Dr. Lance Richey is writing first scholarly book on Lawrence Welk

By Carol Richey

Dr. Lance Richey, Dr. Lance Richey, is Dean, School of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Professor of Theology at St. Francis University, Fort Wayne, Ind.) It all started almost a decade ago with a $1 paperback version of Lawrence Welk’s autobiography, “Wunderful, Wunderful,” bought in a used bookstore in Hales Corners, Wis. My husband, Lance, read it once, then twice, and then read other books written by or about Lawrence. It wasn’t long before he began watching reruns of “The Lawrence Welk Show,” then buying his CDs, and soon after, show memorabilia began arriving at our door: vintage records, coffee mugs, puzzles, postcards and more. His interest in all things Lawrence quietly continued, until he was approached by a $1 paperback version of Lawrence Welk’s autobiography, “Wunderful, Wunderful,” bought in a used bookstore in Hales Corners, Wis. My husband, Lance, read it once, then twice, and then read other books written by or about Lawrence. It wasn’t long before he began watching reruns of “The Lawrence Welk Show,” then buying his CDs, and soon after, show memorabilia began arriving at our door: vintage records, coffee mugs, puzzles, postcards and more. His interest in all things Lawrence quietly continued, until he was approached by an editor at a scholarly press who had read Lance’s blog posts about Lawrence and wanted to know if he was interested in writing a book about Lawrence’s life.

Not long after, my husband was flying to Fargo to conduct research in the Lawrence Welk Collection of the NDSU Archives, and began to think seriously about writing a new biography of Lawrence. In 2016, I joined him, our two trips to North Dakota (my first), and again, we received positive feedback. We both began to think about what it would take to write a biographical book about Lawrence, and how much time and research would be required.

A biography

You might wonder, what is it that my husband does it to write a biography about Lawrence? That answer depends on the type of biography you choose to write, whether you want to write a popular work, or a scholarly one. Several popular biographies of Lawrence already exist, but no scholarly ones, and so that is what my husband has chosen to write (I am his research assistant.). He is just beginning the third chapter, with Lawrence leaving home to begin establishing his career as a musician, and for the first time, we are able to step foot into a sod house similar to the ones my immigrant ancestors built in northeastern Nebraska around the same time as Ludwig and Christina Welk had built theirs. Another treat was to meet with Lawrence’s nieces in Strasburg, Evelyn and Edna Schwab, his nephew in Bismarck, Edwin Ternes, and Allan Burke, publisher and emeritus of the Emmons County Record. While in Fargo, we were able to visit with Strasburg native Michael Miller, director of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, who has done so much to document and preserve the heritage of the German-Russians, as well as NDSU editor Suzanne Kelley, historian Tom Isen and Dean Kent Sandstrom, all of whom have provided support and guidance.

We also spent many pleasant hours with music professor Robert Groves, who shared with us his own research and knowledge of the Lawrence Welk musical family. Chapter Three, Becoming a Bandleader (1924-1931), follows Lawrence as he leaves the family farm to begin his career as a traveling musician. Much research remains to be done on these early years of his career, including searching newspaper archives in North Dakota and neighboring states for information not only on Lawrence, but earlier references to George T. Kelly and the Peerless Entertainers, whom Lawrence joined in the mid-1920s before forming his own band. We’ve read and will likely read transcripts of interviews with former band members, researcher other territory bands, as well as study the history of radio and WNAK, the Yankton radio station where Lawrence got his big break.

For me, these years will be the most familiar, as I grew up not far from Yankton, and traveled many of the same country roads as Lawrence. They also bring back special childhood memories of my own family: my paternal grandmother, whose parents ran Kruse Park (an amusement park in northeastern Nebraska, much like the ones at which Lawrence performed during his territory band days) throughout the 1920s and 30s; my maternal grandparents, who traveled to dances in order to hear Lawrence perform; and my parents and the many hours they spent (and still spend) watching “The Lawrence Welk Show.”

I look forward to helping my husband research these years, and to my small part in sharing that information with a wider audience since relatively little has been written about this period of Lawrence’s life. And yet we still have a long, long road ahead: Lawrence’s struggles throughout the Great Depression, his success and the many millions of dollars and the many hours spent (and still spent) watching “The Lawrence Welk Show.”

We will keep readers of the Emmons County Record posted on our progress.