A "Wunnerful" Man

Growing up in a large and hard-working family that farmed near Strasburg, Lawrence Welk dared to leave the security of the farm for a risky career in music. At the time, he had no inkling of the astounding success he would attain.

Lawrence Welk, the great bandleader from North Dakota, does not now live in a nursing home, as has sometimes been reported in the press. Instead, his new residence is in an apartment near his office in Escondido, California.

That is the word from Welk's niece, Evelyn Schwab, who lives on a farm close to Strasburg, North Dakota, with her husband, Larry. Welk still remains active and happy, she reports. The popular entertainer, who was 82 in March, no longer is the leader of his band which garnered the national spotlight from the 1940s until the present. That leadership has been turned over to Welk's colleague and good friend, Myron Floren. Yet Welk retains a strong interest in the band's career, following it with great pride.

And proud he should be! Lawrence Welk, the farm boy from the small town of Strasburg, became one of the nation's top television entertainers. He and his champagne music-makers developed a flavor of music that was bouncy, buoyant, and fun. For that, the world loved him. It still does.

It was interesting to reminisce about that spectacular career with Welk's relatives in Strasburg, the Schwabs.

What was it like, for instance, for Evelyn to grow up having such a famous uncle? How did Welk begin his rise to acclaim?

The questions bring warm smiles to Larry and Evelyn's faces.

"We were very proud of Lawrence. And he was very proud of all of the Welks," said Evelyn.

She well recalls the great excitement she felt when he would return home to Strasburg. "It was a thrill when he came back to the farm. We always had a special dinner. That was a big thing. My dad seemed to be the happiest when Lawrence was home," said Evelyn, beaming.

Her father, Mike, was Lawrence's brother, and was the last person to live on the Welk family farm just a few miles northwest of Strasburg.

Partly because Evelyn and Larry own the Welk family homestead along with Larry's brother, Jim, the Schwabs have kept in contact with many of Lawrence Welk's fans.

"During the summer, people
Welk in the 1960s: he overcame enormous shyness of youth to become engaging TV personality.
LEFT PHOTO: Evelyn and Larry Schwab in their attractive kitchen, looking at photographs of her famous uncle. The Schwabs live on a beautiful farm northwest of Strasburg. RIGHT PHOTO: Lawrence and Fern (who was raised in Mandan, North Dakota) with their children, Shirley (at right), Donna, and Larry, Jr. Photo taken about 1945.

come from all over the country to see the farm and take pictures,” said Larry.

Because one man from New York had had such a pleasant visit with Evelyn’s father several years ago, the New Yorker always telephones Evelyn on her birthday to extend his greetings and inquire about the Welk family.

Another person from Illinois usually writes twice a month, and a 102-year-old woman from Bismarck regularly writes, too. There are many others who like to keep in touch. They are all attracted to the Welk family's graciousness.

Lawrence Welk's climb to fame was not meteoric. Nor was it easy. When reading about his life as a young man, one is struck by his perseverance. There were hundreds of obstacles for him to overcome. Many disappointments lay ahead. Yet he had a belief in himself, and it eventually propelled him to stardom.

For the young musician, those early years were mighty tough. Lawrence had to first convince himself that he could earn a livelihood from music. Then he had to convince his parents. Ludwig and Christina (Schwanh) Welk had emigrated as children to Russia from Alsace-Lorraine, and when they were adults, from Russia to Dakota Territory. They had bitterly experienced the troubles of the world, knew firsthand its precariousness, and wanted security and comfort for all of their children. The fertile land around Strasburg seemed to them a godsend. Ludwig, especially, wanted all of his sons to be farmers.

But Lawrence, even as a small child, had different ideas. He loved music. He thoroughly enjoyed the hours he spent practicing on his father’s old accordion and the family’s pump organ. To be sure, he had to spend even more hours working hard in the fields and in the barns, but, from an early age, music had left its mark on him.

He persuaded his father to buy a $400 accordion in exchange for four years of farm work. Then he started to play at weddings, barn dances, name days, celebrations, any occasion that could be enlivened by his exuberant polkas. His first performance was in Strasburg. Sometime later he journeyed to Ipswich, South Dakota, a distance
TOP PHOTO: Some of the Welk family at church in Mitchell, South Dakota, in 1960s: (l. to r.) John Welk, Larry Schwab, Mike Welk, Ted Lennon (father of singers, the Lennon Sisters), Anna Mary Mattern (sister of John, Mike, and Lawrence), Lawrence Welk, Evelyn Schwab, Dianne Welk, (next woman is unidentified), priest from Mitchell (unidentified), Myra Mattern Collete, Joe Feeney (singer with Welk’s band for many years), Ernie Collete, (next man is unidentified).

BOTTOM PHOTO, LEFT: Welk with his grandniece, Laura Schwab, at her graduation at Strasburg High School in 1976.

BOTTOM PHOTO, RIGHT: Welk dancing in Strasburg with Sister Mary Miles, whose father was his cousin.
Old Welk Homestead

TOP PHOTO: Located northwest of Strasburg, the homestead was started by Ludwig and Christina Welk, German immigrants from Russia. The house was made of sod bricks (about 18 inches thick), and then covered with wood siding. The walls are still in excellent condition. At left of house is outside stairway, the only way to get to the boys’ bedroom. Lawrence’s brother, Mike, was the last person to live in the house; he stayed there on the farm after his wife died in 1946, finally moving to Strasburg in 1966.

BOTTOM PHOTO: The summer kitchen, about 30 feet from the main house, was baking and cooking center.
TOP PHOTO, LEFT: When Lawrence was a boy, he frequently played his accordion in the barn, especially after his brothers and sisters got tired of listening to him when he practiced in the house.

TOP PHOTO, RIGHT: The boys’ bedroom as it appears today.

BOTTOM PHOTO: Kitchen in the main house was scene of busy, happy activity. Lawrence’s mother, Christina, grew bright red geraniums, which thrived in pots setting on the wide, sunny window sills.
of more than 100 miles, to stay at a brother's home and play at a dance there. Then, in nearby Hague, Lawrence organized a dance for Hague's Assumption Day Festival which earned him more than $150. Lawrence's father still was not convinced.

"You only make that much once in a while," he pointed out.

It was not until Lawrence's 21st birthday that he left the farm for good. He had completed his agreed-upon obligation, and he left the morning of March 11, 1924.

The next years were rough. He traveled all over the Dakotas and the Midwest, playing in one-night stands with a dramatic and music troupe called the Peerless Entertainers. When that group flopped, he organized his own band. There were more one-night stands and plenty of insecurity until his fledgling orchestra finagled an audition to play over the radio at Station WMAX in Yankton, South Dakota. The band was a hit. Welk and the boys were given a one-week contract, which was repeatedly renewed. Their playing over the radio established their name, at least regionally, and that led to more and more requests to play at dances and at ballrooms in the Dakotas.

Lawrence finally felt financially secure enough to marry Fern Renn, a pretty nurse he had met in Yankton. Their wedding was early in the morning on April 19, 1931 in Sioux City, Iowa—early so that the band could get on the road by 10 a.m. so as to reach Wisconsin that same evening where the band had been booked to play.

Lawrence's hope for financial security was premature, however. Cancellations and the Great Depression gave the newlyweds a long and rocky road.

Welk's first attempt to get his band booked in the big hotels' ballrooms in Chicago and back East failed. He returned to Yankton, WMAX, and the dance halls of the Midwest, where he was again popularly received. It was still a
Lawrence Welk loved to come back to Strasburg: (l. to r.) John Welk, Larry and Evelyn Schwab (daughter of Mike Welk), Lawrence Welk, Dianne (daughter of Mike Welk), Anna Mary Mattern, Mike Welk, Ernie and Myra Collete of Grand Forks (Myra is a daughter of Anna Mary Mattern).

struggle, but at least no one was hungry. Then, after a few more years, Welk felt that he owed it to himself and the members of his band if he tried again to make it on the big time. It was the tag end of the 30s, the era of the big bands like Glenn Miller, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Guy Lombardo, Duke Ellington. The world wanted to forget its troubles. Dancing and happy music was the tonic for many. Welk believed that there would be a chance for him and his band, too.

Welk walked into the office of the owner of a big hotel in St. Paul, Minnesota. It just so happened that the owner was looking for a band for his new ballroom. He signed up Welk right away. The Strasburg kid was on his way.

Other hotels in Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago booked him. The Welk band was becoming better known. With the birth of their third child, Lawrence and Fern wanted to settle down in one place. Chicago was their choice. There were several big hotels in town, and the people in the surrounding states had always enjoyed Welk’s music to provide bookings for one-night stands. They lived there for 10 happy, productive years.

After playing in ballrooms on both coasts and broadcasting on the radio, Welk’s reputation rose. Then, on July 2, 1955, Welk and his champagne music-makers made their first national television broadcast over the ABC network. The show was a summer replacement, and, by the end of the season, had won a large, enthusiastic audience. Welk was given a contract for a year-round TV show on a permanent basis.

The rest is show business history. Besides his own engaging personality, Welk introduced others into the galaxy of TV stardom: Myron Floren, Alice Lon, the Lennon Sisters, Norma Zimmer, Larry Hooper. The Lawrence Welk Show every Saturday night was watched by millions.

Welk’s last broadcast in which he led his famous orchestra was at the end of 1982. The “Memories” programs of earlier broadcasts have been popular favorites; and Myron Floren, the accordion star from Webster, South Dakota, is carrying on in the grand Lawrence Welk-tradition.

Lawrence Welk’s story is something that continues to amaze and inspire. It shows what a person with determination can accomplish.