

Interview with Fern Renner Welk (FW)

Conducted by Michael M. Miller (MM)

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MM: Good morning. I'm Michael Miller, the Germans from Russia Bibliographer from Fargo. I'm also on the Lawrence Welk Collection Committee at the university. It is May 21, 1994, and I'm in Branson, Missouri during the grand opening weekend of the Lawrence Welk Champagne Theater and Welk Resort Center. It's a real privilege for me to visit with Fern Renner Welk, Mrs. Lawrence Welk. We are going to have Mrs. Welk introduce herself and then we will talk a little bit about her early life back in North Dakota.

MM: Fern, when were you born?

FW: I was born on August 26, 1903.

MM: What were the names of your parents?

FW: My dad's name was Matt Renner and my mother's name was Elizabeth Anton Renner.

MM: She was an Anton?

FW: A-n-t-o-n was her last name.

MM: Right. And your parents, Fern, were they born in the old country?

FW: They were born in Russia; both my parents. They were German-Russians. They immigrated (their grandparents) under Catherine the Great, when she went back to Germany and then brought German people to resettle in Russia. My mother and dad grew up. My dad was in the Russian army for awhile. When he got out he met my mother and they were married.

MM: So they were married over there in Russia?

FW: They were married over there and they lived over there. They had - the first three children were boys and they decided they didn't want them in the Russian army, you know, when they grew up. They decided to immigrate to the United States.

MM: Fern, do you remember the year?

FW: It was in the middle of the 1890s when they immigrated and they settled in North Dakota.

MM: Where did they settle?

FW: They settled on farms about seven miles south of Mandan.

MM: Was that around the St. Anthony area?

FW: Yes, well, I grew up in St. Anthony but I was born on the ranch. My mother had a 750 acre ranch. My dad died when I was four. When he came to the United States he bought a German-English dictionary and taught himself English. He learned it very well, where he served on juries and stuff like that. He was serving on a jury in Mandan one day and they were out to lunch when he fell off the chair there. They rushed him to St. Alexius Hospital in Bismarck; he had a ruptured appendix and he got uremic poisoning and after about a week he died. I was four years old. I was always his pet.

In the mornings when Mother would get up, I would always crawl into bed with Dad and he always said, "Put some candy under the pillow, she'll be in here pretty soon." And the first thing I would do, I would go in and run my hand under the pillow and get the candy out. When he was so sick in the hospital, he asked Mother, "Is Fern missing me? What does she say?" I did and I remember seeing him in the coffin.

You know in those days the dead were laid out in the home. And I remember the house being packed with people and my aunt took me over to the coffin. She lifted me up to look in; I remember this as plain as anything. She said, "He's sleeping," and I thought, "No, he's not sleeping." In my mind I knew there was something radically wrong. So when she put me down I thought, "Gee, they were always so busy on the ranch, everybody was so busy, and my dad is gone now" and I thought, "Gee, there are so many people here, one of them might take me."

So I went up in the attic and hid and didn't tell anyone. We had screen windows stored up there; it was winter. He died on the sixth of December and I crawled behind there and fell asleep. They were looking all over and couldn't find me. Finally my sister went upstairs and searched through there and found me sleeping back there. I felt very insecure after my dad died because he was always the one who fussed over me.

Life must go on, and I can remember, I think my mother did a terrific job. She had a brilliant mind. I remember one time - my oldest brother took over; he was twenty-one when dad died. He took over, he and Mother, running the ranch and they were in Mandan at the bank. She was thinking of buying another quarter of land and they were checking it over and my brother and the banker were figuring how much everything would be.

She stood and looked at them and said that will be so much. The banker and Ambrose were just floored that she could figure it out in her head before they have figured it out on paper. My dad was the type of person - he was real easy going and very kind and he was a good farmer. I can remember when they used to, as I was growing up, talking about when there was crop failure. Lot of times I heard them say in our family that they could reap part of a harvest if they plowed deeper where they get more moisture. My dad always did that and he would lend grain after crop failures the next year. He would just give so many bushels and told them if they got a crop then they could give it back.

Well, when he died, Mother had trouble. They said, "You have nothing signed." But he was that type of a man and the family always said that the priest at the funeral of my dad said, "If this man didn't go to heaven, there is no reason for us to." He was kind, understanding, and helpful, but Mother was the business woman. When he was alive he handled everything, but afterwards she was always financially independent. She knew how to manage her money.

My second oldest brother was a pharmacist. He got his degree from the University of Minnesota. He had his own pharmacy in Strasburg, North Dakota. He served his apprenticeship in one of the pharmacies in

Richardton. Then he got his own. I had a very happy childhood. The ranch was big. We had a nice creek running through; there was rolling hills, and I was adventurous.

When I was about seven or eight, I would go down to the creek and go along the creek and inspect everything. There were wild chokecherries, wild raspberries, wild gooseberries and all that and I would gorge myself with all that. I would walk around and investigate. I was curious about everything. My uncle was guardian over us; my dad's brother, Joe Renner. He had also immigrated, he and his wife, and they lived about two miles from us. They had their ranch. And when I got ready and wanted to go away to school he said, "Elizabeth, why do you want to send her away to school? She should stay here and get married like the rest of them." You know that's how it was; they didn't think of going to school.

And I can still see my mother, she said, "Joe, if she wants an education, she can have an education. Too bad we're so dumb," she said. I went and my oldest brother would have loved to have gone away to school and when I would come home, he would say, "Oh, how I wish I was in your shoes. I would love to." But he educated himself quite a bit and my mother never learned English.

MM: She never learned English?

FW: No, she never learned English. You know that area was all German Russians, *most* of them. We did have Norwegian people and Hungarian people, but they were the minority. And you know the German people they were kind of clannish. Maybe it's kind of understandable, because they came from an area over there where they were all kind of congregated in one area, and here was somebody who was like them, you know, the culture I think.

So, however, my brothers and sisters all spoke English, you know. I didn't speak a word of English until I started school. On the ranch we started in public school. I can remember that I started in a public school and in a few months they promoted me from the first to the second grade because I caught on. But children do. They learn.

That's why I'm against bilingual education from the standpoint of putting Spanish books in the schools or Italian or you name it. I feel that you should learn the language of the country and establish yourself in that and then I believe in other languages. I think it's nice to be bilingual. Now I took German, real German when I was in high school.

MM: Where was this at Fern?

FW: This was in Fargo. It was with the Presentation Nuns, and I don't think they are there anymore. From there I went to Sacred Heart in Yankton and then into nursing school there.

MM: Was that at Mt. Marty?

FW: No, Mt. Marty was the college. It was Sacred Heart Hospital. It was just down maybe quarter block or so on the bluff of the Missouri River. It was a beautiful setting. Our doctors that we had there, the best doctor, a surgeon, Dr. Trerewaller said one time, "You know girls, you don't know how lucky you are to be training in a smaller hospital."

We got into every department. We got training in X-ray, and all areas, surgery. Of course, all the hospitals have their nurses go into surgery, but it was more extensive. He was a doctor who had his

training in Chicago and had taken his internship at Mercy Hospital in Chicago and he said that "the nurses there don't get the extensive training that you girls are getting here." So we felt very fortunate.

MM: Going back to the farm and back south of Mandan – of course, you were four years old when your dad died. That was in 1907 and then your mother had to raise the children.

FW: Eight [children]. I never heard her say, "Oh my, I'm a widow and am left with eight children." She was the type of person – she took her shoulder to the wheel and forged ahead. She had a terrific mind and the boys, of course, the three oldest ones were boys. And when Ambrose got married and moved away then Nick, however, went away to school. He is the pharmacist, you know. Course he has died since. Then Charlie ran the ranch and Charlie died in the 1918 flu, you know, when that flu was so bad. But she was very successful; she was careful when she borrowed money to pay off the mortgages and whatever like I told you and she was very successful.

MM: Did she talk much about the old country back in Russia?

FW: No, they were too busy. Well, she may have to the older ones, but see there was Ambrose, Nick, Charlie, Rose, Bridget, John, then I. I was second youngest and then Joe. In my family they are all dead except Bridget in Bismarck. She has a terrible hearing problem. I can't talk to her long distance. Apparently she doesn't have a hearing aid and it's terribly hard to talk to her.

MM: Did your ma with eight children – of course, she had a lot of responsibilities, did everybody have their chores?

FW: Oh, yes, and they were all geared to this. They had over the years grown up with it and they all knew what to do and what their jobs were. What amazed me, in those years the girls married around eighteen, you know. I remember my sister, Rose, she was eighteen, and Bridget, she was a little bit older but she wasn't quite nineteen either when she married. See in those days, in that culture, they picked the husbands for you.

They were all good friends and Pete Helbling was going with this girl and Charlie was a handsome man. He was a go-getter. Everything he touched turned to gold. He was so successful. He ran Mother's farm, you know, but he died early at the age of twenty-nine. He had three children and one on the way when he died. But he had a car; he had a tractor. You know those tractors were very expensive even in those days, according to what I hear. He had everything; his wife always had nice clothes. He believed in being well-dressed.

MM: Now your mother with eight children, did she have to make some of her own clothes?

FW: Oh, yah, they made most of the clothes. My oldest sister was a good seamstress. Of course, they bought the shirts for the men and stuff like that. But during the depression my mother helped out. I know Nick had the drug store in Strasburg and she said, "Nick, take your money out of that bank." She said, "That bank is not going to last, that is going to go under." He said, "Mother, I can't take my money out, I'm doing business with these people here." She said, "Well, we'll see."

She didn't lose a penny during the depression. She told him to put it in that certain bank. But he didn't. He lost everything he had in that bank. Well, she refinanced him then but that's what I mean she had a terrific head on her. Like I say, when my dad died, there were debts on the land and everything and

when she asked for the grain back that he had loaned, they said you haven't anything signed and they didn't give her the grain back. Well, she didn't do anything about it. What could she do?

But in no time she was financially independent. That woman's head worked all the time and she could work out the problems in her mind and with the three older boys and I always think of it. I remember Lawrence and I were married, and we came home. She was a well-dressed woman. She believed in it. I had beautiful clothes as I was growing up and she was fastidious, you might say. If she took her dress off, she wouldn't just hang it up. It had to be ironed; every wrinkle is out before it was hung up again. When she got dressed, everything had to lay just perfectly, you know, the collar everything had to lay just perfectly.

She walked real straight, real fast and very straight and I remember Charlie used to say, "Oh, I'm so proud of Mother, she's the best dressed woman in church on Sunday." The way she carried herself, but I never heard her criticize anyone, I think she was too busy running the family or anything. I never heard her say, "Here I am with eight children." She just forged ahead.

Now with the older girls, I'm sure she mentioned some of the stuff about Russia but we were too little and were gone all the time. I can remember Rose, my older sister, and after she was married and I went out for a visit for a week or two and she said, "You know, Mother said when Dad got out of the army she met him in church and he said, "Mother was a good looking woman, big brown eyes, beautiful skin, and black hair, and Mother said that Dad asked somebody, "Who's that woman with the big brown eyes?" So he got introduced to her and they started going with one another and got married.

MM: This was in Russia?

FW: Yah, this was in Russia.

MM: Did your ma have to do, of course, a lot of cooking on the farm?

FW: Oh yes!

MM: Did she have the girls learn to cook?

FW: The girls grew up – by the time Rose was sixteen she could cook for *anybody*, and in *any* amount and *anything*. She was an *excellent* cook. They didn't have measuring cups [for] measuring flour or measuring spoons, they did it by hand. The coal stoves they had – I can still see them stick their hand in [to] see if it's warm enough to put the cake in, you know.

MM: Imagine that.

FW: And the cakes! You never saw cakes like Rose baked. They were like a feather. When she stirred up the cakes she'd be talking and walking back and forth throwing a handful of this in and a handful of that.

The threshers in the fall used to just wait to come to our house, because they said the food was the best food and the cakes were so marvelous. I can remember my brother John, he was four years younger than I was, and we used to play together outside. So Rose had made all these cakes for the threshers in the morning for lunch. And they were frosted and they were beautiful and she had them sitting on the piano in the dining room; the dining room had the piano. And John and I had caught this little baby rabbit and we had it in our hand and we went in the house and we went on in there. We saw these cakes and we took the paw of the rabbit on one of the chocolate cakes and trimmed, decorated it all the

way around. So now we didn't say anything to anyone and we went out. So when they served lunch to the threshers, John and I kind of hung around to see who gets the rabbit cake.

MM: Did you learn to do some cooking too?

FW: I learned after the girls were gone and married. My mother was an excellent cook and she knew exactly how to fix anything. She could fix bread and pies and cakes and stuff and Rose was like that too. Now Bridget was a good cook too but not quite as good as Rose. They used to say that Rose made the best coffee in the area. And it was interesting, you know, people on a ranch or a farm, they grow up learning anything.

MM: Did they make some of those German noodles?

FW: Oh, I loved them. The potato noodles? I made them until a few years ago. Shirley learned to make them, you know. Bob Fredricks liked them so well that when they were in Washington DC. and Bob was interning – after they were first married he interned there.

We had these FBI friends – John Malone was the head of the FBI here in LA. He would come out and I used to play bridge with he and his wife Margaret. I would have them out on Saturday nights at the house or I'd be down at their place. Well, he was transferred and made a director to J. Edgar Hoover. There was an opening in New York City and J. Edgar Hoover said, "John, if you keep the job in New York City as head of the FBI, you'll still remain my director." So he took it and every time Lawrence would go to New York to play John was always there.

We went to Europe in 1956, Lawrence and I, and John made arrangements all over Europe for security. They took us around and showed the places when we got in there. And when we got home, John Malone was there and went on the plane, took Lawrence and I off the plane ahead of anyone so we could go through customs. We went through customs ahead of everybody and there was no delay. He was a wonderful man; he was a good Catholic man – Margaret too. He died here about three or four years ago, he had cancer. He had been moved from New York to Carbondale, Pennsylvania, and I was in touch with them until John died. Margaret never wanted to fly; she sort of had a phobia about airplanes. She wouldn't want to step on them.

One time they were on a plane and something was wrong, Margaret took her rosary out and started to pray and a fellow behind her said, "Keep right on doing what you're doing."

MM: Was religion important to the life of the Renners?

FW: Oh, yes. My dad was a very religious man. My mother, I can only think of her as like a fireball. She was here, she was there, she was all over and everything was accomplished beautifully. Dad was the relaxed quiet type, always thinking what to do for someone, helping out. Financially we were independent in no time and remained that way all the way through.

MM: So the church was very important?

FW: The church was the number one thing, and we children would go and board at the sisters' school.

MM: Oh, you did?

FW: Yah, I mean for our religion. For two years we had to learn the religion. You don't learn too much in two years. I realized that later on, but that was important. They wanted the children – so they all went there. I can remember, you know how cold it gets in North Dakota, they had the outside bathroom facilities. There was no toilets then and how we'd stand in line freezing to death -

MM: To go to the outhouse?

FW: Ah, huh. My mother – we moved to St. Anthony later on when she retired and turned the ranch over to Charlie. There was John, myself, and Joe and John would go and help out at the ranch like harvest time or plowing and so on and so forth. It was a hard life but I can remember Charlie lived with us for two years. That was, you know, always when the boys got married they brought the wife in for two years. They lived with you and then they branched out on their own.

When they made arrangements for Charlie's wedding, Charlie and Mother you know, the parents would get together and they went out to this girl's family. So the next day I was present and my ears were always open and I remember Mother saying, "They can't cook." We were such excellent cooks. She said, "You could have killed someone with that cake they served last night." So when Charlie was married and I remember she was stirring something on the stove. I remember I walked in and went over to her and looked at her and I said, "You know, Mother said you folks can't cook. She said you could have killed someone with the cake you served when you were out there." You know kids how they talk.

MM: How old were you then?

FW: Oh, I guess about five or six.

MM: Oh, you remembered what you overhead?

FW: Oh, yah, I can remember. Like I told you, I remember my dad in the coffin at age four.

She was a very nice and very sweet person and she said, "I know, we can't cook like you people can." She learned and she became just as good a cook. You know the family taught her very nicely. I remember after Charlie died, she came in for Mass on Sundays. She always came by the house. She was walking back and forth outside and she was crying. I think Mother went out and she said, "Oh, how I would love to be in this family."

Then she married a fellow from north of Mandan, I think, he was a German-Russian too. But he was mean to her. See, she had these children and he'd get drunk and he'd beat up on the kids and Ambrose had to look after them. He said, "I'll have to take the children, you can't have that." Ambrose went over and she cried and she said, "If you take my children, you have to take me too." Ambrose said, "I just couldn't break this woman's heart." I guess he talked to the man about it. Well, when the children were gone once – he used to beat her but I think they had a nice life after that. He resented those children.

MM: Interesting.

FW: Yah.

MM: In the Renner home back on the ranch -

FW: About twenty years ago Lawrence and I went up to visit; Lawrence was playing a concert in Aberdeen, and one in Grand Forks, you know. I stayed with the family there. Shirley and Bob were up there. See,

Bob's home is in Jamestown, North Dakota. Bob and Shirley had gone there and Laura was three years old. They had taken her along. So they came up and Bob met Lawrence's relatives and my relatives. So Bob and Shirley and I drove out to the ranch. I wanted to and we drove past the public school that I had attended.

So we drove on out there and of course, it had been sold. And the house and - I don't know why they let the house go to pot, because it was still with stone. Bob couldn't get over it, you know, where it was exposed. There were plates about like that. He said, "Look at that construction." I guess my dad and the boys built it. I don't know why they got these stones and afterwards the walls were this thick. It was nice and cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Then it was stuccoed and then it was in white. It wasn't painted, but I don't know what you call it.

MM: How many rooms were there in the house, with eight children?

FW: Rooms, well, they had two bedrooms and then sleeping arrangements in the attic. And in those days they put a couple of double beds in there and the boys had the one, you know, a bedroom on that side. Mother and the girls had the other bedroom and I can remember I slept in the middle between Rose and Bridget. I was so glad when Rose got married, I said, "At least I won't be hemmed in."

MM: Did your mother have a chance to do much reading? Did they subscribe to any newspapers?

FW: Yah. Mother couldn't read English, but the Benedictine priests at (Dickinson?) -

MM: Richardton?

FW: Richardton. They published a paper.

MM: *The North Dakota Herold.*

FW: Yah. She got that in German and I can remember she would have it spread out all over the table and she was reading all this in German. I could still see her with it spread out. But she couldn't read or speak English. My dad could serve on juries and everything. He educated himself on it.

MM: Your ma had you go off to school, so she was very supportive of your going to school after high school.

FW: Very, very. She was pro-education and so was the family. Like I told you, my oldest brother, he said, "I'd have given everything under the sun if I could have gone to school." But the girls didn't get to go away. They went to public grade school and that was the extent.

MM: Were you the only one who graduated from high school?

FW: Yah. I can remember there was a girl that I palled around with who lived across the street in St. Anthony.

MM: What was her name?

FW: Her last name was Helbling. I can't remember her first name. I remember her folks; she was adopted by the Helblings across the street. They were distant relatives of Rose's husband. I was outside one day and she came over from the street crying and she said, "You know my parents are forcing me into the convent. When I'm eighteen, I'm going to leave. I don't want to be a nun." They put her in the convent in Milwaukee – what is it, the Franciscan nuns?

MM: Yes.

FW: Yah, they put her in there. So when I was in nurses training in Yankton at Sacred Heart, one day I was coming in the front door and a nun was coming down the steps and I looked at her and I thought, "Gee she looks familiar." But they were the Benedictine's, you know. I went on in then, then she came home for a visit after she became a nun and loved it. She asked and I think she came over and she asked Mother where I was and Mother said, "Well, she's in nurse's training at Sacred Heart in Yankton. She said, "I saw her then, she was coming in and I was going out." Too bad we didn't speak.

MM: Did you see her later then?

FW: No, I never saw her again because I was down there and graduated. I got a hospital position in Dallas, Texas. I was gone a year and then Lawrence and I got married.

MM: Back on the farm, was there any time for play?

FW: I was playing all the time and especially in the summertime. I would look like an Indian; I was so brown because you know you didn't wear anything on your head. I was out all day long, you know, as a kid. When Charlie had their first child they used to want me to rock the cradle and I was outside playing and pretty soon I'd get a call to come in and rock the cradle. So I went in and rocked the cradle and the kid would be quiet. So I'd rock it a while and then I would give it a good push so it wouldn't cry and then I'd run out. And I'd go way down the creek so that I wouldn't have to take care of the kid.

MM: What kind of games did you play?

FW: John was older and Joe was younger and we'd play hopscotch or tag or, you know, lot of that kind of stuff. Cards – I don't know what you call it.

MM: Those years when you were growing – of course you learned English in school, so you'd speak with the other children in English or did you talk German?

FW: German kids, German; English kids, English. There were Bohemians that lived next to the ranch and their girl and I went to public school. And sometimes I would go and stay overnight with her or she would come down and we spoke English. I can remember one time, I think I was probably seven – it was Joe and I, the younger brother. We went out and it was hilly and we walked along this ridge of hills. And there was a home and it was vacant and it was not locked and of course no one locked when they left. They had rhubarb growing there and it was just this high. We loved rhubarb pie.

Break in dialogue

FW: She made rhubarb pie. Then I got pangs of conscience. We stole. That was stealing although there was nobody there; it was going to waste you know. You know how rhubarb gets hard. It goes so long then you can't use it. I went to take a nap that afternoon and I couldn't sleep. I had such pangs of conscience. I stole – a terrible thing to steal.

So I went to my sister Rose and I told her, I think I was crying and I told her, "You know, we stole this. We stole and it's bothering me something terrible." She said, "You know what you did wasn't right but don't worry about it. It would have spoiled. There is nobody living there, nobody. It would have spoiled." She helped me, you know, and I got over it. But that was a good lesson that taught you. You don't take anything that doesn't belong to you, because you're conscience is going to bother you so bad. Of course,

Mother was such a stickler for anything like that. She used to say "One unjust penny will eat ten just ones."

We had to be honest with it. I remember one time, we loved sweet corn. I remember hearing them talk. I guess Nick was around sixteen or seventeen and he was coming along on the road and those neighbors had that sweet corn for the family dinner. He brought it home and Mother asked where he had gotten the corn and he told her what he did. She said, "You take that corn and you go back and give it to the people you got it from. You picked it unjustly from them." He did and I guess he was terribly embarrassed but they understood. I guess having families of their own it was no big deal.

MM: But what you learned at home, those kinds of things like sincerity and honesty carried through your life.

FW: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. This is why, I think, the people nowadays – so many people are lax in teaching their children. If they take something, they have to take it back. Now I was strict in that sense with my kids all the time. Donna has an adopted girl, Christine, and when she was in kindergarten, they lived at that time in Palos Verdes in Los Angeles.

One night when they picked up Christine, she had a little red car. She didn't notice it right away, but on the way home she saw Christine in the back seat and she said, "Christine, where did you get that red car?" Christine said, "I took it, so and so girl had it and we played with it and I took it." Donna gave her a lecture and told her it was stealing. She said, "Tomorrow when we go back to kindergarten, you take that car and you go to the girl and apologize for taking her little car." She made her take it back. When Christine brought it back the girl said, "Oh, thank you for bringing me my car." Christine said, "I stole it" and started crying, but she made them take it back and that is the best thing to do.

MM: And that, of course, brought on by you what you had learned when you were young.

FW: It is absolutely essential, I feel, that parents impress on the kids and should they take things – kids take things in stores because they don't sometimes. They are so young yet and haven't learned. But if you make them take it back and apologize, it gets to them and it's a good lesson. I would advocate it. I've seen it time and time again.

MM: Going back to the home. We talked about some games and things. You mentioned earlier that there was a piano in the home.

FW: Yah.

MM: Who played that piano?

FW: Practically all my family was musical. I was the only one [who played the piano] and I loved music and dancing. I was the first one who opened the dance hall and the last one out and I would dance every dance. Joe and Bridget were not as good at playing. They had an organ that you pumped and they played that too. Rose was a little bit better on it but Nick and John could play in any band, not that they could read music by heart, you know. They would learn the numbers and they were very good. And I remember "Beautiful Ohio" came out and John would play it and he would shade it. He would go soft and then go in strong and he played for dances. Nick played the violin and also played for dances. He could play piano and violin, John could play piano and organ. Nick could play organ too.

MM: Who taught them to play?

- FW:** They taught themselves and they did beautifully. My Uncle Joe, my father's brother, he was good on the organ too. I remember when I was first married and Lawrence and I came home, we visited Uncle Joe, he lived around St. Anthony too. Uncle Joe sat down at the organ and he played "Deutschland." Over at Champagne Towers we had a boy who worked there and he was from Germany. He went home at one time and when he came back, I talked German a little bit with him and I said, "Deutschland." Do you know what that means?
- MM:** Yes, yes.
- FW:** He said, "That doesn't go over very well anymore."
- MM:** No, not at all. We can say it here in Branson but not too many places. Going to dances when you were a teenager, at what age did you start going?
- FW:** Before Mother would allow me to. There was a hall called Foresters. That was kiddie corner across the street and they had dances in there.
- MM:** How old were you then?
- FW:** I was maybe fifteen, sixteen. I loved to dance. I went over there across the street and one time they had a dance. Mother said, "You are not going. I don't want you to go to that." I said, "Mother, all my friends are going. I love to dance, couldn't I go, why couldn't I go?" She said, "You are too young to go to those public dances." I said, "There is nothing wrong in dancing." She went to visit across the street with the Helblings. Then I went over. Of course, Mother came home, she never stayed long. She came in and I'm not there. So she goes over and I was having a ball. I always danced every dance. I was dancing and I look up and Mother was sitting there on the bench. I finished the dance and I went over. She said, "We are going home. Let's go." And I went. She scolded me. I said, "I told you, you can't go and we are going home."
- MM:** She was more upset because you disobeyed.
- FW:** Yes. Yes, those things were good. They impressed upon you that you've got to be honest and truthful and -
- MM:** And listen to your elders.
- FW:** Yah, be honest and truthful and have discipline. While at the moment you disapproved but later on in life it left a mark on you.
- MM:** But then you went to dances later on?
- FW:** Oh, I went back to maybe the next dance that she allowed me.
- MM:** Who played at the dances?
- FW:** Well, when Nick was home, he would be one of the musicians. They would have piano, violin, and drums, you know. John was so good on the piano and organ, people called him McDonald at the time, because there was a musician somewhere in the nation that was really great and they used to call him McDonald. John died at school in Chicago. He died about the middle of January one time when he was writing exams and they sent us the papers that he was writing exams when he died.

I missed him so much because I loved the way he played. At dances when John would come he always wanted to dance with me and I would dance and he would say to me, "Now Fern, I don't want you to be dancing with so and so. It's not the right type of fellow." I didn't know what these boys were like but he looked after me and it was nice to have somebody like John look after me.

MM: Did you learn to dance on your own?

FW: Oh, I learned from little on up. You know in North Dakota there was nothing else to do but to dance.

MM: So there was a lot of dancing going on?

FW: Oh, yah. There was a lot of dancing going on.

MM: So you had some music in the house too?

FW: Oh, yah, we had music in the house and I was kind of particular with whom I danced with. I wouldn't dance with just anybody. I remember one time somebody told me that in the pool hall the fellows were begging, "I give you ten dollars if can get a dance with her." Somebody told me. If I thought they weren't the right type, I wouldn't dance with them either. Like I say, I danced every dance, loved it, every minute of it.

MM: Did your folks have a record player in the house?

FW: Yah, one of those big ones where the music came out, you know?

MM: Yes, yes. What kind of music did you hear?

FW: The music of the time, I don't remember exactly.

MM: Did you have any favorite partners that you danced with?

FW: Oh yes, I don't remember their names but there were a lot of them; I scheduled the dances and all the way through I was booked.

MM: So you really were a good dancer, huh?

FW: And when John was over there, then I'd cancel some of them when John wanted to dance with me because he was my brother and John and I were very close. He got what they called black diphtheria in Chicago and died there. That is hemorrhagic, you know; it hemorrhages in the throat, I learned later on. He died from it in Cook County Hospital. Oh, how I missed him. His coffin was sealed shut because of the disease he died of.

MM: That dancing, does that carry through your whole life?

FW: All my life. I loved it. Lawrence loved to dance.

MM: Did you do some dancing in Yankton too?

FW: Oh, if Lawrence's show was on we danced or music we would dance together. In Escondido, too, we danced. They had what they call Sunday Swing down there, one Sunday a month, and sometimes we'd go down. I remember people would be there and women would come over to the table because Dad or

Lawrence danced with women on the show. They would come over and they would say, "Pardon me, can I dance with your husband?" And I would say, "I'm sorry, this is my husband's and my time out."

You know on the show that's different, but this is my husband's and my night out. I could be sitting there and all these people dancing and every so often somebody would tap him and I would dance with their husband and they couldn't dance and would walk all over my feet.

MM: That's true. I can see that. Now let's go back again to the dance scene in St. Anthony. Did you go into any other neighboring towns and dance?

FW: Well, once in a great while. There was a family that had a pool hall and they lived right next to us. They had their basement finished off, you know, like a recreation room and sometimes we would congregate there and dance.

MM: Have some music, live music?

FW: Well, no, records.

MM: What about down in Yankton, when you got down to Yankton to nursing school. Did you dance down there?

FW: Never went a lot. You know, today it's different. They wouldn't let the nurses out past nine o'clock and one time there was this show, I can't think of the name of it now. It was a real nice Disney show, a real nice show and Dr. Abts, he was a darling from the hospital. He went to the superintendent and said, "I would like Frances (his wife) and I - we would like to take the nurses to the show. It's a real nice show." And she said, "Mind your business." The heads of the hospital were European and our girls who were Benedictine nuns were entirely different. But they had that European culture and you couldn't get past that.

So when I met Lawrence in church one Sunday, he said, "Can I take you to lunch?" I said, "Well, if we take somebody else along, I didn't know. Well, my mother had always said, "Musicians are the lowliest of the lowly. They have no roots; they are here today and tomorrow they are there. They don't pay their bills." So I was leery although he seemed sincere but I thought I had better take it easy, you know. So we took somebody, the drummer, and one of the other girls and had a very nice afternoon and went to this movie and had lunch. Somehow I got in a little past nine o'clock and the door was locked.

One of the nuns who was real fond of me was in charge of one of the floors. She came out and had the dustpan and she was doing the steps, you know, between the door where you go in and the steps you go up. I knocked down the thing. She came over and said, "I see nothing." In other words she never reported me because she liked me. I was always thankful. She walked straight up and into the hall so that if one of the other nuns would come along and catch me, you know, she wouldn't be involved.

MM: Were they quite strict if they did get caught?

FW: Oh, yes, the head of the hospital, the one who said to the doctor to mind his own business. She was impossible. Whenever somebody didn't act right or something like that they would always say, "like Sister so and so." The doctors didn't like her at all and they had her in the office there.

MM: How long were you in nursing training down there?

FW: Three years. You have to be there three years from the day you enter. If you miss some of those days with sickness, you make them up. There was an attack of impetigo and some of the nurses got it. Well, my mind always worked, you know, "What if I get it?" I don't want to miss, you know. Yet, impetigo is catching. You shouldn't go on the floor to patients. So I had the plan on what I would do if I got this. So I got an attack, see this white spot here?

MM: Yes.

FW: The minute it started I was in the operating room at the time. Alcohol neutralizes phenol and phenol is very strong. We used to put instruments into phenol that we used, you know, to sterilize them for quick use. So I got a sponge and dipped into the alcohol and one in the phenol and I put the phenol over the impetigo here, and immediately neutralized it with the alcohol. It killed it and I didn't give it to anyone. But I had it all formulated, the plan, what I would do so that way I didn't lose any time and didn't have to make it up.

MM: Did you have many sick days?

FW: I had, I think maybe a couple or whatever it was. I entered in September for the school year and then three days from that day I was due to be released, and I would be an RN if I graduated. I graduated in June.

MM: So, Fern, you went to nine months of school?

FW: Yah, we had school for nine months.

MM: So you would go home for the summer?

FW: No, no. You have to have three full years on the floor of nursing. I don't know what they have now. You know things have changed. They were very strict on that.

MM: So when did you get back home to the farm?

FW: I didn't get back home to the farm. By that time Mother lived in St. Anthony. I got home after two years.

MM: You were down there two full years?

FW: Two full years before I ever got home.

MM: Did you ever get homesick?

FW: I didn't have time. Look, you were on the floor at seven o'clock in the morning and it was about seven at night when you got off. It wasn't an eight hour thing like it was now. We worked. If we have real sick patients and couldn't get an RN, they put three of us girls and invariably they would call on us. There was Molly Schmidt, myself, and Loretta Langen. They put us on at night. You worked all day and then you went and stayed with that patient. They put a little cot in there and if the patient slept you could lay on the cot and sleep. I was perhaps overly conscientious. I didn't sleep well and was alert as to any move that the patient made to make sure everything was okay.

One day I was fixing a hypo for the patient and one of the doctors was in there and my hand was shaking like that. I was worn down, you know, working twelve hours and then being there. He said, "Miss Renner, what is the matter with you?" I said, "Doctor, I am so tired." I said, "I've been with this patient

now for a few days and working on the floor at seven in the morning." He said, "This shouldn't be. I am going to talk to the superintendent about it." And he was right doing that, but the heads of the hospital being European, they were slave drivers, I guess.

MM: I forgot to ask you, Fern, back in St. Anthony, what was Christmas like?

FW: There was no such thing as buying gifts for each one. What they did, they bought lots of goodies, nuts, candy, cookies, and they baked cookies too, cakes, and bought oranges and apples and all that stuff. Then on Christmas Day they would take a plate and pile it this high with all these goodies. But there was no such thing as gifts. This was your gift, these goodies, and we looked forward to it.

MM: Was there a Midnight Mass?

FW: I don't think – maybe there was. We would go by sled and go into day Mass.

MM: Did the Santa Claus come out to your house?

FW: No Santa Claus.

MM: No angels either?

FW: No.

MM: Not in St. Anthony either?

FW: I think they were so busy on the ranch, they didn't have time for all that and later on when they retired they didn't do it either.

MM: What about Easter, anything special at Easter time?

FW: There was talk about the Easter bunny and Easter eggs. They dyed a bunch of eggs, you know. You had Easter eggs. And we looked forward to it. I think we were just as thrilled about the little stuff. Kids get too much stuff nowadays. I wonder if they appreciate it all.

MM: Other celebrations, including weddings, must have been pretty big.

FW: Oh, yes, they were. When my brother Charlie got married and Rose – The wedding was at our house and we had it in our barn. We had a lot of granaries but in the barn, it was a beautiful big barn. Now here was a shed for the machinery, you know, so it wouldn't rust. And here the grain was all sold so it was all empty and they cleaned it up and had the dancing in there and put benches along the side for the dancing. It was a double wedding, Rose and Pete, and Charlie and Tillie.

MM: Did they serve a lot of food?

FW: Oh yah, they always had a lot of food.

MM: Did they do some butchering?

FW: Chickens, chicken soup.

MM: Did you have to clean chickens when you grew up?

FW: Yah, not until I was about eighteen before I did.

- MM:** Did they do a lot of butchering?
- FW:** Oh, yah, in the fall. We had our own smokehouse; the hams were smoked in there. It was surprising that the smoked hams kept all summer without refrigeration. I don't know how they did it.
- MM:** Did they have a summer kitchen on the farm?
- FW:** Yah, we had a summer kitchen and it was a nice one, fairly big and everything.
- MM:** What about a root cellar?
- FW:** A what?
- MM:** A root cellar?
- FW:** Oh yah, they had one of those. And I can remember they put sand down in a pile and they put the beets in the sand when they dug them up and the carrots. They all kept down there in the cold cellar.
- MM:** Did your mom do a lot of canning?
- FW:** Oh, yah and kept it down there and it kept nicely.
- MM:** Watermelon?
- FW:** Yah, they had watermelon. They had watermelon rind that they pickled and the pickles kept year round. The big thing, you know – now what do they call the pickles they keep?
- MM:** Dill?
- FW:** Yah, dill. We had our own dill, grew our own dill.
- MM:** Did you have some head cheese and some of those things too?
- FW:** Yes, nobody liked it too well so I think they only made it one time.
- MM:** But some good sausages, country smoked sausage.
- FW:** Oh, yes. It was, oh, the pork sausage was sensational. We didn't put so much garlic in. Some people put so much garlic in. You knew it was there but it wasn't outstanding. I remember before going to church on Sunday, Mother came over and said, "Fern, see if I smell from garlic." I couldn't smell garlic. I think I told Uncle Joe one time. He said, "I don't go places for people to smell me."
- MM:** Those things were real important and so you didn't get home for two years. How did you get home, with the bus?
- FW:** Train, by the train. We went by train through Aberdeen to Bismarck to Mandan, or the bus. One time I took the bus and I got to Bismarck. He shortchanged me ten dollars. He said he had collected before we got to Bismarck and he said he didn't have the ten dollars to pay me back. He said, "When we get to Bismarck I will give it to you." We got to Bismarck and stopped and I looked and he got off the bus and I thought he would go on in. I went up to the desk and I told them what had happened that he owed me ten dollars. So they checked around and they gave me ten dollars.
- MM:** That was a lot of money at that time.

- FW:** Yah, the thing of it is, I think he thought, "That is some dumb German-Russian girl and I'll make myself some money." But they gave it to me.
- MM:** How long did you stay home then?
- FW:** I think I was home just a week. Mother was so - Mother always thought I should be a nun and [thought of] a nun and a priest as the height of everything. They were very religious, my dad and my mother. Religion was the number one thing. Everything hinged on that. I didn't feel that. I told her when I got married, "Here I am marrying a musician." And they are the lowliest of lowlies in her mind. I wrote home; I was in Dallas at the hospital. I told them, "I met this young man, he's a very nice young and we will be married in April." So the letter came back, "What does he do?" That is the thing I avoided so now I have to tell them.
- I wrote and said, "He is a musician and has his own band." I tried to explain that he is from Strasburg, North Dakota. He doesn't appear to be like the average musician, you know. So the letter comes back, "Does he have more than a shirt on his back?" Because Mother said they spend all their money, they have no roots, they are here and there and don't pay their bills and this and that.
- So when I took Lawrence home for the first time (see we were married in Sioux City, Iowa) my mother was in her eighties. There was nobody there of the family, you know. We were married at five-thirty in the morning because Lawrence had to play. The band was playing the night before Lawrence took off. See in those days things were different. Five-thirty the band had played that night, you know and they were coming in to be at the five-thirty marriage. When we came out of the church in Sioux City, Iowa, they were sitting in the car sound asleep.
- MM:** So there wasn't a very big marriage.
- FW:** Well, and the priest that married us, Father Leo McCoy, we were the first couple he married, you know, he was a young priest. So we get half way down the aisle and he cries out, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. I forgot to bless the ring." So he comes on down the aisle and blesses my ring. The whole thing was a lesson.
- MM:** The last moment we talked was about your marriage and we are going to suggest that we are going to continue our conversation at a later date and talk about your life as Mrs. Lawrence Welk. In closing, I want to mention again that we are here in Branson, Missouri, for the grand opening weekend for the Lawrence Welk Theater and Resort. I think it is wonderful and we hope the memories of Lawrence and the musical family and your importance in this musical family and that of your children will create a wonderful heritage. We think it's wonderful that North Dakota State University has become a part of this in preserving that too. And your feelings, Fern, relating to the university and all this, how do you feel about all this?
- FW:** Well, I think it's great and I feel that the right place for the memorabilia is North Dakota State University. Lawrence always was so proud North Dakota and pro the university, so I feel it is the proper place to have it.
- MM:** So with your help and Shirley, Donna, and Larry. Now we need to look at the next generation to help us so that this continues and we can collect materials and document it because his legacy is important, not only for now, but for the future.

FW: Right.

MM: His love of music and his faith is very important.

FW: And his character and he had the highest standards, I think, of any man I ever encountered. He wouldn't compromise principal. He stood for what was right and many times it might have caused friction but it didn't make any difference. And if he gave you his word, he lived up to it. I remember one time, he promised somebody something and he said something to me about it. I said, "Do we have to do that?" He said, "Fern, I gave my word, you wouldn't want me to break my word; when I give my word, I live up to it."

MM: Maybe he learned that a little bit from home too?

FW: Oh, yah, I had a hunch he did. I didn't know his people well enough because we were up there for a few days once or twice. You can't learn too much about people from that. I liked them, they were nice homey people, you know. They had a deep religion, you know. Those people were not educated but to a degree they had learned, you know, from experience a lot of things and they lived up to what was right and just.

MM: And of course, that carried through in Lawrence's life and your life at home. I think both yourself as Fern Renner and your husband as Lawrence Welk, I think you are wonderful examples of a son and a daughter of these German-Russian immigrants that had a hard life on these prairies. It wasn't easy.

FW: That's right.

MM: They went through the depression. They came to America and didn't speak the English language. They struggled and made it and especially in the case of the Renner family they saw to it. And in the case of your mother, who had eight children, and saw to it that you as one of the youngest went on. [She] made sure that you needed a career too and needed to be educated so you could read and write and help others.

FW: That's what I always thought being that my mother was pro-education. It reflected on the family, you know, compared to the people around there. Not many of them went away to school, you know. But I can remember when I was a little girl, maybe about twelve or thirteen. We went to my Uncle Pete and his wife in Bismarck and I used to go over there once in awhile and visit them, maybe for a week or so. Certain functions that they attended, they took me along and I would get in there and I was just thrilled to pieces at the speakers at these functions. I would just sit there and drink in every word. I'd get home and dream about these things like that and I thought, "I have to get away from here. There is nothing but prairie here and you can't learn anything." I wanted to be like some of those people.

MM: We are going to close now and continue at a later date. It is May 21, 1994, and it was a real privilege to visit with Fern Renner Welk. Thank you very much and we'll see you in July?

FW: Right.

MM: Good.