

Interview with Fern Renner Welk (FW)

Conducted by Michael M. Miller

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MM: It is July 27, 1994, and I'm in Santa Monica, California, visiting with Fern Renner Welk. We will continue our conversation that we had at Branson, Missouri, in May of 1994. This is Michael Miller from North Dakota State University in Fargo and I'm in the home of Fern Renner Welk. Let's continue our conversation and talk about the time when you first met Lawrence, where you were, and how it all happened.

FW: Well, I tell you, he was broadcasting. He had a radio show over WNAX, Yankton and some of the nurses on their day off went down there and they came home and they came in my room and said, "Oh, you should see that orchestra leader. He's so handsome and he has such a good band." I laughed and to myself I thought, "Isn't that just like a bunch of silly girls," you know. So I turned to them and I was laughing and I said, "If that's the case, on my day off I'll go down and meet him," kidding, of course.

And on my day off some of the other girls said, "Let's go down and see." So there were about five of us and we went on down and of course, it was all glass, like it is for television, you know, and he was having a half hour show. So we sat out in the audience and he kept on looking out and smiling and I thought, "He thinks we are running after him," you know. And I wouldn't smile back. You know I thought, "I'm not a pick up." So we got up, he put his accordion down when he finished, ran out, and he came over to *me*. He said, "Where are you girls from?" And I thought - in my heart I thought, "None of your business." I thought he was being fresh you know. I said, "You'd be surprised." He said, "I saw you at a dance." I said, "No, you didn't. Our work is such that we don't get out at night for dances." He said, "What do you girls do?" I said, "We're nurses at the hospital." He said, "That's what accounts for you girls being so nice." So he said, "How about me taking you to dinner?" I said, "Well, I'll go if you take one of the other girls along."

I didn't want to be alone, you know, not with a man I don't know. My mother had always said, "Orchestra, entertainers are the lowest of people in caliber." She said, "They have no roots and they don't act like real people should." So this was in my mind. So he said, "Okay." So I asked one of the other girls if she wants to go along with us to dinner. She said, "Yes," so he asked the drummer to go with us too. We had a very nice time, and I kept – and I thought, "Gee, for an entertainer -." I kept on thinking more and more, "What a fine person he is," you know. So we talked and he told me he was from Strasburg, North Dakota. I said, "That's where my brother has a drugstore!" my brother Nick. He knew him, of course, and we talked a little, and I thought, "That's what accounts for him being so nice, you know, coming from a small place like that."

The more he talked, the more I liked him. So we went on out for dinner and when he took me back he said he'd like to see me some more and I said, "Well, we're pretty busy as nurses and I don't know just

how I could arrange it," and left it at that. The girls used to see him drive up to the hospital and under the arch, we had a round driveway, he'd come up in hopes of seeing me, I guess. So some of the girls on their day off went down to his broadcast and he came out and recognized them, and he said, "What happened to my girl? Bring my girl down."

Another time I ran on to him at church on Sunday and he said, "How about me taking you to lunch and maybe to a movie?" And we did; we went to lunch and went to a movie and he was such a perfect gentlemen all the time. I had graduated then and he was going to Lake Placid, New York and I had a hospital position in Dallas, Texas. I was going to go to Dallas in no time. So when he took me home he said, "Would you like to have a picture of me?" I said, "It doesn't make any difference, if you have it in the car, fine." I said, "We aren't going to see each other again; you're going to Lake Placid, New York, and I'm going to Dallas." He said, "Don't say that."

So I barely got to Dallas and there was a letter from him. I told him where I was going to work, St. Paul's Hospital. I roomed with two registered nurses and I was laughing and I told them I was going to write back and pretend I don't know what he wants to ask me. But he said he didn't like to ask it in writing. So I wrote back and pretended to be real dumb. "I don't know what it could be that you couldn't ask me in writing," laughing all the way through while I was doing that. Anyway later on, he kept on writing every so often and in November I was going home for a visit. I hadn't been home for a long time.

MM: What year was this, Fern?

FW: That must have been (we were married in 1931) that must have been in 1929. So anyway, I had a layover in Denver. I checked into the Brown Palace Hotel. The next morning I called him. I had his address but not the phone number and the phone number was not in his name. He roomed with two bachelor boys in a private home. So I called the Chamber of Commerce to see if they had the number and they had it. I got the number and then I called him. He said, "Where are you at?" I said, "I'm at the Brown Palace Hotel. I'm on my way home and had a layover." He said, "I'll be right down and take you to breakfast."

He came right down and took me to breakfast, and he said, "Would you like to drive to up the mountains?" I said, "Yes." We drove up there, Lookout Mountain, you know, and all around there and on the way down he said, "Fern, do you drink or smoke?" I said, "Oh, no, I don't drink and I don't smoke." He said, "I would never marry a girl who drinks or smokes." Then we talked on and then he proposed to me. I said, "You know something," I said, "I like music very much, I love to dance," I said, "but I don't know anything about it." You should have a wife who could be a help to you in music." He said, "I don't want any wife to tell me what I should do in music. I wouldn't marry any woman who was a musician."

So we talked on and we were engaged. He went and got me a ring then. I think I was there two or three days and then I went on. I was engaged then. When I got back there were, of course, letters there from him. My family was not happy [with] somebody in the entertainment business because they had experienced local entertainers, what they were like, not solid, some of them didn't pay their bills and whatever. I wrote home and told them that I was engaged, I didn't tell them the first time. They wrote back and said, "What does he do?" I didn't write what he did. So I wrote home and had to tell them now and the answer came back, "Does he have more than a shirt on his back?" I wrote and explained that

he's very solid, that he's originally from Strasburg, North Dakota, and of German descent; this was important to them, that you married a German.

Anyway, everything seemed to fall into place then. This was, I guess, in the fall in November and we were married April 18, 1931. Shirley was born in 1932 on April 29th. When Shirley was a little girl and heard us talk and she would say when people were around, "My mother and daddy were married on April 18, and I was born on April 29." See it sounded like two weeks later but it was a year and two weeks later. I used to have a lot of explaining to do when she said things. She was precocious. She was such a smart child from little on up. When she was two years old - maybe two years and a few months, she could recite poems like, "Tell me not, in mournful numbers, life is but an empty dream, for the soul is that slumbers, and things are not what they seem."

You know, I used to always play with her and recite poems and all this and that and later on I read that the more time you devote to your child when it's little, I think it's up to three years of age, they learn faster than when they get older, and it develops their brain. I had experienced that in Shirley. I had the time; we lived in hotels. So we ate in the hotel, I had an electric plate that I cooked cream of wheat and oatmeal for Shirley and then, of course, the little cans of baby food for her.

MM: Now after you married Lawrence in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1931, you were still in Dallas at that time?

FW: Yah, Lawrence headquartered out of Dallas at that time. He played the Baker Hotel and the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth and then also would go out for dances. In the spring he would go back to the Middle West and play the territory he had known. In the wintertime it was in Dallas in the hotel.

MM: So after you got married, the first year you were in Dallas?

FW: Well, we headquartered - Shirley was, I think, three years old, when we moved from Dallas.

MM: From 1931 to 1934, then?

FW: Yah.

MM: Then in 1934 - but you remember the times in the summer, when you came back to the Midwest?

FW: Yah.

MM: Tell me a little about that, what kind of orchestra did he have then?

FW: Oh, he always got the best of musicians. I remember he got a saxophone player; he was just wonderful. His name was Charlie Koffee and he was so good that Lawrence thought he was too good for his band. When Paul Whiteman came through the territory (he played Sioux City, Iowa) and Tom Archer had a chain of ballrooms: Sioux City, Iowa, Omaha, and there was one in Missouri, and he used to bring all the big bands on the circuit.

He went to hear Paul Whiteman and he said, "I've got a saxophone player, he's way too good for me in the territory band." He said, "Could you use him?" and Paul said, "No, I've got all my musicians that I need." He couldn't use another one. Lawrence was always generous and he always was anxious for his boys if they had a chance to better themselves, as you know. You heard him when he was territory band, didn't you?

Well, I heard him later on, yes. He was pushing the boys. Well, on his TV shows he was always pushing the talent instead of himself. He never pushed himself. That was always very nice, I thought. He was never jealous of other orchestra leaders or other acts or talent. In the entertainment business there's a lot of jealousy, you know. We'd go down to the Ambassador. We'd hear big bands from the East, you know, Jan Garbor, and lot of the big bands, Guy Lombardo. And he would say (we'd be dancing you know) - he'd say, "Aren't they wonderful?"

Oh, he was in heaven to hear somebody who was real good. There was a colored player, a band, he was very famous, I can't think of it. Lawrence and I went to hear them when they played the hotel and he was so wonderful. He had a saxophone player that was sensational and Lawrence hired him for records while he was there in the afternoon or morning. He could come and sit in and help Lawrence make records.

And then he would travel: Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota - five states: Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa.

MM: So you would travel with him?

FW: No. We headquartered out of Omaha at one point. We were in Yankton for awhile and Omaha. They said they would take Lawrence into the union if he headquartered out of there and so he changed. We had a home about two miles out of the city limits, two acres. We were growing grapes, and he had chickens and stuff. We were getting the chickens that they raise there on wires and very close scientifically and we had my nephew take care of the grapes and chickens and all this and that. And you know, Donna is just like her father, she wants to give everything away. Lawrence would meet somebody and get real friendly.

Then he would say, "Why don't you drive by our place and pick up a couple of fryers." Finally I said, "This is not a good business for us." You know, he gives away all the profit. Donna is the same way, so we discontinued having the fryers because we were only supplying them to other people. We would have some too. Lawrence loved creamed chicken, the way I made it. Everybody who ever had it just loved it. I remember the time we went home to visit his folks, he said, "Fern, you've got to cook creamed chicken for them while you're there." So I did. But you use real cream. It's real high in cholesterol. I haven't made it for a long time. But my family just loved it, the grandchildren also. Shirley made some a year ago and she gave me some. She had me over for dinner and gave me some. I froze it and gradually took a piece out and a little gravy.

MM: Now then when you went back to the Midwest, how long did you live in Omaha?

FW: I think we were only there two years, three years at the most. He wanted to branch out and he went on to the St. Paul Hotel in Minnesota and played. From there he went to the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh. He had airtime every night for thirty minutes and the band got quite famous. So we lived in Pittsburgh two or three years and we sold our place in Omaha then.

Then our next home was in Chicago and he played the Trianon and the Aragon, mostly the Trianon. He had airtime there and he got quite popular nationwide because the broadcast carried him nationwide. We played the Edgewater Beach Hotel, which was the spot that really lifted the band up, you know. It had such prestige and was right on the beach and everything. Then we lived in Chicago. We bought a home in River Forest.

When the war was breaking out Lawrence said, "We better go and look for a home." He said, "River Forest is in the middle." It's west and was the last suburb at the time. You could go equally to the Aragon or the Trianon. He wanted a central location like that. We wanted to be out in the suburbs like that. It was a wonderful suburb. They had the best police protection in Chicago there in River Forest. They were noted for their protection. But the gangsters also moved in there. There was Netty who was one. There was the gangster who took over the Capone mob. I don't remember the other big gangster who owned the mob at the time. After we lived in River Forest for a while, these gangsters [were] moving in.

When there are big gangsters living in there, it's the safest place to live because the other crooks are afraid to come in, you know, to the place. But Lawrence said, "I'm getting tired of having all these gangsters living around us. [Tony] Acosta, I think, was the name of the fella who took over the Capone gang. He lived a block and a half from us on Ashland Avenue. He [Lawrence] came to California on a tour and up the West Coast and then he called me. When he played at the Aragon Ballroom on Lake Pierre, KTLA came out and telecast his show.

The first show they telecast, the next day Lawrence was playing golf and everybody kept coming up to him and talking. They were excited and loved his band. So he called me and said, "Fern, I think we found our niche. I think we should think about moving to California." I said, "Before we pull up stakes, let's feel reasonably sure it is the place. If it is the place, I'll take the children and come. But," I said, "we have three kids, we're situated so well, we have grade school, high school and college within three blocks of us." Rosary College was there, Trinity High School and St. Vincent School all within three blocks of us. However, when the kids got up to college, none of them attended Rosary College. They wanted to go away like kids do when they get to that age, or most kids anyway.

So it was then, after Lawrence was here from August 4, he opened at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. In February he went to that Hotel Claremont and he played there for about two months. Then he came back to Chicago. He was just raving about it. He said, "That's the place for us, the West Coast." He said, "Fern, there are only two places, New York City and Los Angeles, where you make it," and he said, "I'd like to be in one of those cities because that's where you get to the top." I said, "I'll take the lesser of two evils, I'll take Los Angeles." And so when it was evident that this was the place, I put our house up for sale and moved after school was out. I always felt you go where your husband's business is best and I didn't want to hamper him. But by the same token I didn't want to pull up stakes and go on a wild goose chase.

I wanted to be reasonably sure, you're never sure, but that's what happened. That's how we got to California. I don't have to tell you, but he became a national figure. I liked privacy, I always tried to stay back. It was fine for him to go, but I never stuck my face in on television unless it was a Christmas show. I would do it reluctantly; I didn't tell him I'm doing it reluctantly. I did it because he had a wife and children and Christmas is family. But in my heart I was reluctant to be exposed to the media and had people know who I am. Because then your privacy breaks down.

I remember I was up in the Palisades grocery shopping one time after a Christmas show and when the cashier checked me out she said, "Oh, you know who you look like? You look like Mrs. Lawrence Welk." And I didn't say anything. She said, "Go down, there is a magazine on the stand that has her picture on the cover." I never went or anything and I didn't tell her that I was Mrs. Welk. I tried to play it down so that the family and I could have privacy. But a lot of people recognized me after a Christmas show. They would come up to me and say, "You're Mrs. Lawrence Welk." Then, of course, you have to say, "Yes."

MM: Fern, when he came to California and of course, he was here, did you bring the family alone then?

FW: I brought the family with me.

MM: Drove with the car?

FW: First of all, the first Christmas he was out here, he didn't come home for Christmas. So after school was out I flew the kids out here with me, and we spent Christmas out here with him. Then we stayed a week and the kids had to go back to school after New Year's so we went back there. When he played the St. Francis Hotel he flew home for two or three days for Christmas and then he flew back again. The band played then.

So we always tried to work it out and in the summertime he always played the Aragon and Trianon so we were always together then. But it was difficult when the children were in school. When Shirley was alone (she was five years old when Donna was born) then we used to take Shirley with us and travel. But when we got two children and three children it was too difficult. And I had a maid when the kids were little but I wanted our values imparted upon the family. I didn't want outside values, I wanted our values. These were our children and I felt it was our duty to see that one of us at least was there.

MM: Now in those early years of marriage, Fern, did you get a chance to get back to North Dakota often?

FW: Sometimes. Lawrence would maybe every two or three years play a concert up there but I wouldn't go up there, because he was going from place to place playing concerts. Sometimes later on as the kids got a little bit bigger in the summertime we traveled with Lawrence on the one-nighters. We didn't go to the ballroom but we traveled. Then usually it was – sometimes it was five hundred miles we traveled and we would get there and be dead tired. Lawrence would have to get dressed and play the ballroom but we all ate dinner together and he would go on. I would have to do laundry and I had to go to the laundromat and do the laundry. The kids would go to bed.

So it was difficult, it was hard, it was not unmanageable; you had to plan it. I know I had bought a dress, nylon, and had a little jacket and I could wash that out in the evening and hang it up in the bathroom and it would be dry in the morning. We would be every day in a different place so it wasn't that I was wearing something that everyone would see me in every day. The family, of course, saw me and I remember Shirley saying to me one time, "Mother, don't you have any other clothes to wear?" But it was so handy, washed out so good and dried so quickly. It was cool, but people say that nylon is so hot, but I didn't find it so hot. It was great.

MM: Now in those years of traveling and so on sometimes it was even difficult to get to church but you always would find a church?

FW: We always made it, except one time I remember. And that was before the kids were born and I was pregnant with Shirley and we were coming from Chicago to Phoenix, Arizona. There is a ballroom in Phoenix, Arizona, and they wanted to hire Lawrence for a couple of months. So we came out and we stopped in New Mexico, one of the towns, to go to Mass. It was on Sunday. We got there at eleven o'clock and went to this church and it was just letting out, the Mass, and there was no other Mass so we missed church and we went on then to Phoenix. We got to Phoenix and the ballroom had closed. The fella had opened the ballroom and he wasn't making it. It was several people who were involved in this ballroom. They weren't making it it and had closed.

So we get there and we have all these musicians and everything and there's no ballroom and no booking now after a week of traveling. So Lawrence went and called a meeting of the stockholders and the man and he talked to them. He was the best salesman I have ever known. Our son Larry is that way. He talked him into opening the ballroom. He said, "I guarantee you, we'll do the business." He did and the ballroom flourished while he played there.

I don't know what happened afterwards, after we left. But you know he had so much confidence and he had such perception, Lawrence. Don Fedderson said to me - one time he called me up and he said, "Fern, Lawrence has got something that no one else I know of has." He said, "You *can't* buy it. Money doesn't buy it. You're born with it." He said, "He has perception. He just knows so far in advance." When everybody said, "Lawrence, it can't be done." Lawrence did it. I remember his secretary Lois Lamont said to me one time, "I never say to him, 'it can't be done,' because he always proves he can." So it was very interesting. There were *a lot* of things I never discussed with Lawrence that the kids did wrong, you know, or anything or if I had to punish the kids. Never, because I felt he's got his problems with the band and I don't want to burden him. This is my job to raise the kids and I don't want to burden him.

MM: Those early years, Fern, when you got to know Lawrence and so forth, did you get to know the band members too?

FW: Oh yes, I got to know the band members too. On Christmas and Thanksgiving and during the holidays, lots of times they were back in Chicago and they played. The ones that weren't married, I'd have out for Christmas dinner and Thanksgiving dinner. Jerry Burke, we knew him. Well, Lawrence had known him for years and years and when Lawrence hired him I knew him. Jerry Burke just loved to come to the place all the time.

Of course, Jerry liked to drink. He was an Irishman. Our liquor, well, he said, "You have the best liquor, it's aged." Because Lawrence didn't drink; I didn't drink. And when Jerry came I'd say, "You help yourself, I don't know how to make a cocktail of any kind." I was never interested. To me, liquor tasted so terrible, it was like terrible medicine you take. So I was never interested to learn to make different cocktails. And when somebody came to the house and they would like a cocktail of some kind, I'd take them out in the kitchen and say, "Here's the liquor, you mix it." They would mix their own; they liked to mix their own cocktails. I never learned how. I didn't care to learn how. I should have probably learned for the sake of some people but I didn't. The smell of it to me was revolting.

MM: Now you had known Jerry Burke, and he was playing with Lawrence in Chicago and he would travel with him?

FW: Yah, he traveled with the band and he was very popular with the organ and he had that light touch, you know? Not the heavy touch like some do. For organ the light touch was better. However, he played piano first for several years and then when Lawrence decided to have an organ he asked Jerry to play the organ and he would get a piano player and he said, "Yes." He became famous for the way he played the organ.

People would write in and love the way Jerry plays the organ. He got sick one time. They would tape their show to be played on Saturday night and one of the boys came to Lawrence and said, "Lawrence, I think you should come back and look at Jerry. He's sick backstage." So Lawrence went out and called Bob, you know our Bob was a doctor. He called Bob and Bob examined him and found out his liver was

mostly gone. He had him admitted to St. John's Hospital. Lawrence's doctor was out of town; he played in the Bing Crosby tournament up in northern California, Monterey.

This was on Saturday night. Dr. Marvin Mack came home on Sunday night and on Monday morning when he examined Jerry Burke, he called up Bob and Bob was appalled. Bob said, "He is not going to make it." Jerry was feeling pretty good, you know, after a couple days in the hospital and on Wednesday he called up Lawrence at the house. He said, "Get that doctor over here and have me released, I'm fine." So I had talked to Bob a couple of times, and I said, "Jerry seems to feel real good, and he's real anxious to get out." Bob would shake his head like that. Lawrence didn't do anything and on Saturday morning Jerry took a turn for the worse and he went down real fast and died at eleven o'clock that Saturday night. I said to Bob afterwards, "Bob, how did you know that Jerry's not going to make it?" He said, "When you have over half of your liver gone, you don't live." Bob didn't tell us that it was over half gone until Jerry died. But when I would say something, Bob would shake his head.

MM: Now Jerry came out with Lawrence. Did anyone else come out from Chicago to start out there?

FW: Oh, all of them came from Chicago, the whole band. Jerry was so popular but he died. We had another boy on the band at the time, Larry Hooper, who had that deep singing voice. He had a very serious heart attack and he was at St. Vincent's Hospital and so Lawrence went down. He couldn't have visitors, but Lawrence wanted to go and assure him. He had bought a home and had a couple of kids.

Lawrence went down and he went in and said, "Larry, I don't want you to worry about a thing." He said, "You get well," and he said, "We'll pay your mortgage on the home while you're sick." He got out of the hospital and we played Tahoe and he was up there and I saw him a couple of times up there in the daytime and I could notice that he had trouble breathing. I think he lived about a year and had some more trouble and died.

MM: Now the orchestra, when they were in Chicago, did they already have that champagne music style?

FW: Yah, champagne music started in Pittsburgh.

MM: How did that develop?

FW: One of the announcers said to Lawrence (he used to come to announce when they broadcast) he said, "You're music sounds so bubbly like champagne music." That was then that Lawrence took the label "Champagne Music."

MM: So that was from the days in Pittsburgh?

FW: Yah, when he played the William Penn Hotel.

MM: What about "Bubbles in the Wine?"

Break in dialogue

FW: "Bubbles in the Wine," I think maybe Lawrence had written this number for Shirley. Then he named it "You're my Home Sweet Home." I think that maybe he named that later "Bubbles in the Wine" when he was on television and it was his theme song. I think that's perhaps how it was.

MM: So when you came out to California and Lawrence started locally on KTLA, did you go to some of those early shows?

FW: We didn't go often. Occasionally when friends came and then we'd go down to the show. You know, when Lawrence was playing, the audience was free; however, they would be booked two years in advance. I didn't want to go and take up a seat. People came from out of town and wanted to see it. Like when he played Harrah's in Tahoe, they were always sold out. Lawrence had a complimentary booth that they gave him for his guests and family. I was down with a friend of mine from L.A. who was up there (Dorothy Fickes) and we were using the booth.

The waiter came by and he said, "There are some people out there that came from Canada, a couple, and they insist on coming in and we have nothing open." I said, "Wait a minute, here's this booth, bring them in and seat them with us," because we didn't need the whole booth. So they did. But they didn't or they wouldn't have asked, but I thought, "Why these people came from Canada and why not have them occupy some of the space?"

MM: Now you remember the time you told me earlier about the time Lawrence went to Washington, D.C. and played for President Eisenhower. Tell me a little about that experience.

FW: Oh, that was wonderful. We came in and we had reservations at the hotel; however, we were going to President Eisenhower's dinner at the White House. My luggage went to the White House. So John Malone who was the head of the FBI in Los Angeles whom we knew well, he was right there to be around us. So my luggage - I can't find my luggage and I said, "John, I don't know what happened to my luggage." I said, "I have nothing to wear but what I have on." He went out and checked and found it had gone to the White House. So he went and got it and brought it back. So I sent my formal out to have it ironed and John Malone was going to pick us up and seven o'clock; the dinner was at seven-thirty, I think.

So John comes, I'm all ready, except my gown isn't back. I said, "John, I can't go." My formal, I sent it out to have it pressed (to the hotel) and it never came back. Out he went. He went down and came back and had my gown. I said, "Where was it?" He said, "Dick Dale's room," one of the band members. The next time I saw Dick Dale I said, "Dick, why didn't you call them and tell them you have a gown that doesn't belong to you." He said, "I was in hopes that whoever owned the gown would come and get it."

So we had a lot of help from the FBI, and the same time we went to Europe. John Malone contacted all the different securities in the nations we went to and had them meet us. And John said, "You never know, people go abroad and they run into problems. I want you to have these numbers." But we never used them because they would meet us, take us around to all the places, show us all the places of interest. When we got to New York on our way back, there was John Malone up on the plane the minute they opened the doors. He came in and everybody had to remain seated and he took Lawrence and I out and it didn't take us any time to go through. So we have a lot of good help from John Malone.

MM: Now the orchestra played for President Eisenhower's inauguration?

FW: Yah, they played for the Supreme Court in the Green Room in the White House. After they played then we went back to the dining room again, and the table was set up in the most beautiful buffet that you ever saw. Ike and Mamie talked to Lawrence and I, no, to me, I think it was because Lawrence had to go and set up. They said, "We want the boys to know how their President lives." See the boys were not invited to the dinner. When we were at that dinner, Lawrence and I weren't partners. I had a senator from California as my dinner partner and Lawrence had Mrs. Spartman (her husband was a senator from

Tennessee, I think) as a dinner partner. They served us all these different courses, and the different wines with each course.

I just took the glass and put it upside down and when they'd come I'd say, "I don't drink," and I told them "My husband doesn't drink either." I didn't want them to pour the stuff and then not touch it. I've always been one where I don't like to waste food. I think it's with people starving and everything, to be extravagant and waste food, I don't believe in that. I remember we were at the country club in Bel Air and there was a fella there from Omaha who Lawrence advertised for him the insurance company; the head was out here, Scutt and his wife. We were sitting around and they were all having drinks and the waiter came to Lawrence and I and we said, "We don't drink." I said, "Occasionally we tolerate a little sweet wine." I said, "Do you have some sweet wine? But don't bring a lot because Lawrence and I don't drink, just a few sips, a small portion." So Don Fedderson was sitting there like you are and after the waiter left, he laughed and said, "You know, Fern, this is what we like about you. You're so honest."

MM: I think you learned that from home.

FW: Yah. So many people fake it but for some reason I can't fake it.

MM: I think you learned a little bit of that from back home in North Dakota.

FW: I think maybe you're right. So it was funny that he was listening to me and said that.

MM: Did Lawrence bring - of course there were some good times and sometimes he had problems with some of the band members and so forth, did he talk much about that at home?

FW: No, once in awhile he would tell me. He said to me one time this girl singer was almost impossible to get along with. The girl was wonderful but the mother - the mother would want to tell Lawrence what songs she should sing, what she should wear - not what Lawrence required for his organization. Lawrence had terrible problems with her. So he said to me (we were on our way to Palm Springs) he said, "Fern, I just don't know anymore how to handle it." I said, "Why don't you let her go? What's the reason for keeping her on if she has all those problems?" He said, "Say, that's an idea. I'll let her go."

MM: So that's what happened?

FW: Yah. See she came when Lawrence was sick. I think about a year before Lawrence died. Lawrence was in bed, of course, and I took her in. And as we were going out and when we got out of the room she said, "You know, Lawrence and I had some problems, but it wasn't me. I was young but it was my mother." The mother was terrible and when Lawrence hired girl singers he would say, "I like the way she sings, but she has a mother." There was another girl, very sweet nice girl (the singer) but her mother - Lawrence didn't like the idea. When he had this one girl, he sent them into Chicago to look for a job. He said, "You're too good for my band." She was very good and she got on in Chicago with Hal Kemp. Do you remember Hal Kemp?

MM: Yes.

FW: Hal Kemp put his foot down. He said, "I want you to wear such and such gowns. This is what we'll get for you." So they wrote back and said they didn't like Hal Kemp. They like his orchestra but they don't like the way he does things and could they come back? We were so glad that they were gone. So I had to write back and I said, "You know, you might have to try a little harder, but Lawrence says you're way too

good for his organization and for the traveling around like he does." I wrote a nice letter to them but let them know that Lawrence was not ready to take them back. So that was it.

MM: Did you get to know the Champagne Ladies?

FW: Oh yes. I knew them, all of them. This particular girl was one of the nicest and she had a beautiful voice, easy to get along with. But if she didn't have a mother, like Lawrence said, she would have been the greatest. But the mother's the one that caused the problems. He had a girl after that from New York and her mother was terrible and she made the remark that "Helen is just as good as he is. She's what makes his band." Very demanding and we found the mother was very demanding and very off base so Lawrence let her go. He got other girls.

There were always enough good singers around. Then Helen wound up - she wasn't as good as her mother thought. She was a dealer in Las Vegas in one of the casinos and when we were up there we saw her and then the mother made a remark later on I guess, "Well, maybe I didn't know." But they insist they think they can put it across and with Lawrence you couldn't. He knew and it was his band and he knew how he wanted to run it. He knew what he wanted the girls to sing and he didn't want the mother of the singer to try to run his band. For one thing, they never talked about music very much. They just knew that their daughter was a good singer.

MM: What about the Lennon Sisters? Do you remember them as children?

FW: Oh yes, and the way that came about. It was in November and it was a Sunday.

MM: What year was that?

FW: Lawrence was sick with the flu in bed and he wasn't that sick that he couldn't hear them sing. Larry had been out on Saturday night with the Lennon sisters and they had sung at one of the places and they would go out and entertain. So Larry came in and said, "Dad, I was out last night." The Lennon Sisters went to St. Monica's like Larry and he knew them. He said, "I was out with the Lennon Sisters last night and they entertained and Dad, they are real good." Lawrence said, "Call them up and have them come over."

MM: What year was that?

FW: It was in 1955. So Larry called them and they came over and they sang and the song they sang was "He." Remember the song "He?"

MM: Uh, huh.

FW: I had goose pimples up and down my arms. Oh, I thought that was the most beautiful harmony I had ever heard. So Lawrence got up and out of bed and went over and called George Cates, the musical director. He said, "George, I want to have you hear something." And then the Lennons sang into the phone and he said, "George, I think we should put them on the Christmas show," which they did. Then they had to go to rehearsal when Lawrence rehearsed and he put them on the Christmas show and the rest was history. In my way of thinking even to this day, I think they had the best blend, and I have no musical training, I love music, good harmony and all this and that, and they had such beautiful harmony and sang so beautifully.

So they became quite big but what they resented was traveling. Lawrence said, "When I have a band, the people I have on the band will have to also travel. The people hear these stars on my band and they want to see them in person." So they didn't want to travel so after awhile they had to quit and they got quite a bit of booking, I can't think of the big star who hired them in Vegas, you know to back him in Vegas. Gee, I don't remember - a male star.

When he booked Vegas, he always hired them. And when they were on Lawrence's band, when they went on their own to entertain they would get twenty-five thousand to go out so they had - Lawrence's band was a showcase and from there they would hire individuals. When he didn't need them, they could go out and make money of their own. I remember Lawrence said to Myron Floren one time, he said, "You must have around two hundred thousand dollars from going out." "Oh, much more," he said, "it's more like two hundred fifty thousand."

MM: Do you remember when Myron Floren was hired?

FW: [He was hired in St. Louis in 1950.] He was hired fairly early, after we came to California. I would say, perhaps around 1955, because Lawrence was playing the Aragon ballroom at the time and having this television show from the Aragon ballroom once a week. He wanted to get another accordionist in there so that he wouldn't have to play so much. Myron is from South Dakota. Lawrence knew he was a good accordion player and Myron was playing a hotel in St. Louis and teaching music and Lawrence contacted him and had him come out and then hired him. Pretty soon he had a big reputation and still does. He still plays around what did he say, two hundred fifty dates a year?

MM: I think the other night he said one hundred fifty dates.

FW: Oh, maybe that's what he said.

MM: Let's talk a little about Escondido and the Welk Resort Center down there and what happened there. Just a few days ago we had the thirtieth anniversary of the resort and we were there together and you remember that, of course, in the early days.

FW: Oh, absolutely. Lawrence and Bert Carter (the manager in our office) were looking for a place to invest in and Bert Carter said, "Lawrence, San Diego is getting popular." He said, "Down around San Diego, that's a hot spot right now." Lawrence said, "Well, let's go down and look." So they went down and they went on what is now Freeway [Interstate] 15. At the time it was a highway but it wasn't a freeway.

And as they were driving by where our place is now, the grove of trees you see was there and Lawrence (Bert was driving) and Lawrence said, "Bert, what is that?" and Bert said, "That's a little golf course there." Lawrence said, "Turn around, let's go in." So he turned around and he went on in and there is a little restaurant there and [you know] the little clubhouse that is there now?

MM: Uh, huh.

FW: It was there then. Behind the clubhouse was a swimming pool and next to the swimming pool, they have it as a card room now for the people, but that was a small restaurant and they went in to eat and Lawrence went to the cashier and asked who owns this. He said it was a man by the name of Squire and he is out of town in Washington, D.C. right now. Lawrence said, "Is his wife here? Call her." So they called her and she didn't come and she didn't come and they finished eating and she wasn't there so Lawrence went to the cashier again and said, "Call her again." You know, he was persistent.

So when they called her again she finally came over and she apologized. They told her Lawrence Welk wanted to see her and it was April Fool's Day and she thought they were pulling a joke on her. So Lawrence kind of questioned her and found out when her husband would be home and he said, "Do you think he might be interested in selling the park?" She said, "Well, he has to have a million dollars on reserve all the time. He moves military personnel for the government and has to have that in reserve." So Lawrence came home and he had sent all of his head people down there: bookkeepers, head of the office, everybody that meant anything down there for the weekend. He said, "I want you to all go down there and check it out for me."

His attorney and everybody and so they went on down there and they came back and they said, "Lawrence, this isn't for you; it's forty miles from San Diego, it's eight miles from Escondido. It sits out there on the prairie. It doesn't fit into your schedule." So Lawrence listened and then he said, "Sorry, fellas, I'm going to call Squire tomorrow and tell him to be in my office at nine o'clock and I'm going to buy the park." So that's what happened and Lawrence bought the park. A good deal too; Lawrence always got good deals.

The next weekend Lawrence and I went down and on the way down he said, "You know, Fern, if the place should not go, I have no one to blame but myself. But should the place go - I have a feeling, I know it will work." And it did and you could see. We'd go down and go in and we'd look down over the park, the restaurant, the hotel, and he would shake his head and say, "To think that my number one people never wanted me to get into this." He had such perception like Don Fedderson said, "He knew what would go." It must have been kind of humiliating because they had said no, and then he bought it.

Thirty years later it still stands today; it's even bigger and better. Oh gosh, yes. They have all the time shares down there and they are all sold. The time shares is closed because it's all sold out.

MM: Now when you were down there this past weekend, Fern, and you watched the show, you watched Myron Floren, Anacani and others perform, what went through your mind as far as what Lawrence would have thought of this thirty years later?

FW: You know, I could see him there on the stage; you know, he danced back and forth. Dixieland was his favorite music. You wouldn't think so, they used to pick him as polka king, you know. But Dixieland, he couldn't stand still. He'd scoot from one side of the stage to the other. I could see how pleased he would be and in my mind I could see him go back and forth.

MM: Yes, it certainly is a wonderful place to visit. They have a nice museum there with his items and so forth. As you know we donated a nice piece to this museum with the plaque that we presented from the university.

FW: That was beautiful. Where did they put that?

MM: They will put that in the museum and remember we have the same one in Branson.

FW: Oh, yah, yah.

MM: Now just a few weeks ago, both of us visited Branson for the first time and there too it's a wonderful thing to see the Lawrence Welk Show providing a lot of young people. Lawrence always wanted to have young people perform; then to have the Lennon Sisters together again.

- FW:** Well, you know what's nice? They moved down there. They sold their places up here and moved down there. You know Peggy is a widow, didn't you?
- MM:** Yes.
- FW:** Did you see her son in Branson? He played the piano pretty nice.
- MM:** Yes, he's a good director too. But during those years when you were here in California and so forth you also had a home in Palm Springs?
- FW:** Yah, we did. But we sold it just recently.
- MM:** But you did a lot of entertaining over there?
- FW:** We used to take friends and go down there with us, especially the Shipstad's that's from the Ice Show.
- MM:** Who was that?
- FW:** Shipps. She died a couple of years ago, Mrs. Shipstad did. We used to go down there. They were wonderful people. Eddie is a widower and of course still lives in their Bel Air place. They had a woman who has worked for them for about forty years and she retired and went back to Minnesota and had her apartment there, but when Lu got sick, I guess they called her and she came out and stayed and helped. When Lu died, she stayed on so that Eddie wouldn't be alone. She's in her eighties too and so is Eddie.
- MM:** So you would do some entertaining over there and Lawrence would enter various golf tournaments?
- FW:** He always played in the golf tournaments. You know one of the big golfers was the one who laid out our second golf course and it's laid out so that if the PGA wants to put a tournament on there, they can. It's to specifications. I can't think of the golfer anymore. I used to know his name real well. He laid out the course.
- MM:** Lawrence was an avid golfer?
- FW:** Oh, gosh, he loved golf. And the way it came about that Lawrence took golf seriously - he used to have backaches. You know, backaches, in many instances they are spasms. The back muscles in the lumbar region go into spasms and it's very painful and he was in St. John's Hospital. They had weights on and it helped. But he'd get out and still have the backaches. Sometimes he'd roll on the floor and the doctor said, "Lawrence, you sit too much so the muscles in your back are weak. That's why you have these spasms," and he said, "you must do more walking." In that case, Lawrence said, "I'll take up golf seriously." He played some golf but he never had another backache.
- MM:** Fern, you were always known as Mrs. Lawrence Welk. You wanted to keep a private life. We have talked about many things in our two conversations. But when you go back and think about your life - First of all, you have lived such a full life. You have had so many good years and when you look - and to think at your age and still have such memory and surrounded by a wonderful family, what do you think back in your life as Mrs. Lawrence Welk, and now your children and what your husband accomplished and of course, what you accomplished together.
- FW:** Well, you know, I reminisce many times and you always feel you could have improved on some of the things, you know. But I had a full, happy, long life and maybe it's not accidental. For a long time, as I was younger and was a nurse, it was strong in my mind that I want to be a doctor. But I was also getting

married, and traveling, you just couldn't fit it in. Today, they do those things. The wife stays somewhere you know. In those days, you just wouldn't do it. Medicine always fascinated me and I experimented.

For instance, I went to the eye doctor and he said, "Your eyes are getting bad." I said, "What can be done?" He said, "Nothing." I said, "It's awful hard for me to reconcile myself to the fact that nothing can be done." (Because I always overcome situations that where they said it couldn't.) He reached in the drawer and took out a bottle of vitamins called I-Caps. Now you cannot use any other vitamins [with them]. There is an ingredient in there called selenium and he was impressed with this selenium.

So I went home and I knew that vitamin E acts on the tissues. I took vitamin E; I took I-Caps twice a day and then five months later when I went back he said, "You're doing real well." I said, "I don't know if you believe in this or not, but I'm taking vitamin E. He said, "I most certainly do." But he never told me. See I knew and I always like to evaluate a situation and I don't take 'no' for an answer. I always think there must be a better way, so it has helped. It's not a cure but it helps along the way.

MM: When you were in your last days with Lawrence, and along with others you took good care of Lawrence and so forth, and Lawrence in his final days and then in his wonderful service, do you reminisce once in awhile about those last years with Lawrence?

FW: Yes, I do sometimes. I always used to think, he is so busy, we have so little time for one another because he traveled so extensively and then he was always busy with shows and rehearsals and making out the show, you know, meeting with this and that. I didn't nag him. I always thought this was his life and he was music, every bone in his body. I've never known anyone - I felt I must support him in every way and I always felt someday we'll have a nice life together but that someday never came, you know, because he died and before the last few years he was declining. The last two years before he died he was up and down in bed. The last year in bed, only up to go to the bathroom and to eat.

MM: Of course, you stayed with him to the very end?

FW: I married him. I made a commitment. You know when you make a commitment you should keep it. I know that many people, when it gets rough they walk out. I don't think that's the road to take.

MM: So now you look back, and more and more you reminisce about the years together?

FW: Once in a while, I'm not a person to dwell on the past too much. I always feel we have to advance. We have to look forward. Those things, I feel, the Lord lets them happen to you. We cannot argue with that. We have to accept what is sent to us. There is no need dwelling on it. I'm not a person who gets morose over things or I have always felt that you adjust to the situation and you don't burden your family or other people. They have problems of their own.

MM: So now you're looking back and the Welk organization - the family is involved with the operation and you have the new enterprise in Branson, but going back to your childhood and those characteristics that were instilled in you and the characteristics from Lawrence's family instilled in him, and now, I think it passes on to your children and grandchildren. What are those kinds of characteristics that you could say from back at home in North Dakota that still continue in the Welk family?

FW: I didn't get to know the Welk family too much. We were married and we didn't get home to Lawrence's folks until Shirley was three years old. While we were there a few days and we took Lawrence's folks to meet my mother and we were there about three days and then we came back. I liked them very much

and I thought they were good people, morally and otherwise, but as for knowing them real well, you just don't get to know them in just a few days.

MM: Did they speak only German?

FW: They couldn't speak English. That was a little bit difficult. I had forgotten, but some things I remembered and when they talked, if they talked slow, I remembered. But if they talked regular, sometimes I didn't know what they were saying.

MM: Now did Lawrence speak to them in German then?

FW: Well, he had the same problems I did. You know, after years away not talking it or anything - I know Lawrence's mother thought we should teach Shirley German. We never taught any of our kids German because Lawrence and I both have a brogue, and I didn't want my children to have a brogue. I believe in bilingual languages, you know, but after they get bigger, when their own language is established which is English. So I think they were a little bit unhappy with Lawrence and I that Shirley couldn't speak German.

MM: Oh, they thought she should speak German when you came to visit there?

FW: Well, I think they thought she should speak German so that she could speak with them too.

MM: Right, as a grandchild.

FW: If Shirley wanted to take German she could have but she didn't want to when she got into high school. She took French as a second language. Donna's Jim took German in high school and in college and he and I would speak a little German together. He was good in it.

MM: Now in those early years when you met Lawrence and he would write to you in Dallas, how was his English, because he had to learn his English and his writing on his own since he quit school so early. How was his English?

FW: Well, his English was good. There are a lot of words that he didn't know. For instance, I never have forgotten, I said one time, "So and so was captivating." He said, "What is that, Fern?" If he didn't know a word he would ask you to explain. He wouldn't let it go you know.

Many times somebody would say something and if he didn't know what it meant he would turn to me and say, "What does it mean?" He learned. He was a genius, he really was. You can imagine a twenty-one-year-old boy going out, not knowing any English, having gone through the fourth grade and that was all and going out in the world. How quickly he learned.

Break in dialogue

MM: So Fern, by the time you met Lawrence in Yankton, when you were going to school there, was he speaking good English then?

FW: Oh, yes, absolutely. We never spoke German even though we were both German. My mother didn't even know we had forgotten. I remember when we took Lawrence's mother up to meet my mother. Lawrence's mother said to my mother, "Elizabeth, don't you think they should teach that Shirley German?" Mother said, "I don't think so. I think it's too bad we're so dumb." You know, she felt dumb because she couldn't speak and I remember she used to get the German newspaper and she would have it spread all over the kitchen table. She would go from cover to cover.

MM: She would read that German newspaper?

FW: I think it was printed - do you know anything about it?

MM: Yes, the *Nord Dakota Herald*. It was printed up in Richardton and then in Dickinson.

FW: Yah, up there somewhere.

MM: They subscribed to that paper?

FW: My dad taught himself English when they first came to the United States. He bought a German-English dictionary. He learned English so well he served on juries in Mandan. And, in fact, he was serving on a jury when he got sick. They had gone out to lunch and he fell off the stool. (They sat at the counter.) And then they took him to St. Alexius Hospital. He had a ruptured appendix and he was operated on and got peritonitis and died. I was always his favorite. I missed him even when I was away at school.

He was so wonderful to me. He said when he was in the hospital, he asked Mother, "What does Fern say? What is she doing?" He was a wonderful man all the way around. When he died a priest said, "If this man didn't go straight to heaven, there's no way we will." Because if anybody needed anything, there he was. In Mandan, if he walked down the street and saw a bum, he didn't give him money, but he said, "Come on in, and I'll buy you lunch or whatever dinner." If people needed seed grain, he would just give it to them or loan it to them. They were supposed to pay it back but they didn't after he died. Mother would ask for the grain back and they said, "You have nothing signed." You wouldn't think those people would do that, would you?

MM: So those characteristics that you learned from home from your father and then your mother, because your father died so young.

FW: Yah, he died so young.

MM: You had to be honest, not wasteful. You had to be careful with your own life even today, and I think hopefully some of those kinds of ideas were instilled into your children.

FW: She was a stickler for honesty. She used to tell us that one unjust penny would devour nine just ones. In other words if you cheat, you lose that much more. She believed in that and they were all - when my brother Nick was a pharmacist he had to serve an apprenticeship after he finished his education. And in the drugstore he served the apprenticeship, the manager said to us, "He will write every ice cream cone down that he eats." He said he was so surprised that there is someone who is that honest and Nick wouldn't take anything. He would have thought it was stealing or deceiving if he had eaten an ice cream cone and not written it down.

MM: We are going to close our conversation today. Fern, when you think about your own life, you know, we have talked a little about this before, I think it's important for us to remember.

FW: Yah.

MM: Fern Renner and the life she had. She came from a German-Russian family south of Mandan; I think a unique family in that her mother and father saw to it that their children became educated. They learned the English language and if they wanted to go on to school even as a young girl.

- FW:** Like my mother urged us to go; like when my uncle - like in those days the girls weren't educated, you know. They got married and lived on the farm and when my Uncle Joe said, "Elizabeth, why do you let her go away to school?" She said, "If she wants an education, she can have an education. Too bad that we're so dumb."
- MM:** To think that you married a man that had only a fourth grade education. I think that even for you that was a challenge. You were quite well educated. You had grade school, high school, and you went on to nurse's training and here you found a musician who grew up in North Dakota too, was from a German-Russian Catholic family but not well-educated. I'm sure you thought about that too.
- FW:** It's like one of the hostesses said in one of the hotels we played. Lawrence and I were eating breakfast and she came in and sat down and we were talking. She said, "Lawrence, what college did you go to?" He said, "I only went through the fourth grade." "You have a college education," she said. See the way he could present things and do things - He was a self-educated man. He read books. When he played the Aragon and the Trianon, sometimes I'd wake up during the night and there would be two or three books laying there. You know, he'd get sleepy and laid it down. He would read extensively. He loved to read. He was more or less self-educated, but he never lost that wonderful humility, earthiness, down-to-earth and everything. I admired him. I didn't know anyone who could fit that mold.
- MM:** Was he very close to his fans?
- FW:** Very close to his fans, to his mother, and his brothers and sisters. He had so many qualities that I never found in other people. I admired him greatly and as far as education was concerned, I would say he was way above the fourth grade. He read book after book after book. He craved knowledge and he would come home dead tired from the Aragon and Trianon that he played and the light would be on in the bedroom and he would be reading one of the books. So it's not that he accepted it and never read anything.
- MM:** He self-taught himself the English language and then he learned by doing a lot of reading.
- FW:** Oh, gosh, yes.
- MM:** You were around him a lot, you go out to dine or someplace like that and sometimes people would come up and recognize him. Did he always take time to say hello?
- FW:** Always he did. It got so bad the last few years that he was working that if we went to Escondido he couldn't eat his dinner. Somebody was always hanging over the table and his food would get cold. He would have to eat cold food. I said to him, "Why don't we do this, when we come down here, why don't we go in the kitchen and eat our dinner out there. You'd get a good hot dinner." He said, "Fern, these are my people, what do you want me to do, run from them?" He loved people and this was to him outrageous to go out there. It's okay if he eats his food cold. But his people, these are his people.
- MM:** I think you even noticed it when you were down in Escondido.
- FW:** Now the people go after me if they find out. I sort of understand it. I try to be nice to them, it means a lot to them. They knew Lawrence and he's gone and they want to come and express their sentiments. That's okay if it makes them happy, fine.

MM: So Lawrence left a real wonderful legacy not only for his family, his grandchildren and even his great-grandchildren but for all the people back home and throughout America and his musical family.

FW: You know Donna is more of an example of Lawrence than the other two. Larry is a little bit more than Shirley. Shirley has always been the one to look for more education, you know, and music, classical. She only took classical. She has her certificate in classical music. She had to give a concert in order to get her certificate in classical music. She has always been more or less in the upper echelon. Her intelligence is very high. They had her tested at the high school before. They wouldn't tell. They said her IQ was so high, they wouldn't tell us what it was. So I didn't insist. We can live without that.

But like I said, in high school they never graded her. They just wrote 'superior grading'. Her father was a genius and I'm not surprised. You talked to Donna. You can't fool her in any way or form and she has more friends. She is so outgoing. Shirley is more reserved. I think that part - I was always reserved, you know. I always thought, "I'll get to know the people. And when I know them, I can easier pick my friends. I don't have to hurt their feelings." I was always thinking of other people's feelings and I was always careful so that I didn't have to hurt their feelings. But I let my children develop their way, under good guidance, I felt.

I never nagged the kids if they did wrong. I would take them and sit down and I would say, "You knew it was wrong, didn't you?" They would say, "Yes," and I'd say, "What punishment do you think I should [give you], so that you remember it next time?" I would talk and discuss it with them. I remember one time, Larry was about six or seven and I said, "Larry, take the garbage out." He wouldn't take it out. Then all of a sudden I said, "Larry you didn't take the garbage out when I asked you." I said, "You know, Larry, I'll have to give you a spanking if you don't listen and I wouldn't like to do that." He said, "You wouldn't dare."

MM: Uh, huh.

FW: With that I let him have it. He ran upstairs in his room and cried and about fifteen minutes later I was working in the kitchen and he came down. He came over and put his arm around me, he thought, "She said she wouldn't like to do it, but she'd have to." I kissed him and I hugged him and after that I had no more trouble. He seemed to have been a child - the girls had their feet on the ground early. I think that boys are more devilish than girls. I discovered that Larry was, and if he didn't have a spanking for three months, he'd get completely out of hand. I didn't like to do it, but I felt I had to. Lawrence didn't believe in spanking the kids and he told me one time, "Fern, I don't admire you for that." I didn't say anything. That's his privilege to feel that way, you know. I thought, he's gone so much of the time, I'll do what I feel is right.

One time he was reading in the living room in Chicago, and Donna and Larry were in there and they were fighting and it got so on his nerves and he said, "Come here," and they did. He said, "Put out your hand," and then he slapped them a little. They never felt it. Donna cried and cried. Then he cried. Then he gave each one a quarter so everything was healed. Donna came out in the kitchen and said, "Oh, Mother, we like for Dad to punish us, he gives us money." So I didn't say anything. I thought, he travels, when he's gone I'll do what I feel is right. It's a challenge and a husband and a wife must never disagree in front of the children.

That's the worst thing you can do. Kids will play one against the other if they see that. I never disagreed in front of Lawrence and one time when Lawrence played the hotel in New York on Sunday and we went up into Connecticut and she said, "Mother said we must never -" (I forgot what she said) but Lawrence said, "If Mother said that, it must be right." I thought, "God bless you," that he agreed with me. Another time, he did such a wonderful thing. Shirley was seventeen. We had some friends in Yankton and they had a very handsome boy. He was in college there and he was graduating. He liked Shirley, was crazy about Shirley and he wanted Shirley to come to the prom (and I was sitting there); he was graduating from the university. So Shirley wanted to go, and she liked him too.

Dad was out here on the West Coast out here, and Shirley came to me and I sat her down and I said, "Shirley, as much as I would like to say 'yes', my conscience tells me it's not the thing to do. You know those functions, there is a lot of drinking going on and they are not on the up and up as sometimes." I said, "We don't know anything about that and I don't believe for me to let you go is the right thing." Then she said, "Then I'll write to Dad." I said, "That's fine, you write to your father and tell him." So she wrote to her father, and he sent a telegram. He said, "I love you too much to say no, but I suggest you listen to your mother." Wasn't that great?

MM: Yes, uh huh.

FW: Then she cried and I said, "You know, Shirley, would you want me to go against my conscience?" She said, "No." And I said, "My permission would be to go against my conscience." She had enough Catholic training that she realized your conscience - you have to pay attention to your conscience. It worked out fine. She would have loved to have gone and he was a nice boy. I had nothing against the boy, but those times you read every so often somebody is killed when they have these. Like Stanford had a whole car full of kids killed one night at a function and I was just not for that.

MM: So you, because Lawrence was on the road so much, were like a single parent?

FW: I didn't like to call Lawrence and say, "What do you think?" He had enough grief and trouble with the band without me calling him and piling stuff on. He never knew this happened except what she wrote him. I was careful like when he gave them the money, I thought he defeated the purpose of the punishment. But he himself never liked to spank, and he didn't. He just touched their hand like that, but they weren't used to that, you know, because he never did.

MM: I forgot to ask you about the program, "This is Your Life?" Do you remember that?

FW: Oh, yes, I had the most beautiful bracelet from "This is Your Life" show. They called me - see everything was secret. Donna was at Marquette in college. Shirley and Bob were married and lived in Boston and we had to have them all come out. They stayed at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel before the show because we couldn't have them at the house, you see. Then Lawrence would have been suspicious when they called him in.

I know that morning - Jack Minor, he was president of Dodge cars, and Dodge sponsored and he was very instrumental in getting Lawrence to get there. It was a day of rehearsal, you know, Lawrence never missed a rehearsal day. Jack said, "Lawrence, we need you for this commercial. Couldn't the band rehearse without you? We need this commercial. They could just film it at that time." So he did it. I remember the Dodge was coming along and we were standing outside and Lawrence was supposed to come over and say something about the Dodge cars in there. He walked on over to say, and Ralph

Edwards said, "This is your life, Lawrence Welk." He was so floored. I had been to rehearsal most of the day and he was supposed to be at rehearsal and he never comes home for dinner on rehearsal day. So Lawrence didn't know that I had been down there all day long. It was great.

MM: Who all came on the show?

FW: His sister Eva.

MM: From Aberdeen, she came out?

FW: Yah, she was the only one. Shirley and Bob had come home from Boston. Donna had come home from Marquette. Larry was home; he was at Loyola, as a graduate of Loyola. So we were all there.

MM: Was Lawrence very surprised?

FW: Oh, was he ever surprised!

MM: What did he tell you afterwards? Did he ever say, "Why didn't you tell me beforehand?"

FW: He said, "That's why you were gone when I got up there." I'm always there and always had his breakfast, you know, and everything, but we had to go early. He never had any inkling. They told me, they said, "If he finds out, the program is off. There won't be any program." The kids, we told them we must not call the house or anything and they went from the Hollywood Roosevelt to the studio and I did too. He went to rehearsal and Jack Minor took him to what he thought was a commercial filming for Dodge to the studio.

MM: That's how it developed?

FW: Yah.

MM: I bet the audience cheered also.

FW: Oh yah, sure.

MM: I'm sure it brings back memories.

FW: Oh, yah, the other day I took the bracelet out. For every event in Lawrence's life, there is a charm on there. It's beautiful. I don't wear it. It's too clanky, you know, but it's nice to have. But eventually it goes into one of the museums, either in Escondido or in Strasburg.

MM: Now that bracelet, was that given to you on "This is Your Life?"

FW: Yah, it was.

MM: Was it presented by Ralph Edwards?

FW: Yah.

MM: You must have gotten to know some of the people that did the commercials for Lawrence.

FW: You know it wasn't "This is Your Life." It was a CBS program, what other program were we on. That, too, they filmed it down in Escondido. After the show the producer came over to me and he said, "You people are such good people. It makes you want to be good."

MM: Wholesome Americans. Lawrence was on some other shows, wasn't he?

FW: Oh yah, this other one CBS I had to be on, like "This is Your Life." ABC wanted to come out one time and follow Lawrence around the house, had me serve him breakfast. And I said, "No, I play a low profile and I don't want to be exposed that much." So they came out anyway. The fellow from ABC said, "Lawrence's public wants to know what his wife looks like." I said, "Let's just keep them guessing." I walked out and I wouldn't stay around. You know they can be obnoxious.

One time, it got so that the photographers were following me around when there was a function. When Myron Floren's daughter got married, Lawrence was in Escondido and she was being married in the afternoon and he drove up from Escondido. He went to the function; he wasn't at the church that she was married at. They were Lutherans. Donna and I went so I didn't go over to Palos Verdes to the function, I just went to the church. So when I came out of church they were these hounds, I called them, cameras and I said, "It's nothing against you fellas, it's that I want to be on a low profile. I like my privacy and I don't like to have that much exposure." Donna and I went down to the car and here they were running backwards with their cameras, one of them walking on the sidewalk and I put my hands over my face and one of them said, "You're just as important as Elizabeth Taylor." Then I said to Donna, "Now I don't know if I should be offended or flattered."

MM: When you look at that picture of Lawrence there as a young boy with his accordion, that was many years ago in his early career, of course. He was a musician, a performer, a businessman.

FW: Oh, gosh, yes he was a good businessman. Larry is a good businessman. Somebody told me that a couple of the boys in the band told them that Larry is the best businessman they have ever known. He has got his father's perception. He's a wheeler-dealer. When I got my new car, he went with me on Saturday. We went down to Claude Short Dodge and I looked at the Dodge I have. "Now let's go and look at the Fifth Avenues" and we went and looked at those and there was several thousand dollars difference and this was expensive enough. I said, "Look, Larry, I don't feel that there is that much difference, that it warrants all the money, several thousand dollars. The Dodge Intrepid has everything I need, drives nice, rides nice, has everything and why waste another five thousand dollars?"

I said, "Now, I'm going to leave it up to you Larry, you are good in your judgment. You promote the deal, you feel you get the best deal. And it's okay with me." I never had somebody do something and then if it isn't something what I want say, "Well, why didn't you?" I think when people do you a favor you thank them instead of making them miserable. I know there are people who talk others down in the ground, and I think that's wrong. If they do you a favor and express themselves like I did, I left it up to Larry. I thanked him for what he did.

MM: So your family is continuing the music of Lawrence Welk that will be played for future generations on Public TV because he brought such a wholesome wonderful family show to America.

FW: And you know it's our grandchildren, they are very principled. You would like Jon, you met Jon in Branson, and his oldest brother is a doctor in Flagstaff, Arizona. He's in with a group of doctors. He is a pediatrician, wonderful, and he has that easygoing, soft-spoken way. He doesn't hurry you. Whoever has him as a pediatrician must be delighted. Donna's Jim is that way too, you know, he's a doctor also. Shirley has two doctors, David Fredricks in San Francisco and he just moved to Palo Alto. He wants to take a course at Palo Alto and I don't remember what it is, also in medicine. They are such fine young

men. You met Laura. She has the highest principles. She's so smart, not because they are my grandchildren, but because it's the truth. I'm very happy as their grandmother.

MM: It's certainly a wonderful thing for us to get to know them, for me to get to know them personally, because they are learning what we are trying to do at the university in Fargo.

FW: Yah, young Larry, Larry's oldest son, is a helicopter pilot for Channel 2 here in town. When the O.J. Simpson case was on, he was six hours in the air, over Simpson's house and as he was leaving. He said at one point he had to go back and get some more gas. He's constantly on call and anytime something turns up he has to be out there with the helicopter. He wanted to be a pilot for the big planes, but he went to college and didn't like it and quit. So he has a high school education and he needed a college education. But they told him that the University of North Dakota has the best pilot training. Did you know that?

MM: Uh, huh.

FW: I didn't know that until young Larry told me. He is very smart and he has so much charisma. He's very well liked everywhere he goes, but he didn't want anything to do with college. Larry wanted him to go on and get his college degree, but he quit.

MM: Each has their own idea in life; you can't push them too far. Maybe he'll decide later on.

FW: Well, he got his helicopter license but he won't get the big plane license unless he gets a college education. Maybe that's why he's got a good job as a helicopter pilot for Channel 2. Kevin works in our office and so does his wife. Young Larry's wife works in a museum somewhere in town. She's very smart, and a very nice person.

MM: So they all found good husbands and wives and they respect the name Welk and their grandfather and, of course, their grandmother. With that we are going to say goodbye today to Fern Renner Welk here in Santa Monica. It's the 27th of July 1994, and perhaps some day we can visit some more about all of this.

FW: Why not? And I'm going to take a nap.