

# NDSU Institute for Regional Studies & University Archives

## North Dakota State University Libraries

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### Finding Aid to the Lawrence Welk Scrapbooks Collection

#### Welk, Lawrence, 1903-1992

Lawrence Welk Scrapbooks Collection, 1938-1981

ca. 20 linear ft.

Collection number: Welk Collection 5

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#### OVERVIEW

**Access:** The collection is in off-site storage. A 24-hour turn-around is required to make the records available for use at the Institute Research Room. The collection is open under the rules and regulations of the Institute.

**Provenance:** Donated by Welk Group Inc. to North Dakota State University, 1992.

**Property rights:** North Dakota State University owns the property rights to this collection.

**Copyrights:** Copyrights to this collection is held by the donor or others.

**Citation:** [Identification of item]. Lawrence Welk Scrapbooks Collection (Welk Coll. 5), Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo.

#### BIOGRAPHY

Lawrence Welk was born on March 11, 1903 in Strasburg, North Dakota to Ludwig and Christine (Schwahn) Welk. Ludwig and Christina immigrated to America from Russia, arriving in New York in 1893. They traveled by rail to Eureka, South Dakota, where they acquired a wagon and a team of oxen for their trek northward to Emmons County, North Dakota and settled on a farm near Strasburg. There were eight children in all in the Welk family. Born in the sod house still standing on the homestead were

Barbara (1895), Anna Mary (1896), Louie (1898). Agatha (1900), Lawrence (1903), Michael (1905), and Eva (1909).

Lawrence Welk received his first accordion at the age of seventeen. On March 11, 1924, his twenty-first birthday he left home and went to Aberdeen, S.D. looking for work as a musician. The only paying position he could find was with a children's band called the Jazzy Junior Five. He went to Bismarck, N.D. in hopes of finding more fulfilling engagements, but after a few weeks with little success, returned to Aberdeen where he teamed up with drummer Frank Schalk. In fall 1924 he met Chicago bandleader Lincoln Boulds at a concert in Watertown, S.D. and was hired for \$35 a week each. In September 1925, he met vaudevillian actor George T. Kelly, who persuaded Welk to join his traveling group, the Peerless Entertainers. When Kelly became too ill to perform in spring 1927, Welk enlisted two other Peerless entertainers, drummer Johnny Higgins and saxophonist Howard Kieser, to go to Bismarck. In the capital city, they added pianist Art Beal and formed Lawrence Welk and his Novelty Orchestra. They performed at dances in the region.

Later at Yankton, S.D. he persuaded the radio station owner at WNAX to audition the band. Soon they were given a long-term contract. Because of his Yankton radio program, Welk's 'biggest little band in America' became a favorite dance band throughout the Dakotas, Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota, under the names 'Hotsy Totsy Boys' and 'Honolulu Fruit Gum Orchestra.' From 1930 to 1935 he traveled with his band from Omaha to Akron, from Lake Placid to Phoenix. There was a notable eight-month stop at the Dallas Main Peak Hotel. Then came small hotels, bigger ballrooms, the resort circuit from Denver in the summer to Lake Placid in the winter. His music exposure continued to bigger hotels and in 1938 that Welk has risen to the name-band level and was playing his 'Champagne Music' with his first 'Champagne Lady' in the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. He also performed on Mutual network radio, performed at San Francisco and Los Angeles ballrooms. In 1939 the Welk orchestra started a long run at the Trianon Ballroom in Chicago which became his home base. Welk and his orchestra and became one of the big bands of the 1940s.

Lawrence Welk married Fern Renner, also of German Russian heritage April 18, 1931. She was born on Aug. 26, 1903 in St. Anthony, N.D., in St. Anthony, North Dakota. She was the thirteenth of fourteen children born to immigrant parents Mathias and Elizabeth Renner. When in training to become a nurse in Yankton, S.D. she went to one of his radio broadcasts. After the show he introduced himself. It was three years later that they were married. The family put down year-long roots in cities like Omaha, Denver, Pittsburgh and Dallas, where she raised their three young children, Shirley, Donna and Larry. For almost the first two decades of her marriage, she was essentially a single parent as Lawrence's work, of necessity, took him through many states within a few weeks. They finally settled in Chicago and bought their first home where they remained for eight years, before moving to California.

Welk moved to Los Angeles, California in 1951 where he and his orchestra performed at the Aragon Ballroom and also local television station KTLA. For almost four years Welk had Los Angeles' highest rated TV show. In July 1955 the national break came on ABC-TV. Welk at 52 had hit the big time. By 1957 "The Lawrence Welk Show" had become one of the nation's top ten TV shows and was 'Mr. Wonderful' to an estimated audience of 37 million Americans. The show was aired on ABC for sixteen years, followed by eleven years in syndication. The last show was taped in 1982. Several specials aired on

national television in 1984 and 1985, before 'The Lawrence Welk Show' began its run on public television stations across the country in October 1987 and where it still can be seen today.

After his retirement Lawrence and Fern Welk continued to live in Santa Monica, California. Lawrence Welk died there on May 17, 1992. Fern Welk died February 13, 2002 in Santa Monica, California.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT

The **Lawrence Welk Scrapbook Collection** is perhaps the single, most comprehensive collection documenting the career of Lawrence Welk from 1938 to 1981. However there is a significant gap between 1943 and 1950 and also 1954-1955. Whether scrapbooks were ever compiled the years of the gaps is not known. It is believed that Welk's sister Eva Welk compiled these early scrapbooks, possibly through 1953. From 1956 to 1981 the scrapbooks are complete. No scrapbooks were compiled after 1981. The scrapbooks from 1938 to 1953 have been photocopied and are available in a bound volume at the Institute Research Room. This was done due to the fragile condition of the originals.

The initial scrapbook begins in January 1939, although at the very end are several pages of articles from 1938 as well as a letter dated 1940. Included in this scrapbook are clippings, programs, advertisements, and several letters regarding Welk and various performances. Most of the clippings are from newspapers in Minneapolis & St. Paul, Minnesota; Milwaukee & Madison, Wisconsin; Chicago and Dallas, Texas. The 1938 clippings relate to his shows at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

The 1941 scrapbook also has a label 'D' inscribed inside the cover and consists of the typical newspaper clippings of articles, advertisements and programs related to Welk, his orchestra and various performances. Also included are some loose clippings and a number of 'newsletters' issued by the Trianon Ballroom in Chicago where Welk was a regular performer. This scrapbook is in quite fragile shape. The 1942 scrapbook continues in the same format of almost exclusively newspaper clippings from Chicago, Pittsburg as well as from Iowa. Loose in the scrapbook is a single issue of *Dance Topics* from the Trianon Ballroom.

The 1951-1953 volume is labeled 'Book #7, Early TV' on the cover. It begins with articles in Quincy, Illinois as well as Nebraska and Iowa and the Tomba Room, then moves to California, the Aragon Ballroom and his show on KTLA. There are also a number of photographic prints related to Welk in a separate booklet within the scrapbook. The 1953 scrapbook is more comprehensive in its coverage than the earlier scrapbooks and includes many articles on members of his orchestra and 'Champagne Lady' Roberta Linn.

After a gap for 1954 and 1955, the Welk scrapbooks beginning with 1956 are much larger in size and used better paper to mount the items. No doubt with the 1956 volume they were compiled by Welk's staff. They continue to consist primarily of newspaper clippings and magazine articles, and include advertisements for recordings issued and performances given in California and around the country. The scrapbook containing October 1956 items apparently was compiled by someone else within or out of the Welk organization. The items were enclosed in large plastic sheets within a scrapbook; however

everything was removed and the original scrapbook discarded due to the serious decomposition of the plastic pages.

Beginning in 1974 and for the years 1975, 1977 and 1978 there is an additional scrapbook each year that contain articles received through a clipping service. Each item includes the name of the newspaper and date it was published. As with the other scrapbooks they include articles about both Welk and his musical family.

The final scrapbook ends with December 1981 even though the Welk show was on the television until 1982. Most of the articles are from a clipping service and the arrangement is a bit more haphazard than the earlier scrapbooks with many articles folded over each other.

## **BOX LIST**

### **Box      Contents**

1/1      Finding aid, and Historical information

#### **Scrapbook Series**

1	1938-1939 (1940)
2	1941
3	1942
4	1951 (February) – 1953 (February)
5	1953
6	1956 (January-September)
7	1956 (October)
8	1956 (October-December)
9	1957 (January-September)
10	1957 (May) – 1958 (July)
11	1958 (January) – 1959 (August)
12	1959 (August) – 1960 (July)
13	1960 (October) – 1962
14	1963
15	1964
16	1965
17	1966
18	1967
19	1968
20	1969
21	1970
22	1971
23	1972

- 24 1972 (April –December)
- 25 1972 (December) – 1973
- 26 1973
- 27 1974
- 28 1974 (Clipping service)
- 29 1975
- 30 1975 (Clipping service)
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- 32 1977
- 33 1977 (Clipping service)
- 34 1978
- 35 1978 (Clipping service)
- 36 1979
- 37 1979-1980
- 38 1980-1981