. 15
6. *Orland Unit*, Tuesday, August 27, 1918; Vol. IX No. 32
7. *Orland Register*, Saturday, August 31, 1918; Vol. 20 No. 16
8. *Orland Register*, Saturday, September 7, 1918; Vol. 20 No. 18
9. Conversation with Carol Baugher, October 16, 2013, Orland, CA
10. *Orland Unit*, Tuesday, 23 October 1928, Vol. 18 No. 72
11. *Tibia Magazine*, Summer 1956, p. 8
12. Conversation with Carol Baugher, October 16, 2013, Orland, CA

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## Chapter 1 IMAGES (proposed, not in order):

1. Lulu Spears senior photo
2. 1920 Orland census
3. 1928 Orland voter directory
4. Orland Theater exterior
5. Orland Theater marquee
6. Orland Theater interior
7. GW cousin Carol Baugher and husband Keith
8. Elbert Wright with wife and daughter
9. GW's first grade report card (interior)
10. GW's first grade report card (exterior)
11. Lulu Spears with friends in Orland
12. Elbert Wright grave marker
13. John C. Wright in the family store
14. Elbert Wright beside an airplane
15. 1920s Orland Grammar School
16. Florence Wright
17. 1929 photo of George and Elbert Wright
18. Childhood photo of sisters Lulu and Velma Spears
19. Grandparents' house in Orland
20. Redwood tree GW planted in Grandparents' front yard
21. Adult GW in front of Orland Grammar School
22. Adult GW in front of Grant Union High School
23. GW baby book page with 2 photos and text
24. GW baby book page with 3 photos and text
25. GW baby book page with 3 photos and text
26. GW baby book page with 1 photos and text
27. GW baby book cover
28. GW baby book page with 2 photos
29. GW baby book page with GW photo and birth information
30. Young GW
31. Interior view of the Wright store with John Wright
32. Orland Dam
33. 1917 Orland Grammar School picture with teachers and students
34. Annie Wright grave marker
35. Wright Baby grave marker
36. Grandpa and Nana's grave marker
37. GW with classmates close-up
38. GW with classmates
39. GW's birthplace
40. GW with cello
41. GW with Orland Grammar School Band
42. Horseshoe imprint in grandpa's sidewalk
43. Orland Theater construction photo 1913

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44. Two exterior photos of Wright's "Orland Implement and Hardware Store"

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