

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
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On March 11, 2024, we celebrate the 121st birthday of bandleader Lawrence Welk. He was born March 11, 1903 in a sodhouse near Strasburg, ND, and died on May 17, 1992. The Lawrence Welk Collection was donated to the North Dakota State University Archives, Fargo.

In May 1994, I interviewed Fern (Renner) Welk, wife of Lawrence Welk, during the grand opening of the Lawrence Welk Champagne Theater in Branson, MO. Included in this column are highlights from that interview. She was born on August 26, 1903, on a ranch near St. Anthony, south of Mandan, ND. Her parents were Mathias and Elizabeth (Anton) Renner, who had emigrated from the Catholic Beresan District villages of South Russia (today near Odessa, Ukraine).

Fern shared, "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, he served on juries and stuff like that.

In the mornings when mother would get up, I would always crawl into the 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?'

When dad died, mother had trouble. They said, 'You have nothing signed.' But he was that type of 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. I never heard mother say, 'Oh my, I'm a widow and left with eight children.' She took her shoulder to the wheel and forged ahead.

I think my mother 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 out how

everything could 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 figured it out on paper.

My dad was a very religious man. My mother, I can only think of her like a fireball. She was here, but was there, she was all over and everything was accomplished beautifully. The church was the number one thing, and we children would go and board at the sisters' school.

Mother couldn't read English. She got the German newspaper, Nord Dakota Herold. I can remember she would have it spread out all over the table, reading all of this in German. But she couldn't read or speak English.

By the time my sister Rose was sixteen, she could cook for anybody. 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 the it's warm enough to put the cake in. You never saw cakes like Rose baked. 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 best food and the cakes were marvelous.

When I got ready and wanted to go away to school, my uncle Joseph Renner said, 'Elizabeth, why do you want to send Fern away to school? She could stay here and get married like the rest of them.' You know that's how it was and 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.' You know that area was all German-Russians. My brothers and sisters all spoke English. I didn't speak a word of English until I started school. I can remember that I started in a public school and in a few months, they promoted me from first to second grade because I caught on. I took German, real German, when I was in Catholic high school in Fargo with the Presentation Nuns.

I remember when Lawrence and I were married, and when we came home. Mother was a well-dressed woman. I had beautiful

clothes when I was growing up. If she took her dress off, she wouldn't hang it up. It had to be ironed, every wrinkle is out before it was hung up again. Charlie would say, 'She's the best dressed woman in church on Sunday.'" Fern's brother Charlie died in the 1918 flu.

Ending the interview with Fern, she shared, "They went through the depression. They came to America and didn't speak a word of the English language. They struggled and made it, and especially in the case of the Renner family. My mother, with eight children, saw to it that I was one of the youngest, she made sure that I needed a career too and needed to be educated so I could read and write and help others."

Fern Welk passed away on February 13, 2002, in Santa Monica, CA. She was 98 years old.

For the complete transcription of the oral interview with Fern Renner Welk, go to <http://hdl.handle.net/10365/14364>. In a future column, I will highlight the interview of Fern on July 27, 1994, at Santa Monica, CA.

The Welk Homestead State Historic Site near Strasburg, ND, will have an impressive new addition for the summer of 2024, be watching for an announcement. The Welk Homestead is open Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day, Thursdays to Sundays, 10 am to 5 pm. For information, go to www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk.

For more information about donating family histories and photographs, or how to financially support the GRHC, contact Jeremy Kopp, at jeremy.kopp@ndsu.edu or 701-231-6596; mail to: NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, N.D. 58108-6050; or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc or email michael.miller@ndsu.edu.

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