

# In Touch with Prairie Living

March 2022

By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection  
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA  
**GRHC**  
HERITAGE COLLECTION

On March 11, 2022, we celebrate the 119th birthday of Lawrence Welk who was born March 11, 1903, in a sodhouse near Strasburg, ND. He died on May 17, 1992, at the age of 89 in Santa Monica, CA. Lawrence Welk's parents, Ludwig and Christina (Schwahn) Welk were married in Selz near Odessa, Ukraine, and immigrated to the United States in 1894, to homestead in Strasburg, ND.

The State Historical Society of North Dakota provides an excellent brochure for the Welk Homestead State Historic Site. I share the information included: "An Immigrant farm family balancing old ways and new – whether farming on the homestead or, in the case of Lawrence Welk, hosting one of the most successful TV shows in history, the Welks made daily choices between old ways and new opportunities.

Ludwig and Christina Welk homesteaded in rural Strasburg in 1894, having emigrated from today's Ukraine. They raised eight children, including Lawrence, who lived here from his birth in 1903 until 1924. Although the Welks shared a common German dialect, music, food, religion, and other traditions with the surrounding German-Russian farm community, life in America also led to change. For example, they merged longstanding farming traditions with new mechanical equipment.

Lawrence himself chose new ways to become one of the wealthiest entertainers in America, and yet he never abandoned some of his cherished traditions. Learn how Welk family members faced these choices in different ways, each making their best possible lives in America."

The Welk Homestead State Historic Site is located at 845 88th Street SE, Strasburg, ND 58573, and is open Memorial Day Weekend to Labor Day, Thursdays to Sundays, 10 am to 5 pm. Further information at [www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk](http://www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk).

In March 2015, I received a most interesting letter from Verna (Fischer) Green, Hastings, MN, who was 88. I have fond memories of my visits at her home in Hastings, MN. Verna passed away in 2020 at age 93.

Verna grew up at Hague, ND. Her parents were Karl E. and Lena (Kocher) Fischer. Verna's grandparents immigrated to

the Hague area from the Black Sea village of Selz, Kutschurgan District, today near Odessa, Ukraine. Verna graduated from Hague High School in 1943 at age 16. She attended the College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, MN, where she majored in music. She graduated from the U.S. Cadet Nursing Corps Program in 1948.

With Verna's correspondence, she included an original typewritten letter dated February 7, 1948, from Lawrence Welk to her father Karl Fischer. Lawrence Welk wrote, "We are playing at the Trianon (in Chicago) but got permission to go to Madison (Wisconsin) to play the biggest prom of the year. Everyone dressed formal and it was possibly the highest class dance I have played in years. Look and Life magazines were there, and I took some pictures with the governor. The family now consists of two girls and a young boy – Shirley Jean, Dona Lee, and the youngest child is Lawrence Jr. We are closing at the Trianon tomorrow and will then be working out of Chicago before going to the Chase Hotel in St. Louis, and then to the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City."

Verna's father, Karl Fischer wrote a Letter to the Editor of the Emmons County Record, detailing a drive to Strasburg to watch a baseball game, "I always looked for Lawrence Welk and we sat in an open Model T to watch the game. We would not see much of the baseball game because we talked about music, in German of course.

When Lawrence had a job in Hague, he would come down on the train sometimes (from Roscoe, SD). We walked down the street together to advertise the dance he was to play that evening. Some people came just to hear the accordion. After the dance, if he could not get a ride home, I invited him to stay with me. After breakfast, we went to the living room to practice on my dad's pedal organ. Lawrence always carried some sheet music with his accordion. I already had some music lessons from our Hague Brass Band leader, Franz Neiharz. I played some of the sheet music with one finger.

Lawrence taught me some fast waltzes. When we were tired, he would pack up his accordion and walk to the train to go home. Lawrence told me to buy a set of drums and play with him. It would take a while before

I finally did buy a three-piece drum set. I also had an old Model T Roadster to get around with.

I played with Lawrence in Hague at a Werlinger barn dance, some basket socials, and in the green farm school. Once he called me and made a deal with me. He had a job to play near the Missouri River, northwest of Westfield. He came down on the train, we tied up our equipment on the back little trunk of my car and headed for Westfield. Late in the evening when Lawrence got tired playing, he told me to play a number and I would play the drums. In the morning, we had another session on the pedal organ. In 1920, I left Hague to go to school. Lawrence made mention of me on page 30 in his book, "Wunnerful! Wunnerful!"

The Verna (Fischer) Green Collection was donated to the GRHC and includes valuable black and white photographs of Hague taken by Karl Fischer, with detailed captions and genealogical records of the Fischer, Schneider, and Senger families.

On February 24, we woke up to the tragic news of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine. The GRHC has offered ancestral heritage tours to Ukraine since 1996, and over 650 people have joined us to visit the villages of their German-Russian ancestors. Through these tours, we have developed many lasting friendships, professional relationships, and a great love for the people of Ukraine. We are deeply saddened by this development and our sincere prayers for safety, courage, and resolve are with our friends, colleagues, and all of Ukraine as they fight for their independence and freedom.

Due to this development, all future Journey to the Homeland Tours are postponed indefinitely. We do not know what the future holds for Ukraine – but we hope one day we will be able to visit our friends again.

For more information about donating family histories and photographs, or how to financially support the GRHC, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050, (Tel: 701-231-8416); [michael.miller@ndsu.edu](mailto:michael.miller@ndsu.edu); or go to [library.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc).

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