

The Story of Joseph Schell

By Cheryl Herrmann

May 2026

For many families living in Evansville, there are hidden connections to one of the city's most well-known names—Mesker.

Most people recognize George L. Mesker as the man who generously gifted land and money to the City of Evansville, helping create what we know today as Mesker Park and Zoo. But for many local families, the connection to the Mesker family runs much deeper than public history—it runs through family trees.

One such story is the story of Joseph Schell.

Joseph Schell's daughter, Elizabeth Katherine Schell, married George W. Mesker.

No—not *that* George Mesker of Mesker Steel. George W. Mesker was actually the first cousin, once removed, of George L. Mesker. To make things even more complicated, both men were married to women named Elizabeth, which has created plenty of confusion in online family trees over the years.

So, let's untangle that story ...

... and trace the journey of Joseph Schell—from his family's roots in Hesse, Germany, to the farmlands of Dubois County, and finally to Perry Township in Vanderburgh County, where his family became part of the west side story.

Joseph Schell was born on 2 October 1865 in Dubois County, Indiana, the second surviving son of Clemens Schell, a German immigrant from Hesse, and Maria Katherine Hatter, a native of Indiana. Joseph was baptized the following day, October 3, 1865, at St. Ferdinand Catholic Church in Ferdinand, Dubois County, by Rev. Fr. Chrysostom Hoffa. His baptismal sponsors were Clement Muth and Barbara Mehling. His birth and baptism were recorded in the parish register of St. Ferdinand Catholic Church.



But to understand the story of Joseph, we must first begin with his father—Clemens Schell.

Clemens was born on January 23, 1816, in Hesse, Germany. He had two older siblings: Joseph, born in 1810, and Mary Elizabeth, born in 1814.

At age 35, Clemens made the life-changing decision to leave Germany. In 1851, he and his brother Joseph departed Liverpool, England aboard the ship *General Dunlap* and arrived in New York City on August 14, 1851. His sister Mary Elizabeth also immigrated, though the records of her journey have yet to be found.

Like thousands of others, Clemens came seeking opportunity. Indiana had become a land of promise—affordable farmland, growing Catholic communities, and the chance for a fresh start. Stories of German Catholic settlements in Indiana had spread all the way to Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New York. For immigrants like Clemens, Indiana offered something priceless: belonging.

Within a year of arriving in America, Clemens and his brother settled in Dubois County.

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THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

CERTIFICATE }
No. 36760

To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting :

WHEREAS Clement Schell, of Dubois County, Indiana,

has deposited in the GENERAL LAND OFFICE of the United States, a Certificate of the REGISTER OF THE LAND OFFICE, at Vincennes whereby it appears that full payment has been made by the said Clement Schell

according to the provisions of the Act of Congress of the 24th of April, 1820, entitled "An act making further provision for the sale of the Public Lands," for the South West quarter of the South West quarter of Section thirty six, in Township three, South, of Range four, West, in the District of Lands subject to sale at Vincennes, Indiana, containing forty acres

according to the official plat of the Survey of the said Lands, returned to the General Land Office by the SURVEYOR GENERAL, which said tract has been purchased by the said Clement Schell

NOW KNOW YE, That the United States of America, in consideration of the premises, and in conformity with the several acts of Congress, in such case made and provided, HAVE GIVEN AND GRANTED, and by these presents DO GIVE AND GRANT, unto the said Clement Schell

and to his heirs, the said tract above described: TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the same, together with all the rights, privileges, immunities, and appurtenances of whatsoever nature, thereunto belonging, unto the said Clement Schell

and to his heirs and assigns forever.

In Testimony Whereof, I, Franklin Pierce, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, have caused these Letters to be made PATENT, and the SEAL of the GENERAL LAND OFFICE to be hereunto affixed.

Given under my hand, at the CITY OF WASHINGTON, the fifteenth day of April, in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty-three and of the Independence of the United States the Seventy-seventh.

BY THE PRESIDENT:

Franklin Pierce
By B. B. French, apt Secy.

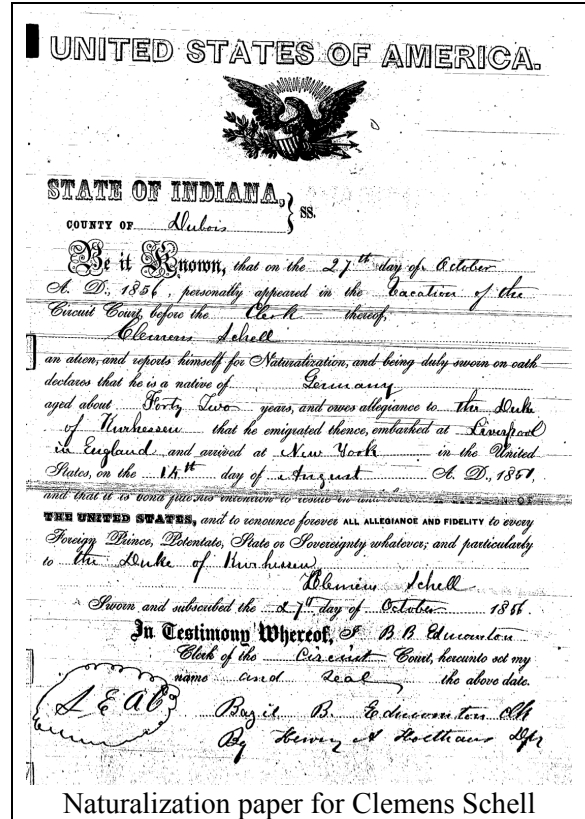
J. M. Granger, RECORDER of the General Land Office.

Land Grant to Clement Schell by President Franklin Pierce
15 April 1853, Certificate 36760

In 1852, at age 36, Within a year, Clemens had settled in Dubois County, Indiana, where he acquired forty acres of land in Ferdinand Township on 26 February 1852. He received the Certificate of Land Patent from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management on 15 April 1853. This land—forty acres more or less—became the foundation of his new life.

He farmed that land, built his future there, and in 1856, he officially became an American citizen. Standing before the Circuit Court of Dubois County, Clemens appeared and was naturalized on 27 October 1856, formally renouncing allegiance to the Duke of Kurhessen.

According to the 1860 census, Clemens was listed as a 45-year-old farmer living alone, with modest property and strong roots already taking hold. His real estate was valued at \$800 and personal estate valued at \$300.



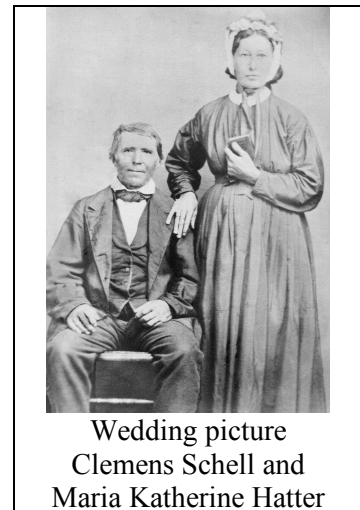
In June 1863, Clemens registered in Class II (married men ages 36-44) for the Civil War in the First Congressional District of Indiana, Dubois County. By 1863, the federal government drafted and enrolled men into the Army. The Conscription Act declared that men between ages of 20 and 45 were eligible for duty. Aliens who had filed their declaration of intention to become a citizen were also eligible. This draft lasted until 1865, when the war ended. It was acceptable to pay a substitute to serve for oneself, with the rate around \$300 to \$1,100. Clemens did not pay a substitute, nor was he a substitute. He did not serve.

But his life was about to change.

Clemens was a devoted Catholic, and just ten days before his 47th birthday, married 19-year-old Maria Katherine Hatter at St. Ferdinand Catholic Church on January 12, 1863.

Yes—the age difference was 28 years. But during the Civil War era, this was far more common than we might think. Many younger men were away fighting—or never returned.

Their marriage was blessed by Father Chrysostom Hoffa. Maria Katherine, born 13 September 1843 in Indiana, was the illegitimate daughter of John Hatter and Barbara Kaiss (Rees). Witnesses to the marriage were Georg Mehling, Anton Troll, Barbara Mehling, and Maria Eversmann. Their marriage is recorded both in the parish register and in Dubois County civil records.



The family resided on the forty-acre farm in the southeastern corner of Ferdinand Township near the Dubois-Spencer County line. Adjacent landowners included Clemens' brother Joseph Schell and neighbors John Weber, Christian Mehling, Kasper Fleck, Valentine Licht, and Killian Leim.

George Mehling 1, Aug. 23 1844	George Glucker Jan. 21 1854	Kasper Fleck Feb. 26 1852	Kasper Fleck Feb. 26 1852	Jackson Cato Oct. 27, 1854
Christian Mehling 30 Mar. 30 1855	Killian Leim Dec. 5, 1843	Joseph Schell Feb. 26 1852	Valentine Licht Feb. 29, 1848	John Weber Feb. 26, 1852
Christian Mehling 26 March 7 1863	Clement Schell Feb. 26, 1852	Joseph Schell Feb. 26, 1852	John Weber Feb. 26, 1852	Geo. Fathner 25, 1857

(Spencer County Line) (Corner of Perry,
Spencer & Dubois)

First Land owners
Township 3 South, Range 4 West, Section 36
Located in the southeast corner of Ferdinand Township

It was a close-knit farming community where neighbors were often relatives, and relatives were often neighbors.

Together Clemens and Maria Katherine built a family of five children:
Mary Catherine (1864–1920),
Joseph (1865–1942),
John (1866–1866),
Henry Joseph (1867–1947), and
Andrew (born 1873).

Let's look at the life of Joseph's siblings:

Mary Catherine was born on 16 January 1864, and baptized that same day by Fr. Wolfgang at St. Ferdinand Catholic Church in Ferdinand, Indiana. Her sponsors were Christian Mehling and Maria Elisabetha Schell. Mary had nine children – the first child, Frank Martin Kraus, was born out of wedlock. In 1890, she married Stephan Seng and had eight children in this union – Maria Catharina, Mary Rosina, John Christian, Peter John, Leo Frank, William J, Cecelia Maria, and Henry Clemens. This family branch remained in Dubois county, with Stephan Seng purchasing the 40 acres from the heirs of Clemens Schell on November 30, 1906.

John, born on December 5, 1866, died as an infant, living only one day.

Henry Joseph, born January 14, 1867, in Dubois County. He was baptized the next day by Fr. Eberhard at St. Ferdinand Church in Ferdinand, Indiana. The sponsors were Henry Joseph Heck and Katharina Schwindel. As an adult, Henry moved to Spencer County, Indiana, and in 1900, married Elizabeth Anna Ernst, a niece of his step-father. This marriage resulted in 4 children – Christina, Simon, Leo and Adam.

Andrew was born in July 1873 in Dubois County, Indiana. No further record or documents have been located.

No one could have known then that Clemens' oldest son, Joseph Schell, would one day leave Dubois County and establish the branch of the family that would connect to the Meskers of Evansville.

Alas, life on the farm was not always easy.

But tragedy came early.

On August 7, 1879, at age 63, Clemens died and was buried at St. Ferdinand Catholic Church Cemetery, Section E, Row 4, Grave 1. His marriage to Maria Katherine had lasted just over 16 years.

Following his death, Maria Katherine and her children were enumerated in the 1880 U.S. Census in Ferdinand Township., Dubois County, Indiana. The next year, on November 8, 1881, she remarried Andreas Ernst and later moved to Spencer County, Indiana, where additional children were born from that union, Francis (1882), Maria Rosalia (1884) and Katherine Maria (1886).

Schell Catherine	W	F	37			1	Farming
— Maria C.	W	F	16	Daughter	1		Keeping house
— Joseph	W	M	14	son	1		
— Henry J.	W	M	8	son	1		

1880 US Census – Indiana – Dubois County – Ferdinand Township

Soon, young Joseph was no longer living in the household. With his father gone and his mother remarried, and now half siblings, Joseph made a decision that would shape the next generation.

He left.

He traveled south to Vanderburgh County, settling in Perry Township, looking for work and opportunity. Like his father before him, he was building a new beginning. He worked as a farm laborer, saving every dollar he could with one goal in mind: owning land of his own.

And then—love entered the story.

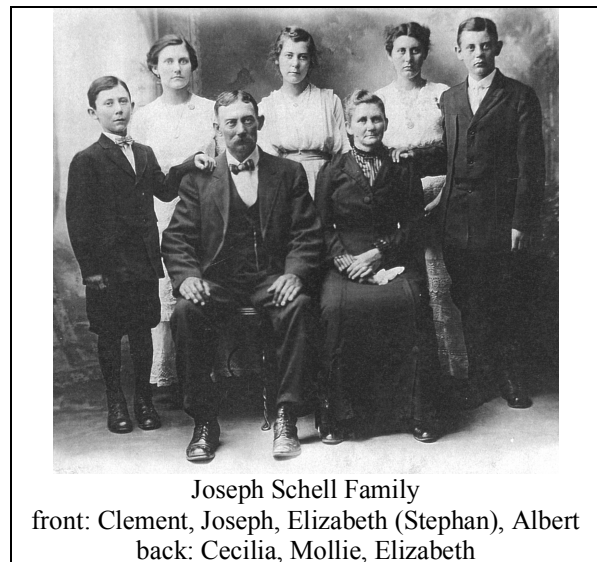
In those days, courting distance was usually about two to five miles—as far as a man could reasonably walk or ride a horse. Most men married someone who lived nearby.

And Joseph did exactly that.

On April 15, 1890, Joseph married Elizabeth Stephan, daughter of Conrad Stephan and Margaret Schlittenhart. Their marriage united two established German Catholic farming families of the west side of Vanderburgh County.

Together, they raised seven children on their own 40-acre farm in Perry Township, near the Vanderburgh-Posey County line. Their children were Elizabeth, Margaret, Cecilia, Joseph Carl, Mollie Rose, Clement Frederick, and Albert George.

And yes —
this is where the Mesker connection enters.



Their daughter, Elizabeth Katherine Schell, later married George W. Mesker, creating the family link to the well-known Mesker family of Evansville. The Schell neighbors included Adam Hahn, Conrad Stephan, Henry Nurrenbern, Ben Steinkamp, and John B. Mesker.

Neighbors marrying neighbors.
It happens all the time.

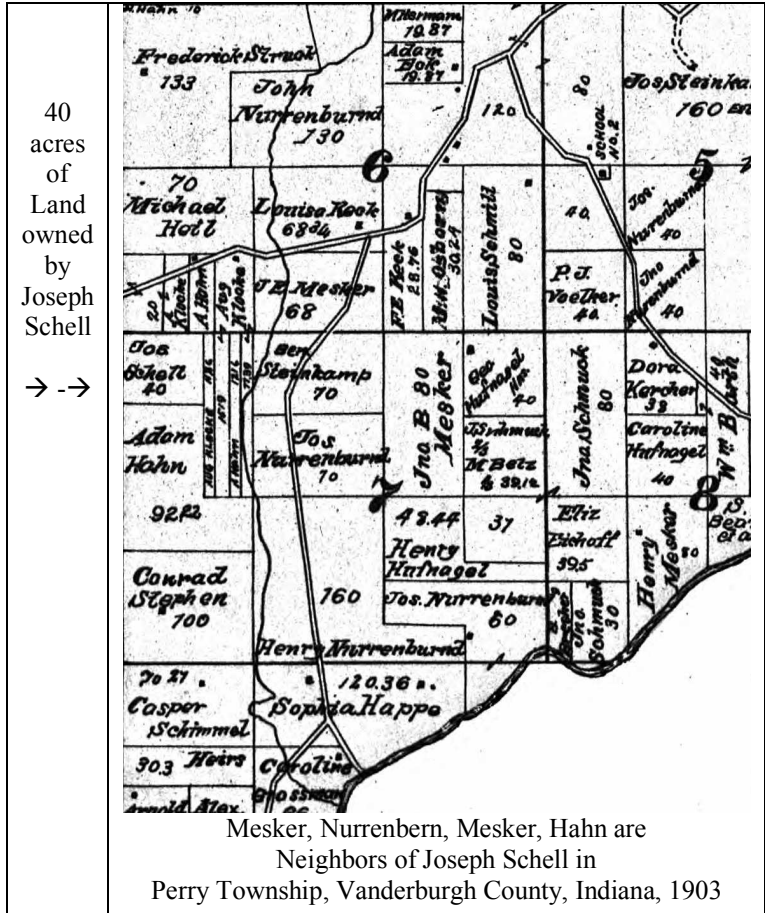
Joseph's life reflects a common but important pattern in southern Indiana genealogy: the migration of German Catholic families from Dubois County into Vanderburgh County. His story demonstrates how family connections formed not only through bloodlines, but also through neighboring farms, parish communities, and marriages that intertwined and tied families together across generations.

And that is how one young farm boy from Dubois County became part of the larger west side story of Evansville—through hard work, family, faith, and the simple reality that history is often built right next door.

Sometimes, the biggest stories are not found in famous names like Mesker...

...but in the families who married into them.

And that is the story of Joseph Schell.



MARRIED FOR 50 YEARS

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Schell celebrated their golden wedding anniversary yesterday with a family dinner at their home on the Lower Mt. Vernon Road. Their children with them included two sons, Clem and Albert Schell, and two daughters, Mrs. George Mesker and Mrs. Thomas Hammer.

Mrs. Schell before her marriage of a half century ago was Miss Elizabeth Stephan.

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The End