A ribbon cutting was done to officially open up the Welk Homestead as SHSND property after all the speakers were done. Pictured in the middle is Evelyn and Edna Schwab, nieces of Lawrence Welk. District 28 Senator Robert Eberle and Secretary of State Al Jaeger are also cutting the ribbon. Others picture are various people who were integral in regards to the historical site.

State Historical Society celebrates grand opening of Welk Homestead

By Zachary Vietz

The State Historical Society of North Dakota (SHSND) celebrated the grand opening of the Lawrence Welk Homestead on July 29, 2017.

While the SHSND had initially acquired the property on July 1, 2015, repairs and other services were rendered before an event was held celebrating the property.

The event started at 10:30 a.m. with arts and craft for children. There was a musical performance put on by Harvey and Diane Schilling at 1 p.m. The speakers took the stage at 2 p.m. After the speakers, the Matt Hodel Band from Lankin played tunes reminiscent of Lawrence Welk’s own music.

Many people had something to say and people to thank when the microphone was given to those who either operated the site before it was taken over by the SHSND, had personal memories tied to it or simply knew a great deal about it. The first speaker was SHSND Director Claudia Berg, who welcomed everyone to the event. She thanked the former Pioneer Heritage, Inc. Board of Directors for developing and operating the before the SHSND acquired it.

Fr. Benny Putharayil of Sts. Peter and Paul, Strasburg, St. Mary’s in Hague and St. Michael’s, rural Linton, gave a short talk about his recent assignment to these churches

(Please see WELK on Page 2)
moved his family and emigrated from southern Russia in 1905. His grandfather, born in Russia and how they made the area into what it is today. He, like others, also shares a German-Russian heritage, how the farmstead was in bad shape. He agreed and said he would have to fund raise as they went along. The first check they received, was one for $5 from an elderly lady from the nursing home in Strasburg. "You get that in the mail from a person whose name I told was in her 90's, and you know you can get it done," he said. Satern, also the fourth generation, said he traveled to the mother of Hebron. The area, as he described it, is on the edge of 1989, he noted. Thanks to volunteers and donations, he said the homestead was repaired and put into serviceable shape. Once the farmstead was repaired, Baumstarck said they "had unspoken volunteers who came and donated their time as tour guides." People simply came to offer their services to the homestead, he said. Baumstarck shared a story of District 11 Sen. Tim Mathern coming down to help. They were putting a vinyl roof in the farm house at the time, and Mathern offered to help Baumstarck. Much like the story of the mouse and elephant crossing a bridge, and the mouse remarking that they both really shook it as they crossed, Mathern said, "Tim did most of the work." He closed by saying he had met some of the nicest people working "out here on the site" and praised them for their work. "Local people have a terrific job," said Baumstarck. "No matter what you call it, it will always be the birthplace of Lawrence Welk." Michael Miller, Director of the Friends of Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, Fargo, was the final speaker of the day. He talked about visiting Lawrence Welk's birthplace in Odessa, Ukraine, and of his mother's struggle and journey to reach the United States. Miller also talked about the Friends of Welk Homestead group, and their mission to keep the homestead thriving and growing. "We encourage all of you to join the Friends of the Welk Homestead," said Miller. "It is very important that we help preserve it so we can do additional things." The friends group helped fund some of the exhibits and banners that can be seen throughout the buildings on the property. He also gave thanks to the Pioneer Heritage group for their work before the SHSND acquired the property. He closed by mentioning there will be a new biographical exhibit of Lawrence Welk by Dr. Lance Richey published in 2019 that will recognize the roots of Germans from Russia. About 150 people turned out for the grand opening throughout the day. Many came to see the homestead and learn more about their favorite musician and television show host. The Welk Homestead appears destined to become one of the state’s most popular historic sites as it tells the story of German-Russian homesteaders and an internationally known Champaign Musicmaker.
Michael Miller, Director of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, speaks at the event.

Adam Baumstarck, former president of Pioneer Heritage, Inc. addresses the crowd.

Gary Satern, Bismarck, speaks about the restoration of the homestead. He helped get the site running as a tourist destination, starting in 1989.

Secretary of State Alvin Jaeger shares his German-Russian heritage.

Edna and Evelyn Schwab receive a panoramic photograph of the homestead where they grew up.

Interpretive banners and signs are displayed throughout the site.

The Welk house is in well kept condition. It is a sod brick house, and siding was installed sometime after it was built. Inside the entryway, the bricks are exposed.

A phonograph and two era-appropriate accordions are displayed in the Welk farm house. These are not accordions that were used by Lawrence Welk himself, but rather ones that were donated. They are similar to the ones Welk would have used.

The windmill and granary/buggy house look out over Baumgartner lake. The lake was not always this high, especially during Lawrence Welk’s time on the farm.

The summer kitchen is mainly used as the site office on the Welk Homestead. However, it has been kept up just as well as the other buildings on site.

The inside of the blacksmith shop shows an anvil and various other equipment.

Various blacksmithing tools line the wall and bench on one side of the building. All are in good condition.

Graham Hurlburt, staff assistant in Congressman Kevin Cramer’s office, reads a letter from Cramer in his absence.

Elaine Wald has been working as a part-time tour guide at the Welk Homestead site for 20 years. Wald gave tours throughout the day. She also works at the Strasburg Care Center.

At the event are Site Supervisor Brian Grove, District 28 Sen. Robert Erbele of Lehr and District 28 Rep. Jeff Magrum of Hazleton.

The SHSND put on some kids crafts in the morning, making whatever they desired. Left to right are Nicole and Haven Grove, Lanette Schmaltz and Keaton Smith.

The barn is the largest building on the property. The roof was fixed as well as a new coat of paint. Inside the barn is a banner about preserving architecture of these buildings and using native materials.

Fr. Benny Putharayil offered a prayer and blessing before the other speakers began.

Linda Roesch, resident artist, was at the homestead event to paint watercolors of the property. She also gave a demonstration to others who were interested in learning how to do water color paintings. You can find more of her work at www.sketchingspot.com.

The inside of the blacksmith shop shows an anvil and various other equipment.

The small, farmstead kitchen has a rustic appeal to it. On the floor, there is a small trap door that leads to a cellar. During particularly wet years, water would fill up the cellar. Lawrence Welk’s mother, Christina, would then attach strings to goods and lower them into the water to keep them cool and prevent spoiling.

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Harvey and Diane Schilling took to the stage at 1 p.m. and played some music before the speakers at 2 p.m.

Site Supervisor and Strasburg High School history teacher Brian Grove, left, and SHS senior student Haley Eberle manage the Welk Homestead site. They played a large part in the grand opening preparations.

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The Matt Hodek Band played a show at the Welk Homestead. Left to right are Mike Helt, Laddie and Rose Pecka, Matt Hodek, Rodney Bosh and Charlie Sunde. They have been playing since May 2004 and have been to 11 states. During the winter, they go to Arizona to play for the snowbirds. They are based out of Lankin.

The band set up stage on a trailer with a tent covering. The band featured a trombone, keyboard and accordion, among other instruments.