EXCLUSIVE! Life Story of Welk & his Music Makers

The Secret Of His Success Early Struggles Biggest Heartache His Final Triumph! What Is He Really Like? Welk's Mysterious Appeal

Norma Zimmer Roberta Linn Myron Floren Lenons Jimmy Roberts Natalie Nevins Larry Hooper Bobby Burgess Joe Feeney Jo Ann Castle Alice Lon: Bob Lido
Much has been written over the years about our musical family. The various magazines have served to chronicle the ever-changing story of the Champagne Music Makers for our many, many good friends, without whose loyalty we would not have been able to continue playing.

It always has been our goal—in personal appearances, on television and on our records—to give everyone the best possible music for dancing, for viewing and for listening. We hope we have succeeded.

Here now are recorded, in one special collector's book, many treasured and memorable accounts and pictures of the wonderful people and experiences that I have known since stepping from North Dakota into the music world so many years ago.

Until we meet again, "Keep a Song in Your Heart."

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Golfers (L-R): Roy Mann, Mobil Home Estates resident; Pete Matthews, village restaurant manager; G. C. Staugaard, resident; Welk, and R. R. Hogue, an old friend from Linton, N.D. Below: Welk and his Estates manager Bert Carter (right) show interested pair village plot plan.

Left below: Welk plays a happy tune on the upright for Mrs. Bert Carter, co-manager of Mobil Home Village. The Carters have managed this facility since Welk acquired it in 1964. It was Carter who persuaded the Dodge Motor Co. to give national sponsorship to Welk's TV show. Upon retiring from Dodge, Welk persuaded Carter to manage the Estate. Right: Lois Lamont, Welk's able secretary for 23 years. She is his right hand wherever he goes—on tour, on stage, or in his office.

**WELK**

his Aides, his Friends

It is a Welk trademark, as friends, fans and aides alike all know, to put everything he has into any enterprise he undertakes, and that goes for projects that are non-musical as well as those directly affecting his Champagne Music Makers.

It is well-documented fact how Welk directed his single-minded efforts into forging the most successful and oldest intact big band in musical annals. He did it by demanding the best efforts of everyone—most of all himself. Never did he give his fans less than the very best that every musician in his organization had to offer—and that means stamina as well as talent.

Likewise, in diversifying business holdings, he gives these his best efforts, too, and gets top performance from his executives and other aides. With Welk and his people there has always been the corps spirit—and an unstated loyalty. This loyalty has been a two-way street with his fans and friends and associates, both musical and business, and that factor, as much as any, accounts for his tremendous and ongoing success.

His longtime secretary, Lois Lamont, puts the capper on it all in her comment, "Mr. Welk is a wonderful person to work for and with. He's not easy to work for because he works hard himself and is a taskmaster. But he is a marvelous person and deserves all his success. He is so honest, so straight across the board. I'm sure that my job is one of the nicest in the country."
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Lawrence And His Fans

There's probably been less shouting and hoopla about the fantastic feats of Lawrence than any entertainer in history. If a star today makes any news at all, his publicity people blast the news everywhere—and then buy full-page ads in the entertainment trade papers, Hollywood Reporter and Variety. But only his fans know about Lawrence.

Like when he broke all records at the Aragon ballroom by playing to hundreds of thousands of standing-room-only crowds for 11 years. Then going on to top himself at the Palladium where he was such an awesome sell-out that the world-famous ballroom asked him to sign a life-long contract—a history-making offer that typically didn't make the headlines.

And then there's his TV show. When he began on national TV as a summer replacement, the odds on his being a success were comparable to a plow horse winning against Man O' War. Of course the people who made those odds were the three-Martini-at-lunch advertising men along Madison Avenue who either had never seen Lawrence Welk, or if they had, thought he was pure corn. But they soon found out that there's nothing wrong with corn if that's what the public wants—and obviously they wanted Lawrence.

From then until now, 12 years later, Lawrence has yet to listen to the advice of the "experts" if it conflicts with the demands of his fans.

Find Lawrence sitting in a restaurant and invariably he'll be talking to one or two fans who have shyly come up for his autograph only to find themselves drawn into a discussion of the show, and what they like, or don't like, about it.
He's constantly checking on the mood of his audience. In the right hand drawer of his desk in his Santa Monica office, Lawrence keeps a list of the names of each person on the show. As a fan letter comes in, it is read carefully, the name of the sender is entered on a file card, and if the person has made a favorable or unfavorable comment about anybody on the show, a mark is put beside the performer's name on that list. Lawrence checks the list frequently to see how everybody is doing. Then, at Christmas time, a number of girls use the names on the file cards to send Christmas cards. Last Christmas alone Lawrence sent out 200,000 cards to fans!

Even the hiring of Lawrence's "musical family" is most often left up to the TV viewers. A new performer must first have Lawrence's approval, but the audience gets final say. First the person appears as a guest, then if the response is extremely favorable the maestro asks him or her to return—which often leads to a permanent invitation to become one of the Music Makers.

A typical example is how he hired Bobby Burgess and Barbara Boylan. "I was already thinking of hiring another couple," says Lawrence. "I'd auditioned them and it was almost settled. Then Bobby and Barbara won the dance contest at the Aragon when they worked up a real good routine to our first hit 'Calcutta."

"A short time later Bobby called me and asked if they could show me the new routine they'd worked up to 'Yellow Bird,' our second hit. And again it was so good that I put them on the show. Then so many letters came in asking why don't they become regulars that they got the job. And the other couple was still standing by. Barbara and Bobby came in and worked so hard that they opened up the opening for themselves!"
Musical excellence: Above: Accordionist Myron Floren; Below: Cellist Charlotte Harris; Guitarists Buddy Merrill, Neil Levang.
His Secret Of Success

Lawrence is about as old-fashioned as an IBM computer; the big reason that his show has stayed on TV for the last 13 years is that he's probably more willing to experiment and change with the times than anyone. He's always had an incredible sense of what his audience wants. For instance a few years ago his advisors all argued that he shouldn't hire a second accordionist—especially one who played better than the maestro himself. "But I knew I was right," says Lawrence, and went ahead and hired Myron Floren, who's one of the most popular members of the Music Makers today.

A more recent example of Lawrence's sixth sense about entertainers is how Tanya Phelan, the bouncy new brunette singer, joined the group. Mary Lee Schafer has been the President of the Lawrence Welk Fan Club for over 10 years. Although over the years people have tried to use her to get an audition on the show, she has guarded Lawrence's privacy as effectively as she has run his fan club.

But then one day while she was at a neighbor's she heard their daughter sing—and bells rang. She just had to tell Lawrence.

"She was so timid to approach me," says Lawrence. "She's never asked me for anything like this before. She had a tape of Tanya's singing and asked if I would mind listening to it. The minute I heard her I knew she would be perfect for the show."

Larry Jr. explains his father's success in another way: "To do the thing he's doing you really have to believe in it... and he really does. It reminds me of musicians who say I'm going to play "commercially." But when they play commercially they play tongue-in-check—they're acting as if, 'I'm playing this way but I don't believe in it.' He really believes that you have to give the people what they want. I've never met anybody who has the knowledge of, or who has the feel for an audience that he does. He can go out and meet a bunch of people and communicate with them in a sincere way. The people who like him like to hear the melody of a song and that's what he gives them.

"He's a master of pacing a show. He doesn't have a lot of talk. The numbers are like two minutes and there's a lot of variety. If you don't happen to like one act there's another act coming right up behind it."

No detail is overlooked by Lawrence during the rehearsal and taping of a TV show. Each Tuesday he arrives early at the gigantic sound stage "E" on the ABC lot.

Because he wants to see exactly what the audience will see, Lawrence sits in his special office behind the stage, eyes glued to a color monitor—or live TV—and watches his people going through the acts they'll be taping later that evening. Without turning his head he'll tell someone in the room to go out in front and change this or that, or he'll go to the stage himself to suggest a change—or to compliment someone on a job well done.

Today the TV show is in a real transitional stage... the beloved Lennon Sisters are branching out on their own and leaving a gap that's going to be very difficult to fill. But Lawrence is already taking steps to make his show so interesting—and the new regulars so talented—that the audience won't miss the four Lenons quite so much.
IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Dick Dale joined the band in 1951.

Super-pianist Bob Duncan.

Jack Imel plays drums, marimba, vibes and dances.

IN HIS LIFE

Bob Lido started as violinist, now does everything.
Pianist-arranger Frank Scott is also noted composer.

Dancer Arthur Duncan is known throughout the world.
Joe Feeney has been singing since boyhood.
Steve Smith became a regular after "The Blenders" broke up.

Norma "welcomes" Lawrence.
IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Janet Lennon sings one of the group's leads, along with Diane.

Kathy Lennon, who did solo work at the Palladium, sings low harmony.

Country and Western star Lynn Anderson and guitarist Buddy Merrill.

Sandi Jensen and Salli Flynn are newest regulars.
IN HIS LIFE

Dianne Lennon calls the quartet's sound a "sister blend."

Peggy Lennon sings high harmony in the sisters' vast music repertoire.

Frank Scott accompanies popular Myren Floren.

Natalie Nevins first joined the band to replace Norma Zimmer on tours.
IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Clasy King and Bobby Burgess are one of few TV dance teams in the country.

Natalie Nevins, Bobby Burgess, Sall Flynn, Larry Hooper, Steve Smith, Sandi Jensen, Dick Dale, Joann Castle.
IN HIS LIFE

Larry Hooper sang his first song as a dare on the show in 1952.

Bob Hayvens is one of "best jazz trombonists in the U.S."

Charlotte Harris is orchestra's only woman.

Lovely Tanya Phelan.

Joan Castle's rinky tinky piano is redecorated every week.
The Business Maestro

America, land of opportunity...take a look at it! Forty-four years ago Lawrence Welk left his family's poor sod farmhouse without a penny to his name. Today he sits in his gigantic office overlooking the soft green California hills and the endless expanse of the Pacific Ocean. He owns the six-story building which houses his office on Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica, California. A complicated network of business executives, music executives, secretaries, publicity people and musicians call him "boss" and are ready to do whatever he wants whenever he wants.

His holdings in real estate are extensive; he owns a TV production company, a music publishing firm, is developing a fantastic mobile home "Country Club" Village and resort combination a few miles north of San Diego that eventually will rival the plushest resorts, and he owns pieces of other businesses completely unrelated to the entertainment field.

And Lawrence did it all the toughest way—honestly and with every scruple left in tact. He is a consummate showman whose fantastic talent for taking people and shaping them into what the audience wants and needs is now legend.

But it's not always fun to work for Lawrence. He works harder than anybody on his staff—even though he was 65 years old last March 11th. And if a person's not willing to work to the upmost of his or her capacity, then Lawrence has no room for them. He'll help anyone who wants help—career-wise or financially. "I think that if someone comes to me and their motive is to get money out of me," says Lawrence.

"that's a weak point for that person. If their motive is that they want to join me, that they want to be with me because they feel they could do a good job for me and my show, then I'm more interested in that. I think money comes to the people who do a good job.

"But for some reason or another money has never been important to me. Many years ago I was never sure if I had a dollar, 10 cents or 50 cents, and this is the same thing that happened later on when I started to do better in life. I didn't know if I had 100 dollars or 1,000." Lawrence's personal ambitions have always been for the ultimate success and happiness of himself and his employees. "My drive is not so much to be surrounded by a lot of people or admirers; my drive is that I want to do a good job...I want to come close to perfection. And it can be a recording where no one watches, or it can be one person singing a song. I like to do something exceptionally well.

When I'm really pleased with my people or myself, I'm close to heaven. And when I do something and it doesn't come off—not as good as it should have been—quite often I'm in the basement. And I like it much better when I'm close to heaven."

So Lawrence picks his people very carefully, and he's seldom wrong. While he has waved and won famous musicians for the band, often he'll hire relative unknowns. "I look for quality in my people," he says. "I used to say that if you give me quality I can add all the rest of it. If you give me any good. And I've come voice or good playing it won't do me any good. And that's come pretty close to being right throughout my life."

Seated on diving board of swimming pool at his original lodge (above), Welk chats with Mrs. R. K. Hogue of Linton, N.D. (Below) Welk visits with Mr. and Mrs. Hogue and a magazine writer in living room of his mobile home. (The Hogues were houseguests; Mr. Hogue played in Welk's golf foursome earlier in the day.)
Welk Looks at the Lennons

Perennially, the reigning favorites since joining the Champagne Music Makers on Christmas Eve, 1955, are the Lennon Sisters, Dianne, Peggy, Kathy and Janet. Literally, the girls have grown to womanhood before the very eyes of 40 million weekly viewers of the Lawrence Welk Show. Dianne was 15, Peggy 13, Kathy 11 and Janet 8 when they first appeared on television. Today, they're all wives and homemakers—and all but Kathy are mothers.

Welk credits his son, Larry, Jr., for discovering the Lennon Sisters. Larry went to St. Monica's high school in Santa Monica, California, with Dianne and had heard the group sing at school as well as in informal home "musicales" and neighborhood civic and church functions in Venice, the girls' hometown.

Larry kept insisting that his father listen to the girls, and finally found the occasion for their "audition" while Welk was convalescing from the flu. The band leader was charmed instantly, and invited them to appear on the holiday show, little dreaming what lay ahead.

That the single television performance would plop the youngsters down into a full-fledged career was unbelievable. But that's what happened, Welk called them back to sing on the New Year's Eve show which brought an avalanche of mail to the ABC-TV studios, and the "music man" signed them immediately as regulars in his musical "family".

Girls' No. 1 Fan

To Welk, Dianne, Peggy, Kathy and Janet have always been his pride and joy, as well as America's singing sweethearts. In 1960, after the girls had had five years of national television exposure, Welk commented that audiences "have watched the wonderful little Lennon Sisters grow from charming children with gifted voices into lovely young women whose vocal charms are now equalled by their maturing beauty".

Three years later he reflected, "Those Lennon Sisters! I think they're about the nicest thing that ever happened to me in this business. Completely natural, friendly, always in good spirits, they're great morale builders. And doing the show wouldn't be half as much fun without them!"

It was a big jump for the four youngsters to go from their totally family-oriented life into the hurly-burly excitement of a television studio. But from the start they were trouper and even as children were unusually poised. This, coupled with their quiet dignity, is even more apparent today. The Lennon Sisters not only are highly talented singers, in demand far in excess of their time and energy, but they are totally charming women and real warm human beings.
In the early days of their association with Welk the girls reported faithfully each week to world-famous Studio E at ABC.

In the early days of their association with Welk the girls reported faithfully each week to world-famous Studio E at ABC-TV in Hollywood, singing as happily as they did at home doing their household chores.

The routine rarely changed until January of this year, when the girls decided to branch out as entertainers. This decision necessitated their restricting their Welk Show appearances to one or two each month instead of every week. Naturally, they have mixed emotions about it all.

Says Peggy, "We don't like the idea of having to leave the show as regulars. After all, it's been a habit with us for thirteen years! It's been our life. We've made so many many friends within the organization as well as within the ABC-Television family... naturally, we'll miss working with them all.

"To go out and advance our careers isn't something we've done just by choice," Peggy continues. It's something that we've had to do because of certain obligations that we have. And, we look forward to retiring. Unless we work real hard right now we can't ever be just housewives and mothers. We hope to accomplish what we want within five years."

While permanent retirement from the entertainment world is yet in the future, the girls are obviously pleased with a more immediate and long-expected prospect. Kathy explains.

"By not doing the Welk show every week, we will have more concentrated time at home with our families. Before we worked every two days. This way, we can work, say, for ten days consecutively and then not work for maybe a week or two."

**Family Review**

Dianne, now 29, has been married to childhood sweetheart, Richard Gass, since 1960. They live only a short distance from her childhood home, along with their three "angels", Mary Estelle, 4, Dianna Isabella 3, and Thomas Joseph 22 months.

Peggy, 25, was married in May, 1963 to Dick Cathcart, lead trumpeter in the Welk band and one of the country's outstanding Dixieland musicians. They also have three "cherubs", Julianne Mary, 3 on St. Patrick's Day; Christopher Richard, who was two the last of February, and Joseph William, eight months. They live in Studio City, just over Cahuenga Pass from Hollywood.

Janet, 21, married Lee Bernhardt, an ABC-TV stage manager, in May, 1965. They have a son, William Joseph, whom his mother describes as 'seven months going on two'. "He's walking and whenever I put the phone to his mouth, he starts talking. When I take the receiver away, he stops. It's amazing," says Janet, obviously surprised by her youngster's advanced ways. "He's into everything. He simply flies around the house in his walker."

Janet and Lee met three years ago, while Lee was a cue-card boy for Mr. Welk, and their engagement was virtually announced on the show. They, too, live in Venice near the longtime family home.

Kathy, 24, was the last of the singing sisters to marry. She and Mahlon Clark at that time saxophonist in the Welk orchestra, were married on July 15, 1967. They live in Santa Monica, the community adjoining Venice.
The New Era

The new schedule for Dianne, Peggy, Kathy and Janet is broadening their scope to include more public appearances, major variety and musical shows on TV and more recording (they now sing on Mercury Records).

The girls sang on the Jerry Lewis Show and Hollywood Palace, both in December, and they're slated for a guest shot on the Dean Martin Show, as well as show dates at the Frontier Hotel, Las Vegas.

Early in January The Lennon Sisters did the pilot film for "Operation Entertainment" before it sold as a weekly hour-long series on ABC-TV. In the premiere show, aired March 22, the girls sang aboard the USS Constellation anchored in San Diego Harbor, sharing the billing with singer Vikki Carr.

In recent west coast appearances as guest stars with country singer Jimmy Dean, the girls played to standing room only crowds. Their February appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, in which they sang their first Mercury Records tune, surmounted even their own multitudinous viewing audience. As the Lennon Sisters broaden their scope, more millions of fans will see them on the screen, in live performance and on record.

Their new album "The West Coast Sound of the Lennon Sisters", just released, features, as always, Janet and Dianne singing leads, with Peggy vocalizing high harmony and Kathy low harmony. They still do standard songs, but have added to their repertoire the loveliest and liveliest melodies from the best of contemporary music.

And so the Lennon Sisters' fabulous sound will be heard by more and more millions of music-conscious citizens. It is notable that before adding contemporary music to their repertoire, the Lennon Sisters could sing over 300 songs from memory—letter and note perfect!

Welk has said their blend is the best in America. Dianne modestly calls their style a "sister" blend. "It's a secret formula. We don't read music. We just hear the harmony and sort of feel it. Dad always told us to sing with feeling."

That they do!
It never has been easy for the maestro to give up members of his musical family. In fact, Welk says that if none of his people had left the organization he would still have everyone who joined him long ago in the Dakotas.

The way Welk feels about his musical family is that the musicians belong to it. He does everything possible to save them, and when he loses good people it's "part of a heartbreak".

His philosophy over the years has been to do everything possible for his people, but to accept it gracefully if someone can do a little bit more for them. Why hold people back if they can do better some other place? he reasons.

It's like that with the Lennon Sisters. However, theirs is not a final goodbye—they'll still be doing the show once a month. Welk believes their future as entertainers is quite good. "They've been much in demand even while still with us full time," he declares.

There are good reasons why people want to make changes and leave the show, Welk points out. With the Lennon Sisters they have never wanted to make just a career of their lives. They want to build homes and have large families.

Musical Ability

"The Lennon Sisters were accepted very well on the show," Welk continues. "They had a very good image, and I doubt seriously if we have another quartet in the United States today as a blend that comes as close to perfection as do the Lennon Sisters. They've been singing such a long time together. They've their own harmonies, and if they know a song, they'll fall right into a slot with those harmonies. So, rightfully, they become popular because they have a very good quality.

"Long ago, when we used to play ball together, the girls took it so seriously that if one should strike out, they'd start crying. They were fiercely competitive in sports, but not so much about their music, though they do want it to be right."

Welk claims that the girls never were jealous of each other. If it was necessary to take someone out and give the solo to one of the others, they were always happy for the one who got the spot. All
four, however, are individual entertainers. Along with the quartet, you can give each girl a solo and she will put it over. In Welk's opinion, Janet has just a little more of a beat than the rest of the girls. He calls her a 'swinger'.

Another Welk memory is the girls' great love of family. In the days before everyone in the company got so busy and Welk had time to sit down with the Lenons at their jumbo-sized dining table, he recalls that each of the girls was always running around with one of the little ones in her arms ... not because she had to, but because she wanted to. It was wonderful to see that kind of love, Welk recalls.

While he hasn't been exposed to it much in recent years, Welk salutes Dianne, Peggy, Kathy and Janet for their sense of humor. (Later on, the Lenons have some interesting observations about Welk's sense of humor.)

**Tells On Janet**

"The first thing that happened with the Lennon Sisters which I'll always associate with them is when little Janet was only 9, (shortly after the girls joined the organisation). "The girls were doing some pre-recording and Janet started to cry," Welk says. "She was scared, you see. When it looked like we would not be able to go on with the production I put her on my lap and started to talk about playing ball again. Once I had diverted her mind to baseball, she sang her part of the song on my knee."

While Welk has tried for several years to get Mimi to follow along in her singing sisters' footsteps, it looks as if he may have to give up the idea. Mimi, now 12, has been on one or two of the Christmas shows, but she gets scared. Even if she weren't she's a little too young to bring on as a regular. Welk believes she has the best voice of all!

There was a time when Welk actually thought she could be coaxed to sing. Once when Mimi was about two, he was at the Lennon home. Each time she was asked to sing she started crying. Then, when it appeared the request was forgotten, the youngster climbed to the stair landing and started singing, "Goodnight, Ladies", which was once a theme of the Music Makers.  
(Continued on page 28.)
Girls Reminisce

Dianne, Peggy, Kathy and Janet, too, recall many warm and sentimental memories from their years with Welk. For instance, Kathy remembers a humorous incident growing out of her engagement to Mahlon Clark just last year.

Kathy recalls that everyone was offering congratulations and she telephoned Welk to tell him the news. And then, one afternoon about two weeks later, he called her to his office.

"Mr. Welk and I have been closer due to the fact that I have worked the Palladium weekends doing solo work, and quite often we'd sit and talk about things that happened at the performance," Kathy explains. "This particular afternoon when he called me in he had such a serious face. He said, "Kathy, I'd like to talk to you for a minute. This is serious. I haven't talked it over with anyone...I thought if I could talk about it with anyone, I could talk to you."

"I said all right. Then he said, 'I know that now you're engaged...and such an adult and you take things so naturally. The thing I want to talk to you about is that my wife and I are having difficulties.'

"And I said, oh gee, Mr. Welk, I'm sorry. And he took my hand, and it looked like there were real tears in his eyes, and I thought, this is just terrible...you've never heard of it...not Mr. Welk. And he said, 'We've had troubles. In fact, we're really thinking of separating.' I said again how sorry I was.

"Then he said, 'I knew I could talk to you because you have such a wonderful heart, and you girls know so much about family life and everything.' And he said, 'Since I'm so crazy about you is there a chance in my life for you now that you're engaged?'

"And then his face broke up because I was practically in tears," Kathy says. "And then I laughed. For weeks, everytime we'd see each other, he'd say, 'Are you sure there's not a chance?' And it was a big joke. I just howled. He puts you on so beautifully!"

The Welk Humor

"He has a wonderful wit", Janet interjects. "It doesn't come over the television because his show is so planned and timed that he has to do exactly what they write for him. His spontaneous wit doesn't show like it does in a concert.

"He's spontaneously funny, whereas, if he has to read a joke off the cards it doesn't come off so funny. People who see him at the concerts are really amazed at his sense of humor. All the way
through the show he pulls jokes with people. He brings them up on stage and has them direct the band, and as they're directing, he'll go over and straighten their coat or something. The people just love it.

"Or, he'll bring a lady up on stage to dance the polka with him, and as they're dancing, he'll pretend she stepped on his foot and he'll hop around. He just has a way. He really charms an audience.

**Loves People**

"Everything Mr. Welk does is for his people," says Kathy. "One wonderful thing he always does and has taught his people to do is after every show to stay and autograph for every person in that arena—until the lights are actually turned off and they're urging him to go.

"This is a unique thing. He waits for the last person to sign, even though we have busses to make and planes to catch. He stands (he doesn't sit) maybe an extra half hour or forty-five minutes and signs. The people talk to him and touch him. They think, 'Gee! They're not too good for us.' This is one of Mr. Welk's most charming points. He's very good to his audience."

"Many times after we've sung," says Dianné, "he'll come up with tears in his eyes and say, 'Girls, your blend is so beautiful. It thrills me like it did the first night I heard you sing.' This is something very sentimental.

"I remember last year we were going to sing 'O, Holy Night' on the Christmas Show, and he came to the house. Our brothers and sisters were going to sing with us so we decided to preview the number for him. He sat down and we sang, and when we finished, he could hardly speak.

"He said, 'It brings me back to my home the first night you girls ever sang for me. I was sitting just like this on the couch—only then you girls were only this big (he gestures). But it's the same beautiful harmony.' He does that every once in awhile," Peggy smiles, "and it's always very nice to hear."

Peggy furnishes this heart tugger. "It was after we'd only been on the show a couple of years. They had Mr. Welk on *This is Your Life*, and at the very end they had us come and and sing 'Mr. Wonderful', and I think that's something we'll always remember. Everytime I hear that song I think about it," she sighs.

"It was an honor to have them ask us as part of his life", Dianné adds. "We just cried. We didn't know why we were crying, but everyone else did, so we cried, too."
Dianne ("Dee-Dee"), almost 3; Peggy ("Bojie") 18 months; with friend.

At 11 Dianne already is a radiant beauty.

A serious mood for usually sunny Kathy, age 3.
Sisters photo book

Peggy, the Irish pixie, age 3.

Janet was an infant when this picture was taken. Dianne is 7, Peggy 5, and Kathy 3.

Janet, age 2, smiles for the photographer.
The younger Lennon sisters, Anne (at mike) and Mimi (right) are shown with their cousins Theresa and Katie Lennon on a Weh show.

Lennon Sisters Scrapbook

Dianne's "dolls"—Dee Dee, Tommy, Mary, in June of last year.
Peggy’s Joey at 4 months.

Look at this charmer: Peggy’s Chris.

Peggy’s Julie, 2½, has red hair, blue eyes!

This husky young man is Janet’s Bill, age 6 months.
The Champagne Ladies

Lawrence once said that the perfect Champagne Lady was a "Sweetheart to all but a sweetheart to none." She's also glamorous but wholesome, shuns headlines and short skirts as if they were the plague, is always very talented, but with other qualities of character that complement that talent.

It's a formidable combination, and in the last 30-plus years six beautiful women have had the supreme compliment of belonging to the highly exclusive club of the Champagne Ladies of Lawrence Welk.

The glamorous life of these ladies has changed radically since Lois Best was officially named the first Champagne Lady in 1937. Today the hilarious, sad and exhilarating days of the one-night stand are almost as obsolete as the big band itself.

But in past years Lawrence, his men and their girl singer have probably played "more one-night stands than anybody in the entertainment business.

The second Champagne Lady, Jayne Walton, tells about what it was like "on the road" in the 40's. "What was it like in my day?" she asks. "It was packing and traveling constantly—mostly in cars, but through the war years it was trains and buses. We would do at times four to six weeks of one-nighters. During these we would cover eight or nine states. Each night we would travel 200, 300, up to 500 miles to the next town to play a one-night stand.

"I've seen Lawrence so sick he could hardly front the band but the audience never knew it. He figured people paid hard-earned
money to see him and he was going to see it they got what they came to see!

**Maxine Grey**

When Lawrence, Fern and the boys pulled into Dallas, Texas, on a grey morning in 1934 they had no idea that within 24 hours a dramatic and permanent change would take place in the band. Unknown to Lawrence, a few miles away from the Baker Hotel where they were booked to play, a little 17-year-old New Orleans girl named Maxine Grey had her own radio program.

In their hotel room Lawrence and Fern were talking while he was idly tuning the radio. Suddenly Lawrence stopped in the middle of a sentence to listen more closely to the girl singing a popular tune. "That girl on the radio has a wonderful voice!" said Lawrence. "I want to go over there and see what she looks like in person." And off they went to the radio station.

He liked what he saw and on the spot he asked Maxine to become the band's first girl singer. "For four years we toured," says Maxine, "and I adored it. Then I got an offer to sing with Hal Kemp's band—they were very big at the time and Lawrence was just on the way up. I hated to leave him. He had started me and I knew he was going to be very big, but I couldn't turn Hal's offer down." So Maxine left, and because the famous "Champagne Music" slogan was still in the future, she never was known as the Champagne Lady.

Maxine made a big name for herself, while singing with Dave Rose for four and a half years on his national radio show, during which time she got a divorce from her husband. Then, on a pleasure trip to Hawaii she fell in love with the beautiful island and stayed to raise her boy and girl there.

Irronically, Maxine is now back with Lawrence after all these years. He wrote and asked her to help him with his Escondido "Country Club Mobile Village."

"Primarily she'll run our gift shop and act as hostess," says Lawrence. And smiling he adds, "and of course if a guest has a birthday Maxine may be there singing 'Happy Birthday', which would be quite a treat for the guests."

Maxine is very happy with the arrangement. "I'll probably be there the rest of my life," the lovely brunette says contentedly. "It's funny, I started with Lawrence and I'm ending with him... and I can't think of a better place to be."
Lois Best

When Maxine left the band, Lawrence knew that eventually he would hire another girl, but until the perfect one came along he wasn’t going to hurry. Finally in Pittsburgh he discovered the girl who would become known as the first Champagne Lady.

Lois Best was singing daily over radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh and in the evening she sang with another orchestra at a restaurant. “It was there that Lawrence came to hear me in person,” Lois recalls. “And by coincidence, he brought with him my future husband, Jules Herman. Together they sat at a table and listened. At intermission I was introduced to both, and I recall so well when Lawrence mentioned that Jules was from North Dakota. I thought, ‘For goodness sake, what a place to be from!’”

She joined the band and her life became a whirl of activity. “Shortly after meeting Lawrence my father negotiated a contract for me,” says Lois, “and I joined the band at the William Penn Hotel to become the first Champagne Lady. It was really so thrilling for me! Everything was happening at once, including the Champagne Music slogan, the first recordings by the band in New York, a movie short in New York, the writing and naming of the theme song, ‘Bubbles in the Wine,’ and hundreds of radio broadcasts from coast to coast.”

But the maestro worried about Lois on the road and made a fatherly decision. “Lawrence has always been deeply concerned with the welfare of his people,” says Lois. “For example, when I joined the orchestra he appointed two of the boys, Maynard Wilson and Jules, to be on the look-out and watch over me. We often had dinner together with Jerry Burke and others, took taxi cabs together, went to movies etc. But before too long somehow I found myself doing these things with just Jules. And the next thing I knew we were married. Needless to say we are a very happily married couple and all of these years have been just a continuation of the wonderful days with Lawrence. Never a day goes by but that we think of him, and how thrilling it is now to recall in detail those wonderful early years.”

Today the Hermans live in St. Paul, Minnesota where Jules is house bandleader at the Prom Ballroom, while Lois still sings with the orchestra. They have four lovely children and daughter Bonnie is following in her mother’s footsteps by singing professionally in commercials ranging from United Airlines to Dodge cars.

But the friendship between them and the Welks will never be forgotten. Visiting the maestro’s new home in Santa Monica last summer the great bandleader asked Jules to substitute on the show for Dick Cathcart, who was ill. After all those years they were all back together again.

And as Lois reminisces about her days as the first lady of the band, she says: “Being the first Champagne Lady made me a very happy young person, but as the years pass by I realize more and more how fortunate I am, and I shall be ever grateful to this truly outstanding man, Lawrence Welk.”

Jayne Walton

The second Champagne Lady was a diminutive brunette whom Lawrence discovered in typical fashion—over the radio. This time he was doing one-nighters in the area around Omaha, Nebraska when he heard a beautiful soprano voice coming over station WOW. By now Lawrence knew exactly what he wanted in a girl singer and wasted no time. He wired Jayne at the station and asked her to join the band.

Thus began a rewarding relationship that lasted five and a half years.

Jayne was a vivacious, talented girl whose enthusiasm never dimmed, even through the terrible conditions of the war years. Her memories are warm, and often funny. “Keeping up my formals was really a job,” says Jayne, speaking of the hundreds of miles a day they put in traveling between jobs. “I’d try to pack things that didn’t show wrinkles so badly. I recall vividly those one-night ballrooms. A great many of them had ‘outdoor ladies rooms’ and in the winter I would have to get off the bandstand, put on my snow boots and coat and stand in line out in the snow and wait my turn—and did it get cold waiting!”

“Some places had nowhere for me to dress—nor for the men to dress for that matter and I’d have to dress in the car, which is quite an experience in zero weather—or when it’s humid and sticky.

“I did all my traveling with Lawrence and I did most of the driving—Lawrence would share some of it with me but I loved to drive and he was usually so tired that I did a great deal of it.

“Lawrence was always reading the road maps trying to figure out a short cut on these trips because they were so exhausting. He got famous among the boys for planning short cuts and it seems the rest of the band usually beat us
to the next place we were to play because they didn't take Lawrence's short cuts.

"I recall a prize short cut he figured out in Wisconsin. We took back roads, gravel roads and detours to save all the mileage he had planned. I was driving, and Lawrence and two of the musicians in the car with us were asleep. As I came down this last dark country road I saw something before me that caused me to come to an abrupt stop. It seems there was a chain across the road and beyond that was a sign, 'Next ferry 7 a.m.' Lawrence didn't know this short cut he had planned called for us to be carried by ferry boat across a body of water. By then it was about 4 a.m. and we had to track back 30 miles in order to pick up the main highway to where we were playing the next night. As usual we were the last car there!"

After five and a half years Jayne sadly parted company with Lawrence because she felt it was time to go out on her own and make a name for herself. She has been singing ever since.

For the last year Jayne has lived in San Antonio, Texas. Her 15-year-old son plays in the Jefferson High School band there and is hoping to study at the Juilliard School of Music in New York after graduation.

Even today Jayne's love for show business won't let her quit. She works constantly, playing some of the plushest clubs in the city; and she still has many people ask her about the old days with Lawrence..."some of the best days of my life."

Robert Linn

Robert Linn walks into a room today and everybody stops to look. She's a beautiful woman and the only ex-Champagne Lady who is still making it very big in show business today.

ROBERTA LINN and Husband FREDDIE BELL

Born in Gravity, Iowa, Roberta's family almost immediately moved to California where they settled in Highland Park, on the outskirts of Hollywood. As soon as she could walk, she could dance. At three years old she was nabbing good parts in some of the biggest films of that time.

Lawrence discovered the vivacious brunette when she was just 17 years old—and what a break! The fame of the band had grown; they were now on local TV, and Roberta was so talented that Lawrence gave her more and more songs to do.

"Lawrence is a perfectionist who demands your very best," says Roberta. He pushes himself to a terrific pace and you have to stay up with him or drop out. And he always planned a fantastic amount of public appearances—like openings of shopping centers, etc. He has such a feeling for the people who love him, and he wants to reach them in every way possible. But in the end it was just too much for me.

The truth was that Roberta almost had a nervous breakdown. When the Welk show went on local TV it was an instant hit, and according to the audience response, Roberta was a big reason for that success. In fact she was so talented that Klaus Landsberg, who was then station-head of KTLA, asked her to do outside things.

First she dubbed all the voices on "Froste Frolics"—a type of fairy-tale on ice. Then on Tuesday night she started her own TV show. Her schedule began to get out of hand. For instance, on Tuesday she would rehearse all day, tape her show at night, get in a special waiting limousine and be rushed to the Aragon Ballroom where she would perform with Lawrence until two in the morning.

Then one day her mother came in to wake her so she could make the band rehearsal—and Roberta couldn't move. "I was scared to death," she admits now, "I actually couldn't lift my arms and legs. They rushed me to the hospital and I slept without waking for three days.

"All that time they were calling me, asking how I was, and saying how they needed me. Lawrence was very worried, but he also needed me with the band.

"On Tuesday I finally got out of bed, so filled up with antibiotics I could hardly see straight, and went to tape my own show. After that Lawrence had a public appearance planned somewhere and insisted I be there, I just couldn't make it and had to go back to the hospital."

Robert had to make a decision. "I knew eventually I had to go
Alice Lon

The search was on again. Lawrence auditioned girls from almost every state in the union. Roberta Linn had left a big gap and the maestro wasn’t going to stop short of perfection, even though his huge army of admirers was clamoring for another Champagne Lady.

At the same time and only a few miles away in Pasadena, a beautiful girl named Alice Lon was singing over the local radio station. She and her husband had arrived in California only a short time before.

Born in Kilgore, Texas, Alice came to California via Chicago where she sang on the famous Breakfast Club. The whole Lon family was musical and Alice wanted to be in show business ever since she could remember. Her mother played piano and her sister was also a singer. By the time she was ready to go to junior college she was a real professional.

Majoring in music at school, all her spare time was spent on tours of Texas, playing theatres, veterans’ hospitals, army camps, etc. It was on one of these tours that she was recommended to appear on the Breakfast Club in Chicago.

When Alice heard they were looking for a new Champagne Lady she sent her pictures and recording to Sam Lutz, Lawrence’s agent, just “by the slightest chance they might be interested.” She was flabbergasted when they called and asked if she could come down to the Aragon ballroom to perform. The crowd was wild about her and in 1955 she became the first Champagne Lady known to national TV audiences.

Alice Lon’s name became a national byword, differences started to arise between her and Lawrence. Alice had been in show business for a long time, and was not the fledgling 17-year-old singer that Lawrence had heretofore hired. While Lawrence most often picks the music his people sing, or at the least gives his stamp of approval, Alice wanted to sing some things that the bandleader just didn’t think appropriate.

They admired each other very much, but the different views about show business finally loomed too large. When Alice left to go on her own Lawrence expressed the hope that she might return to the band after a trial period away. As always, all he was concerned with was the welfare of his people—even if they weren’t working for him at the moment.

Alice never did return. She was remarried to an Air Force officer, and settled eventually in Dallas, Texas where she is still living happily today.

Norma Zimmer

Slight, blonde, forever effervescent… Norma Zimmer is one of those fantastic people who must have been born happy. When a person speaks of her, invariably their voice softens and they say admiringly, “She’s a wonderful person.”

And she’s also a marvelous singer. Even before the Music Makers, Norma was in constant demand in the fiercely competitive music circles of Hollywood. She would sing from one job to another, sometimes 15, 16 hours a day—and yet the public hadn’t heard of her.

“Actually, I was much busier before I joined Mr. Welk,” says Norma. “I belonged to a quartet called ‘The Girl Friends.’ We did about seven or eight steady shows a week—TV and radio. On records we recorded for every company behind every star. You’ve heard the pretty ‘oh’s and ah’s’ behind the solos like Bing Crosby and Sinatra and Bobby Darin… that was us. On Nat King Cole’s record of ‘Nature Boy’ I did the high obligato, and in George
Cates million seller of ‘Moon-glow’ too.”

When Lawrence chose Norma it was the first time he’d already known his Champagne Lady. He’d secretly kept his eye on the talented singer for a long while. “I did a scene with Alice Lon several years ago,” Norma says. “I came to the show to sing the part of a maid in one of the show’s production numbers. I’d already done some background work on his records, so when I came he asked if I could also sing with Alice. I never dreamed in a million years I’d be the next Champagne Lady.”

Norma officially became Champagne Lady in August 1961. “For about the first three years I did everything except the Palladium,” says Norma. “I did all of his tours and personal appearances. But I was away too much from my two boys and husband so I decided not to do that anymore. Of course I thought he would get a new Champagne Lady but he worked it out so that I could still keep doing the shows.

“He has been so marvelous to me and I’m really grateful.”

The truth is probably that Lawrence, like the rest of the Music Makers, couldn’t stand to let the warm-hearted Norma leave. She seems to give a quiet strength to the whole band, second only to the influence Lawrence himself exerts.

Norma is a devout Lutheran and she’s brought her boys up the same way. “My religion isn’t just going to church on Sunday,” she explains. “I try to live my religion everyday. If you have that base to cling to I feel it helps you through your entire life.”

The Zimmers seem a wonderfully happy family. She and her builder-husband Randy have a mobile home “resort” in La Habra, about 30 miles outside of Los Angeles, which was built, landscaped and today run by the Zimmers as more of a country club than just a mobile home park.

All four love to ski and, hardly, they own a small ski resort on Angeles Crest Highway which has a ski lift, a warming hut and a little food bar. It was through skiing that Norma first met her tall, handsome husband. “I went with my girlfriend skiing for a weekend by my home in Larsen, Idaho,” Norma reminisces. “Of course at the time I was very poor and didn’t have enough money for skis or ski clothes. But my girlfriend was an excellent skier and so she let me borrow her things. The problem was that she was about four or five inches taller than I and at least 20 pounds heavier. So I looked just terrible in these ski clothes.

“Just as I got off the bus my future husband was standing there and I felt like a Laurel and Hardy comedy. My girlfriend knew him and we visited his ski club. He tried to help me learn— I was a novice and he was in races—just beautiful. At that time I set my sights for him and I left my borrowed skis with him to bring to my home. I rushed home to improve my appearance and when he finally came to my house, he said, ‘Oh my gosh, you look terrible in ski clothes!’ And two years later they were married.

Now Norma has everything she wants. “You know we have such fun with each other on the show,” she says. “The girls and I get together occasionally, and Randy and I often see Peggy and Dick Cathcart socially. And showers—we have a lot of showers.

“At the studio all of us share a dressing room at show time. We all dress together and we roll on the floor laughing at some of the things people say and do...it’s really a lot of fun.”

In 1951 the Music Makers settled in California and started a local TV program out of the Aragon Ballroom. Suddenly everyone’s life changed. “It’s amazing for me to realize that more people see us every week on TV than I’ve played to over the entire thirty years I’ve been in the band business!” commented Lawrence. And for Roberta Lynn—followed by Alice Lon and Norma Zimmer the demands changed, but the pace remained almost as frantic. Instead of the one-nighters there were now heavy schedules of public appearances. And perfectionist Lawrence insured that each TV show was perfect by rehearsing endlessly.

Today Lawrence has reached the summit of his career, and realizing his dream, has become mellow. Champagne Lady Norma Zimmer doesn’t even travel with the band. Lawrence gave her permission to stay home with her family and hired Natalie Nevins to take her place on tours.

But no matter what the changes over the years, each of the Champagne Ladies has a deep sense of pride that they were a part of Lawrence’s Music Makers...and no matter what they have done since, each admits it was the high point of her career.
Jayne Walton became the second Champagne Lady in 1940. That's her below with Lawrence on the Merry-Go-Round.

(Upper right) At the Edison Hotel in the 40's Lawrence, Jayne and vocalist Bobby Beers celebrate the "Spirit of '76."
"No fan's too young"—at a Philadelphia Department Store, Christmas '43.
During the war Lawrence and his men spent their spare time cheering up wounded veterans. Today, many of these men are still Lawrence Welk fans.

LOWER LEFT:
Lawrence never tired of helping the war cause.

Days Of The One-Night Stands

Lawrence serenades fans between shows in Milwaukee.
Lawrence and Jayne at the famous Trianon Ballroom in Chicago, 1943.

Days Of The One-Night Stands

Birthday celebrations have always been important among the Music Makers.
Backstage at the Trianon Lawrence and Jayne go over their next number.

Despite tight schedules Lawrence stops in Beresford, S.D. to sign autographs and also entertains a faithful fan who's an invalid.
When Lawrence walked away from the Welk family's sod farmhouse, hair slicked down and shifting uncomfortably inside his ill-fitting suit, he was just 21 years old. During those years he had been sheltered in the confines of Strasburg, North Dakota with other children of Alsation (Alsace-Lorraine) and German immigrants, and even taught by German-speaking nuns from the order of the Ursulines.

Lawrence hadn't a clue how big and tough the world really was, he only knew that he would conquer it. For four years he had waited for this day, the day he would leave home and become a "traveling musician."

When he was 16 years old Lawrence wanted two things desperately—a career in music and a beautiful 400 dollar piano accordion. Already the good-looking boy had scored some small successes playing around the neighborhood dances and Saturday night get-togethers. But to really succeed he needed that accordion. All he could do was turn to his father and drive a back-breaking bargain: "I've been talking about leaving the farm to make my living in the music business," he said. "But I will promise to stay on the farm, working as hard as I can for the next four years until I'm 21 years old. What's more, during that time, I'll turn over to you every cent I make playing at parties, weddings and dances. If you'll buy me a 400 dollar piano accordion now."

To the dirt-poor family of 10, four hundred dollars was a preposterous expense. But the Welks were of a different character. If Lawrence was willing to drive such an adult bargain, his father was willing to sacrifice Lawrence's deal was accepted.

For the next few years he wore himself out. During the day he did a hefty part of the farm chores, and whenever he could take his accordion and play for some occasion he'd work on through the night. Many mornings Lawrence got up after just
going to bed. And at the end of the four years the boy had paid his father back many times over.

When Lawrence walked out of that family home his character was already set. Strangely complex for a boy who came from simple "farm folk," he chose a profession with which nobody he knew had even the slightest experience. To his people a traveling musician was as suspicious as a magician or an actor. Yet Lawrence, who was, and is, starkly conservative and devoutly Catholic never thought his choice of professions at all strange. All he knew was that he loved and adored his music.

But there was one blow he wasn't prepared to face. Out of sight of his mother's figure, waving a sad goodbye from the farmhouse porch, the young man headed for the nearest "big town" of Aberdeen, North Dakota, and immediately ran into a problem. Up to now, everything Lawrence knew was self-taught—he couldn't read a note of music. As soon as a band leader discovered this he wasn't interested in hiring Lawrence.

With only a few cents in his pocket he traveled on to a small town in South Dakota. There he was given a chance to play with an orchestra, but just as they finished and he was quietly congratulating himself that the people seemed to like him, he heard one musician say to another: "If I had to play with that accordionist I'd quit the business!" Without a single lesson in his life and isolated from other accordionists Lawrence's style was still undeveloped and yet so youthfully exuberant that the older musicians had to wince.

Lawrence was crushed. But it was then that the farm boy really grew up. For the first time Lawrence doubted himself and his music. Was this really what he wanted? Someone with lesser conviction and faith in himself might have given up; Lawrence just slowed down a little. He became hesitant when he asked for jobs—and he became more and more unsure of himself. But he refused to quit. Quit! What else could he turn to but his music?

**Lawrence Finds A Mentor**

After a misery of one-nighters with different bands the boy finally found someone who believed in him. George T. Kelly was a character steeped with show-business wisdom. One hundred percent Irish and full of banter he ran a troupe called the Peerless Entertainers. They traveled the small towns in the Midwest putting on a vaudeville show, followed afterwards by a dance. Though the troupe never made much money, George T. taught Lawrence things much more valuable. First he gave him back his self-confidence. Then he instilled in him a philosophy towards his work and his audience that today makes Lawrence uniquely great. It went like this: "Don't forget there are a lot more farmers and plain folk like you and me in the world than there are ritzy guys. Never try to be something you aren't. If the day ever comes that you make a little dough, don't go putting on airs—unless you want your old public to drop you like a hot potato."
The one-nighters and Kelly's years of experience were turning the raw farmboy into something resembling a professional. But while Lawrence learned, the troupe's finances dwindled to an all-time low. The end came in a small town in Oklahoma. At curtain time there was just one little old lady sitting alone in the immense auditorium. And as it turned out even she didn't care about the Peerless Entertainers. When they offered to refund her money she told them she owned the building.

It was then that Kelly and his wife—who'd been helping Lawrence with his English—decided to go back home to Montana for the winter. Four of the musicians and Lawrence decided to try it on their own. They talked about how great it would be to be in New Orleans for the Mardi Gras and all that winter sun, and off they went.

Driving late they decided to stay the night in Yankton, South Dakota, get up early the next morning, and head South. They stayed three years!

Recalls Lawrence, "We arrived in Yankton about four in the morning after following behind a slow snow-plow for hours, and were completely done in. We were all in favor of stopping for a few hours sleep so we checked into the Collins Hotel there and left a call for 7:30 a.m.

"The next morning I got up first and waited for the others in the coffee shop. Sitting there I heard that a new radio station, WNAX, was opening that day and the townsmen were flocking over to the Gurney Seed and Nursery Company, where it was located.

"I rushed over there. Mr. Gurney (who later became United States Senator for his state) was most cordial and seemed interested in hearing about our orchestra. I talked on and on, telling him our experiences, how much success we'd enjoyed and where we were headed.

"He suggested we might like to give a special opening day broadcast for his new station. I tried not to look too excited, accepted his proposal and eased myself out of his office, promising to have the boys back at the station in time for a 9 a.m. broadcast."

Once outside Lawrence ran like a maniac. It was a fantastic break; and at first the fellows couldn't believe their sudden change in luck. But they grabbed their instruments and practically flew to the station.

In storybook fashion they were an instant smash. Employees crowded into the sound booth to hear them; phone calls swamped the station and when Mr. Gurney asked them to stay on for a couple of days, they agreed.

Then bids for dance dates came flooding in. But still the five had their hearts set on New Orleans. So to discourage any more offers, Lawrence, who was by now the undisputed leader, countered with a ridiculously high figure for each date. And were they bowled over when their price was accepted! As Lawrence says, "We couldn't afford to leave then."

Three years later they were still playing on WNAX and the now famous local band played dance dates in the five surrounding Midwestern states.

Lawrence assumed leadership of the group as effortlessly as he had sailed through his farm...
chores at home. Not only was he aggressive career-wise, he was an excellent businessman. Too often he'd seen the mismanagement of money among other bands and vowed that his bookkeeping would be perfect. And he also cared very much what happened to his men. Though still in his twenties, the others came to Lawrence for advice and help.

Everything was wonderful. Lawrence added two more musicians. And they called themselves "America's Biggest Little Band,"—between them they could play 32 different instruments.

And then Lawrence fell in love.

**Love At First Sight**

Up to now the handsome young man had looked at girls and liked them, but he was still quite shy. The only way he could overcome his bashfulness was when he danced with girls. And he loved to dance. "When I first hired out for work a couple, two, three years before I had my own orchestra," says Lawrence, "I hired out with other people and I used to make arrangements with the boss that he let me off at least two or three times a night to dance—because I enjoyed dancing and it gave me a chance to get acquainted with girls, too."

As a "star" at WNAX and now a very eligible young man, Lawrence attracted droves of females to the station. They'd come and watch his program behind the glass enclosure, hoping that they would catch his eye. But other than at the dances Lawrence didn't have time for girls and especially for casual dating. Then one day Fern Renner came to the station with some girl friends and he fell in love at first sight.
Most always, on his Christmas show, Lawrence Welk’s own family pays a special visit, much to his and the audience’s delight. Here the maestro passes the mike to his youngest grandson, while another of Shirley’s sons waits his turn. She stands next to her mother, Fern Welk. Larry Welk, Jr. is at his mother’s right.
But Fern couldn't have been less interested in a serious romance with Lawrence. Ever since she could remember the dark, sensitive young girl wanted to be a nurse. And secretly she even had thought of studying to become a doctor. Of course such a thing was virtually unheard of at that time, but she was taking definite steps towards that end. Her time off from the hospital was spent studying medical books and planning for the time she could go on with her education.

It was only by great insistence from her friends that Fern went to the station that day. She had no interest in standing and watching a band—or the handsome bandleader. And here she was in the station, and positive that the same young man was staring at her. To show her disinterest she stared off in another direction.

Lawrence's reaction was one of complete dismay. Here was the girl of his dreams standing in front of him and she couldn't have cared less. Bashful Lawrence, who'd rarely dated in his life, found himself approaching this girl and asking her if she'd like to go out on a date with him.

Fern did go out with him, but only occasionally and with much coaxing from Lawrence. She found him attractive enough, but he just didn't figure in the practical girl's plans for the future.

Finally Lawrence took a desperate step. With some strange idea that he would be able to have her for his nurse, the love-sick young man checked into the hospital to have a piece of skin removed that had grown back after an old tonsillectomy. Although he didn't get Fern to nurse him, she was so touched by his motives that when he had recovered they started going out steadily.

For a short time they separated. Fern went off to Dallas to work in a hospital there. Then, on a trip home she stopped at Denver, where Lawrence was playing an engagement. He proposed and Fern amazed herself by accepting.

The young bandleader and Fern suited each other in many ways. Both came from strict Catholic backgrounds and were devout Catholics. They shared common moral principles: didn't smoke or drink, agreed on how they should raise children...and they loved each other very much.

For those first years Fern traveled steadily with Lawrence and the band, sharing his frustrations and heartbreaks. "We left South Dakota from 1930 to 1933," says Lawrence. "Those proved to be very lean years so we returned to Yankton, and stayed there until 1936."

The First Big Break

The Welks had their first daughter, Shirley, while Lawrence was traveling from one onetimer to the next, building up his name, but still unsure of any lasting success. But shortly after Shirley arrived, so did Lawrence's first chance at the big time. While playing some dates around St. Paul, Minnesota, he stopped in the St. Paul Hotel to ask the manager, whom he knew slightly, for an engagement. To his astonishment the man asked him when the band could start. Four weeks later, Lawrence Welk and company were playing their first prestigious date. They made a hit and the band was praised highly to the manager of the William Penn in Pittsburgh who then hired the music maker.

Beginning in 1933 the band traveled variously under the name of the "Hoity Totsy Boys," and then, "Lawrence Welk and His Honolulu Fruit Gum Band." The latter
was a typical display of the Maestro's growing showmanship and business acumen. Noting that all the important bands seemed to have sponsors, Lawrence decided they had to have one too. After a little thought he fabricated the gum company name, had a wholesaler make up little penny gums wrapped with that label, and used them as give-aways at the dances. He held countless contests—all the audience had to do was write his or her vote on the back of the gum wrapper. The gimmick almost blossomed into a legitimate gum company until another company brought legal action against Lawrence claiming that the name too closely resembled its product.

"Bubbles In The Wine"

So Lawrence and band arrived at the William Penn Hotel without a name. Immediately he held a contest to rename a song he had previously written feeling it would make a good theme. He gave it a faster tempo and picked "Bubbles in the Wine," as the perfect name, and in 1938 "Champagne Music" became the band's new name. And so it was that Lois Best, who had just joined the band, became the second girl singer with Lawrence, and his very first Champagne Lady!

"After that," continues Lawrence, "we played at the Shroeder Hotel in Milwaukee, the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago (where he also played the Aragon and Trianon Ballrooms) with plenty of one-nighters in between."

Now it was 1941, Jayne Walton had become the new Champagne Lady and the United States had entered the war. While Penn made a permanent home in Chicago with the Welk's three children (Shirley, Donna Lee and Lawrence Jr., who had just arrived), Lawrence went on a gruelling round of one-night stands to cheer up "the folks at home." And in most of the towns Lawrence and some of his people would stop at a hospital to cheer up the boys back from the war.

Jayne Walton rode with Lawrence over most of those tedious miles and she remembers it all vividly. "We talked for miles and miles," says Jayne, "and Lawrence would always dream of the day he could be a 'big-name band.' "Not that he wasn't big then for he always drew huge crowds on his bookings, but he planned and prayed to be a huge success as he is today. I've seen Lawrence so tired he could hardly pick up his accordion and play, but the audience never knew it!"
Lawrence and his Champagne Music Makers in the 1940's.
One of most popular duos of 1940's were Jayne Walton and Jack Nolan, billed as "feature singers". Like rest of Music Makers they were familiar to audiences through their wartime one-nighters and public appearances, many to entertain military personnel and to raise money for war bond subscription drives.
To make a name for himself Lawrence had to take to the road, and that meant leaving his family for long periods of time. Everybody hated it, but they tried to make the best of the situation. Fern was a wonderful mother who could completely run the household when her husband was on the road.

Larry Jr., who today is a record company executive recalls those days: "I remember Dad would work three or four months out of the year in Chicago," he says, "and then the whole family would travel with him about three months during the summer, so that we'd see him seven or eight months out of the year."

"But when we saw him we were more or less on our good behavior. And my mom wasn't afraid to use the stick on me or my two sisters. She had to be strict."

It was on a trip to California that Lawrence was offered a stint at the famous Aragon Ballroom. By then Lawrence Welk's "Champagne Music Makers" were quite well known; and the ballroom's owner, a friend of Lawrence's, complained to him how he couldn't pay enough money to hire a band with as big a name as Welk's. Lawrence saw a golden opportunity. He said they'd play for scale if they could split the ballroom's take fifty-fifty.

Everything was arranged. However Lawrence didn't know that a TV show came with the Aragon contract. For quite awhile the local TV station, KTLA, had picked up the show at the Aragon, and a few times, when the TV audience responded favorably to the bands, the station-head, Klaus Landsberg, hired them for KTLA.

When Lawrence found this out he hesitated. The Music Makers had been on TV in New York a couple of times and nothing earth-shattering had happened. Despite a very loyal following, Lawrence still thought of himself as a farmer-turned-musician, and worried constantly about his German accent—especially how it might sound to a TV audience.

But the Welk magic was there and the audience loved it—had speech, good music and all. Letters and calls poured into the station. The result was a 11 year engagement at the Aragon, with telecasts every Saturday night.

In 1955 the final break to the top came when the national Dodge dealers decided to sponsor Lawrence's "Music Makers" as a summer replacement show on nationwide TV.

If any of the experts gave the new show a thought at all it was to wonder just how big the disaster would be. Along Madison Avenue, where sponsors can make or break shows, this new show was a joke. Hollywood hardly took notice of it—just another summer replacement that would quietly slip back into the void come September.

It's now thirteen years later, Lawrence moved to prime time and has remained on the tough Saturday night spot to become one of the most consistently high rated TV shows in history. It seems Look Magazine was right when they wrote, "Only the public loves Lawrence Welk."
"I came from a family of eight children," says Lawrence. "We had four girls and four boys. I was always in the back end. And I would never say anything unless someone would push me out and ask me a question. I was very, very backward. As I grew older I liked girls, but as a youngster I was very much afraid of them.

Of all eight children only little Lawrence really fell under the spell of the "music box" his father had brought over from the old country. But still a career in music was a fantasy; his parents and all the generations before them were farmers... Lawrence would be a farmer.

Then a crisis changed the entire direction of the young boy's life. Lawrence was just 11 years old when he had an almost fatal attack of acute appendicitis. For one whole year the doctors said he had to stay home on the farm and recover his strength. He had loved music before, but now it became his whole life. Left alone most of the day Lawrence became even shier—and music became almost his sole means of communication.

By the time the year was up he knew that he had to make music his life—and he also knew he didn't want to go back to school. He told his father: "The kids who used to be in my class are now way ahead of me, and the Sisters (Ursuline nuns) will expect me to sit with "babies" half a head shorter than I am." His father readily consented, conceding that a farmer didn't really need an education after all. So in the fourth grade Lawrence stopped school.

Even today Lawrence has attacks of shyness. "Actually for the first ten years in my business I never spoke a word on the stage," says Lawrence. "I was very bashful. In fact, at home, they can't understand how I made
it in the music business, I was more timid than any of my people."

For the first two years after leaving home Lawrence was openly laughed at for his grammatical mistakes and thick accent. But that all changed when George T. Kelly took Lawrence under his wing. Mrs. Kelly took one look at the bashful, naïve boy and felt how much he suffered when the others made fun of him. So she decided to help.

In between the packing and unpacking of the Peerless Entertainers' one night stands, she would sit down with Lawrence and patiently go over an old grammar book she had. Everyday they worked together. Not only did Lawrence make a remarkable improvement, but the boy felt confident in his speech for the first time. Suddenly he wasn't the objects of jokes any longer; and significantly it was just after he parted with the Kellys that he became the leader of his first group!

The Family Man

Lawrence fell in love with Fern Renner at first sight; and part of the great happiness and continuing success of the Welk's marriage has come from their common bond of religion. They raised three wonderful children though the incredibly lean early years were filled with constant struggle and months-long separations.

Today daughters Shirley and Donna Lee are married to Doctors, and Larry Jr. is a bachelor and an executive with a record company. And now the Welks are grandparents five times over.

"I'm a little different from most of the men folk you run into," says Lawrence. "Even when we were training the children I was different. When the men folk lost their tempers—when they screamed or when they swore, or when they used language which was unfavorable it never hit me just right. And especially when they were talking that way to their own children, or to the people who worked for them.

"I always felt it was wrong mainly because I'm a great believer that hate, temper, anger—all of those things are not good for a person. I think love is much better. And even when we trained our children I never spanked them. If the children needed training I would take them, put them on my lap and explain the situation, and ask them if they'd remember it. Then I would tell them that's what we have to do in society. If they did it again we would take away some privilege, like going to the show. But we always discussed it and I never struck them."

Larry Jr. recalls, "My father always had the principle you don't get something for nothing. When I was a kid we were never given money—we had to work for it. I remember I'd get paid for shining the shoes, which I think is good. So when I went to college at Loyola I could have asked for money I suppose, but I worked for my tuition instead."

Lawrence Today

Today Fern and Lawrence are alone in a lovely new home they just built close to Santa Monica.

Perched on a cliff overlooking the Pacific, this early California ranch style house has "wrap-around" windows to take advantage of the fantastic view. "After the children were gone," says Lawrence, "we didn't know whether to move into an apartment or what. Then my son Larry Jr. found this lot and it was perfect." Lawrence then got together with the architect and they built Lawrence's dream house.

In the back is a putting green and driving range where Lawrence can practice his golf, and
there's a beautiful inside swimming pool where he takes a swim before work every morning. "Like this morning," he says. "I went out, drove a bucket of balls, then took a swim, and finally sat down and ate breakfast."

And the maestro is finding it more and more convenient to hold his business meetings in the house's spacious music room. "After a day's work," says Lawrence, "everyone will meet out at my house about seven or eight o'clock. The meeting may be to plan the next TV show, or to talk about my business affairs, but after we're through we'll go and play a game of pool." A big pool table is Lawrence's pride and joy, and before he'll permit you to leave, you have to stop and play a game or two.

Lawrence, who is a bug about watching everything on TV in order to keep up with all the other shows, has a TV set in every room. "You should see the one in Fern's bedroom," says Lawrence. "She just stretches out in bed, presses a button, and it comes out of the floor to eye level." And he beams like a child with a new toy.

But as much as he loves his home and likes to be close to work, he hopes eventually that they'll be able to spend more time in his resort in Escondido, where they have a huge mobile home overlooking the first tee of the 18-hole golf course. "When I get a little bit more time," says Lawrence, "maybe I'll get a chauffeur and go down there and stay about three or four days every week."

"If I would just be thinking about Fern and myself right now I think maybe we would already have retired. But I have such a large family and I'm speaking now of a musical family—and my listening family—I feel I can't stop."

The maestro has provided well for the people who work with him. He has a profit-sharing plan for his Music Makers—which is unheard of among bands. And he is even thinking of providing for future Music Makers.

"I want to get young folk from different parts of the nation who would come here and join a workshop and go to school here," explains Lawrence. "We would conduct contests, etc., to determine who would best benefit from such a workshop. And we might be able to create scholarships for different members. And then as soon as someone is good enough at the workshop, we will put them on the show and give them experience. Experience is the hardest thing for these youngsters to get."

Meanwhile, in keeping with his life-long career of good works, this year he accepted the National Chairmanship of the Cancer Society. "I didn't want to turn this particular offer down," says Lawrence. "Because, as you can see, the world has been so good to me and my health is still fairly good. And I thought I would be able to do this. I went to my people and asked them if they would all be willing to work a little bit harder so I could have a chance to leave here. Because of this I'll have to make a lot of trips this year, mostly up in the large cities."

Lawrence Welk's whole lifetime has been dedicated to helping the people he loves...his audience. And to him "the audience" includes the whole world...if he can't reach them through music then he will offer a helping hand in any way he can, even if it means supreme sacrifice for himself or his loved ones. He has shown that he is much more than an entertainer...a bandleader...a public figure...he represents a way of life.