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Garrison Keillor:

Wobegon's Workaholic

By Pat Woods

For someone who seems very much in sync with the values and slower pace of a small town, Garrison Keillor is, in fact, a workaholic. The popular host of Minnesota Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" still writes all of the show's scripts himself, beginning on Thursday or Friday and making continual changes until Saturday's performance. Deadlines motivate him.

"When you know that on Saturday you have a live show in front of 7,000 people, you focus your concentration," Keillor says while unwinding in his dressing room following a two-hour show and an hour

of signing memorabilia for fans in Sun City West, Ariz. "If I didn't have the show to write, I would have spent more time with my daughter or finished the books I'm reading."

Keillor, who is often compared to Mark Twain and Will Rogers, hosts 34 live "Prairie Home Companion" shows a year. He does comedy sketches, he sings, and, of course, he delivers "News From Lake Wobegon," his signature monologues about a mythical Minnesota town — and he does it all without notes.

Keillor also writes for *Time* magazine, narrates short segments for Public Radio's "Writer's Almanac" and contributes to an Internet column that can be found at www.salon.com. He has 11

books to his credit and is working on yet another. Musician friends and "PHC" staffers describe Keillor as a workaholic.

"Instead of time off when shows repeat, he does appearances at the Hollywood Bowl with the Oregon Symphony, and other [shows]," says "PHC" producer Chris Tschida.

After graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1966 with a degree in English, Keillor's big break came in 1969, when Minnesota Public Radio offered him a job that required him to work from 5:30 a.m. to noon.

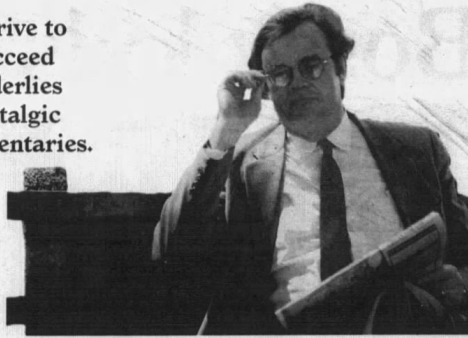
"I got the job because I was willing to get up at 4 a.m.," Keillor says. "I was not particularly talented and did not have a great voice or impressive recommendations. That was the great opportunity which led to everything else."

When "A Prairie Home Companion" debuted in St. Paul in 1974, there were more people on stage than in the audience, and receipts were less than \$8. The show is now carried by 470 public radio stations, has 2.7 million listeners coast to coast and has made a successful leap overseas. Whether on the road or in St. Paul, the live shows sell out quickly.

The third of six children, Gary Edward Keillor was born in Anoka, Minn., in

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1942. He was reared in the faith of his Scottish forebears, the Plymouth Brethren, a fundamentalist group that forbids dancing, watching movies, drinking and gambling. His love of music and his distinctive baritone voice grew from singing hymns at home and in church.

"We weren't supposed to dance, but of course we did," says Keillor, who began using the name Garrison when submitting poetry to his grade-school newspaper, because he wanted a name that conveyed strength. "Growing up in a restrictive group gives you a feeling that you're surrounded and cushioned by people who care about you. You never lose it, even when going through the rough parts of life in which you experience frustration, defeat and loneliness."

Although Keillor's passion for work brought professional success, it hindered his personal life. His first marriage to Mary Guntzel ended in divorce in 1976. Their son, Jason, grew up spending weekends with his father backstage. He now serves as the show's stage manager.

Keillor made a well-publicized exit from "Prairie Home Companion" in 1985, when he went to Denmark with his second wife, Ulla Skaerved.

His dreams of greater writing achievements didn't materialize, and the marriage faltered. In 1987, Keillor reinvented the show in New York as "The American Radio Company." Five years later, the popular program returned to St. Paul as "The Prairie Home Companion."

While living in New York, Keillor met wife No. 3, Jenny Lind Nilsson, a classical violinist 15 years his junior. She's now a freelance musician in St. Paul, where they live in the Cathedral Hill neighborhood with their 2-year-old daughter, Maia, and a part-time nanny.

So along with a full plate of professional commitments, Keillor once again finds himself playing the role of father.

"I had no idea when I fell in love with Jenny that she wanted a child," Keillor says. "She had never been married before, and decided at age 39 that she wanted a child. I thought, 'I love her, and if this is what she wants, I'll do this.'"

And that's the news from Lake Wobegon.

Pat Woods is a regular contributor to *ActiveTimes* on travel and lifestyle topics.

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