

THE END OF AN ERA

# I FIRED GARRISON KEILLOR

Long ago, a young man with ideas of his own got his walking papers. It was the right choice for both of us.

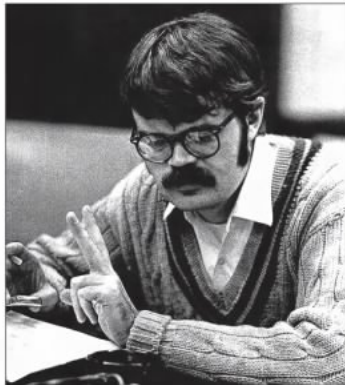
By JOANNE JONSON KILDE

**G**arrison Keillor is retiring? Could this be? A recent article in the Star Tribune did indeed confirm this. It stirred in me the remembrance of an incident long past.

The newspaper mentions Garrison broadcasting his own program in 1969 over Minnesota Public Radio's station KSJN at St. John's University in Collegeville. That's when the Communication Center, a section of Minnesota State Services for the Blind in St. Paul, went on the air with a pioneering effort of closed-circuit radio, 24/7. The latest newspapers, books and magazines were broadcast. Specially designed radios were loaned without charge to eligible listeners. We called this service the Radio Talking Book Network (RTBN).

This one-of-a-kind system rode piggyback on the MPR transmitter out of Collegeville. Volunteer readers in the Twin Cities and elsewhere in Minnesota auditioned. Garrison, of course, passed his audition and was assigned along with two or three other colleagues in Collegeville to broadcast live to Minnesota listeners the morning newspapers via this closed-circuit radio signal from KSJN.

This gifted young broadcaster had his own ideas about how



DONALD BLACK - Star Tribune file photo 1969

Garrison Keillor briefly worked reading newspapers on the air, but he couldn't, or wouldn't, stick to the script

to run things. I had other plans. So we bumped heads.

Garrison and all other volunteer broadcasters were required to read the printed word as written — no ad-libbing or editorializing. So Keillor fans will readily foresee the rest of this story: two warnings, and out on the third. I suffered some remorse about it, in spite of the hard heads involved.

A number of years later, when "A Prairie Home Companion" had become beloved across the country, one of our RTBN staff members had the pleasure of interviewing Garrison on air. Before the broadcast, a brief warm-up conversation ensued in our studio, during which he asked, "Does Joni Jonson still work here?"

"Yes," replied the staff member. "Did you know she fired me?" What the response was and how that conversation proceeded, I know not, but the gist of it was later passed on to me, including the use of the word "fired."

Now that Garrison and I are old — he, 74; I, 88 — we know that memories of those early experiences of success and failure seldom disappear. "A Prairie Home Companion" still exists, and has reached beyond anyone's vision. I am a dedicated fan. The Communication Center and its vital volunteer program still exists, much enlarged and improved beyond my own early expectations.

I'm glad I "fired" the young man. He simply continued to march to his own beat. He found his niche in weaving original, magical, human-life tales with music and sound effects that persuaded his listeners to tune in next week.

Kudos, Garrison, from one hard head to another.

Joanne Jonson Kilde lives in Northfield.