

From Fall Creek to Lake Wobegon

Former Wisconsin resident provides news on 'Companion'

After growing up in bucolic Fall Creek and living in similar rural places, Holly Harden can identify with the mythical burg of Lake Wobegon from the radio show "Prairie Home Companion."

It isn't all that mythical to her.

That may be why she hit it off with show host Garrison Keillor. Or maybe it was because she lives in Scandia, Minn., a Norwegian enclave. Or because her husband is a Lutheran minister and the church has a lot of "Norwegian bachelors who are ushers," she said.

Harden had applied for a part-time writing job in 2002, not knowing it was with "Prairie Home Companion." She didn't expect to pick up the phone one day soon thereafter and hear Keillor, whose sonorous voice she recognized from the Minnesota Public Radio show, which began its 32nd season last night with a live performance from the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul.

He was much more than a voice, she soon discovered. They talked for three hours.

"He told me once when he hired me that 'you and I come from the same stock,'" Harden said last week.

Suddenly, Harden, a mid-30s mother of three, former teacher and aspiring writer,



Contributed photo
Garrison Keillor, who hosts the show "Prairie Home Companion," has two staff writers with ties to the Chippewa Valley: Fall Creek native Holly Harden and Eau Claire native Laura Buchholz.

found herself working for the iconic Keillor.

In a sense, she doesn't write for Keillor but helps him write. By sending him

a weekly e-mail about what's happening in Scandia, she is his life-in-Minnesota touchstone when he gives the "News from Lake Wobegon" monologue, one of the most popular parts of the show.

When Keillor spins his weekly tale about Wobegon, where "all the children are above average," etc., he's picking up on seasonal and small-

town life thoughts that Harden has sent him.

See **KEILLOR**, Page 3C



Off Beat
Jerry Poling

Keillor/Writer also does research for poetry show

from Page 1C

Harden explains it like this: "At some point he asked me to just write to him about Scandia. Later on I figured I was writing a letter to him about Lake Wobegon. I'll tell him something, but I hear it on the radio and it's not word for word," Harden said.

"To him I'm a friend who sends him letters, and the letters give him ideas. With his schedule, which is unbelievable, how would he know the orchids are blooming or the turtles are hatching? He might know it, but I'm kind of a timeline for him."

Harden gleaned material for Keillor from life in Scandia, a city of 2,500 just north of the Twin Cities. She takes mental notes when she grocery shops, talks to her husband about the sermon that week, finds out what's going on with her children at school. She talks to her dad, Mike Hardin, an outdoorsman from Eau Claire, about the natural world.

Some people know she writes for the show and will approach her and say, "You won't believe what happened at Gary's pig farm."

"The important thing is that whatever I send him is true. The bulk of what I write for him is very ordinary, like what kind of pies are on special this week. They're putting up the Christmas tree at church. Everything is filtered through him; he transforms the details into something else. The story is his; I just provide the details."

If you heard Keillor's story last night, you might have heard some of these recent Wobegon thoughts from Harden: The weather has cooled down; pelicans are migrating south from Canada — 300 were spotted on the lake; late summer mushrooms are sprouting on oak trees; there's a festival in town; school is under way.

When Harden hears Keillor's monologue — she mostly works from home and isn't at the shows — she might hear much of what she e-mailed Keillor or very little, but it makes little difference to her because she knows she has helped Keillor in some way with his story, which he writes but then tells from memory, without notes.

"I think the man is a genius," she said of Keillor, who recently published his latest Lake Wobegon-themed novel, "Pontoon."

The story of a writer
Harden herself could be one of Keillor's heartfelt stories, a small-town girl who fell in love with the written word as a girl in Fall Creek, where she graduated from high school in 1985.

"I always considered myself a writer," she said.

"Anything having to do with writing, I was in."

Along with cheerleading, track, volleyball, forensics — all the things you'd expect from a non-urban childhood. "It was a great place to grow up."

Sounds a lot like Lake Wobegon.

After earning an English education degree at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., "I knew I had to do something to supplement a writer's income" — she taught English literature in grades 7 and 8 in Fall Creek from 1990 to 1994 where her dad taught at the same time.

She left for St. Paul, where her husband entered the seminary, and then to Barnum, Minn., when he began to preach. She taught in Barnum for four years.

At the urging of her students, she went back to school to get her master of fine arts degree from Hamline College to pursue her dream — writing. Her thesis was on being a pastor's wife; she hopes to turn it into a nonfiction book.

"I had three kids, so it was a little crazy," she said of returning to school.

Then she applied for the part-time writing job, not knowing she was auditioning for Keillor when she sent in some writing samples in 2002. And he called one August day and hired her as his assistant.

"He said he liked my writing," she said, although she admits she would have sent different writing samples had she known they were going to him.

"Working for him is wonderful because you do things you don't expect. He might say, 'Tell me everything you can tell me about tomatoes.' You don't ask him why."

In addition to her weekly missive from Scandia, Harden helps research poems for "The Writer's Almanac," another public radio show of Keillor's — they are drawn to similar poetry — and writes regularly for the show's Web site.

Harden, 40, loves being part of "Prairie Home Companion" but would acknowledge that even in an idyllic place like Wobegon or Scandia or Fall Creek, nothing stays the same. Everything has its edge.

"I do writing on my own, but there's not a lot of energy left for that. There are books I want to finish. I have over 1,000 pages of stories I've written and essays."

"This is a really good experience. A great thing that's come of this is I feel like I have a friendship with (Keillor). We don't hang out, but I feel like there's someone who knows me pretty well and I know him pretty well."

And they seem to know well a place where many of us like to go, even if only in our minds, even if only for a story on Saturday nights.

Poling can be reached at 830-5832. (800) 236-7077 or jerry.poling@ecpc.com.



Harden