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Preliminary Finding Aid to the Lawrence Welk Photograph Collection

Lawrence Welk Photograph Collection

photographic prints

Collection number: Welk Photograph Collection 2

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OVERVIEW

Access: The collection is open under the rules and regulations of the Institute.

Provenance: Donated by various donors, 1993- [ongoing].

Property rights: The Institute for Regional Studies owns the property rights to this collection.

Copyrights: Copyrights to items in this collection are held by the creator or is unknown.

Citation: Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo (item number)

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 Photograph Collection** is a dynamic and expanding collection. Thus far it encompasses photographs of Lawrence Welk, his family and the Lawrence Welk band members and performers. It includes photographs on two Welk related sites: Escondido, California; and Strasburg, N.D. The collection also contains photographs of events attended by Lawrence Welk as well as awards, honors and tributes to or for Lawrence Welk. The photographs are in both black and white and color. They are of varying sizes and formats. All images have come from private donors; no photographs were part of the initial Welk Family donation.

Because it is a dynamic collection, in order to better facilitate the researcher, the present series are somewhat general and may change with the future growth of the collection. Efforts have been made, however, to organize the collection with this in mind. Thus, series and subseries are provided but no attempt has been made to itemize individual photographs.

The **Awards, Honors and Tributes Series** includes several general images of Welk being honored by various groups. The NDSU Honorary Doctorate documents his attendance at NDSU in May 1965 when he received an honorary doctorate degree during commencement.

Under the **Welk Orchestra and Performers Series**, the Group subseries includes dancing partners and photographs of band members taken with Lawrence Welk. The files are organized alphabetically by name of the performer. Many of the snapshots pertaining to Norma Zimmer have been taken from the Norma Zimmer newsletter and include portraits of Norma Zimmer by herself as well as with family and friends.

The **Escondido, California Series** contains images from the Lawrence Welk Country Club Village. All are either color postcards or snapshots of the village.

The **Events Series** includes images from the Midwestern Governors Conference held in Bismarck, N.D. in 1972 which Lawrence and Fern Welk attended. There is also a series of snapshots documenting the formal announcement of the donation of the Welk Collection to North Dakota State University in June 1992. The event was held at the NDSU Library.

The **Welk Family Series** includes images of Fern Welk, the Welk family, Lawrence Welk's parents and sibling in the Ludwig Welk file.

In the **Orchestra and Band Performances Series**, the Performances and tours subseries includes advertisements. There are also snapshots of performances by the Welk orchestra at Bismarck, N.D. and at the Corn Palace in Mitchell, S.D.

The **Strasburg, N.D. Series** contains scenes of the Welk homestead, a sign in the town advertising it as the home of Welk, and snapshots of the dedication of the Welk homestead near Strasburg, N.D. in June 1992.

In the **Lawrence Welk Stills and Portraits Series**, the Groups subseries does not include persons who

are members of his “musical (band) family.” These are in the Band Members Series under the Group subseries. Nor do they include Lawrence Welk with any of his family members (see the Family Series). Lawrence Welk is in some of the photos in the Escondido, California Series.

The **Topical Series** includes a small number of prints taken from the early Welk scrapbooks of the 1940s and early 1950s due to the poor condition of the original scrapbooks. They document primarily images from his pre-television career.

BOX AND FOLDER LIST

Box/Folder	Content
1/1	Finding aid, and Historical information
	Awards, Honors and Tributes Series
A-General	General
A-No77	NDSU Honorary Doctorate, 1965
	Welk Orchestra and Performers Series
B-Group	Groups (includes dancing partners and photos of band members taken with LW)
B-Al27	Aldridges
B-An22	Anaconi
B-Ca77	Castle, JoAnn
B-Cu37	Cuesta, Henry
B-Du62	Duncan, Arthur
B-En34	English, Ralna
B-Fa77	Farrell, Gail
B-Fe36	Feeney, Joe
B-Fl67	Floren, Myron
B-Gr43	Griffiths, Sandi
B-Im34	Imel, Jack
B-Ke86	Kesner, Dick
B-Kl34	Klein, Johnny
B-Le66	Lennon Sisters
B-Me79	Metgzer, Mary Lou
N-Ts47	Ralston, Bob
B-Ro23	Roberts, Jim
B-R034	Rockwell, Rocky
B-Wa47	Walton, Jane
B-Zi55	Zimmer, Norma
B-Unidentified	Unidentified
	Escondido, California Series
C-Es26	Lawrence Welk Country Club Village, Escondido, California

C-Sa36 Santa Monica, California.

Events Series

E-Mi28 Midwestern Governors Conference, Bismarck, N.D. 1972
E-Pu24 Public Announcement of Lawrence Welk Donation from Eva Welk, June 1992

Welk Family Series

F-Fe66 Fern Welk
F-La86 Lawrence Welk family
F-Lu28 Ludwig Welk family
F-Si24 Siblings

Orchestras and Performances Series

O-Bi85 Bismarck, N.D. parade and performance, Sept. 1965
O-Ho56 Honolulu Fruit Gum Orchestra
O-No77 Hotsy Totsy Boys
O-Mi57 Mitchell, S.D. performance at Corn Palace, Sept. 1963
O-Po73 Posed orchestra group photographs
O-Pe36 Performances and tours (Advertisements)

Strasburg, North Dakota Series

S-Ho57 Homestead dedication, Strasburg, N.D., June 1992
S-St72 Strasburg, North Dakota

Lawrence Welk Stills and Portraits Series

W-Ac26 with Accordion
W-BI22 Black and white prints
W-Co46 Color prints
W-Go43 Golf
W-Gr86 Groups

Topical Series

T-Sc72 Scrapbook prints removed from early Welk scrapbooks