“A Prairie Home Companion”: First Broadcast (July 6, 1974)

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Essay by Chuck Howell (guest post)*

Garrison Keillor

“Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my hometown, out on the edge of the prairie.”

On July 6, 1974, before a crowd of maybe a dozen people (certainly less than 20), a live radio variety program went on the air from the campus of Macalester College in St. Paul, MN. It was called “A Prairie Home Companion,” a name which at once evoked a sense of place and a time now past--recalling the “Little House on the Prairie” books, the once popular magazine “The Ladies Home Companion” or “The Prairie Farmer,” the oldest agricultural publication in America (founded 1841). The “Prairie Farmer” later bought WLS radio in Chicago from Sears, Roebuck & Co. and gave its name to the powerful clear channel station, which blanketed the middle third of the country from 1928 until its sale in 1959. The creator and host of the program, Garrison Keillor, later confided that he had no nostalgic intent, but took the name from “The Prairie Home Cemetery” in Moorhead, MN. His explanation is both self-effacing and humorous, much like the program he went on to host, with some sabbaticals and detours, for the next 42 years.

Origins

Gary Edward “Garrison” Keillor was born in Anoka, MN on August 7, 1942 and raised in nearby Brooklyn Park. His family were not (contrary to popular opinion) Lutherans, instead belonging to a strict fundamentalist religious sect known as the Plymouth Brethren. The Brethren abjured tobacco, alcohol, dancing, gambling, movies and (initially) television. Keillor, who as an adult has moved back and forth between the Lutheran and Episcopalian churches, later observed, “...no self-respecting Brethren family would ever want a child of theirs to go into entertainment or literature.”

As a youth he did enjoy two forms of entertainment that were allowed--the radio and singing.

Keillor's family had a large Zenith console centrally located in the living room. Here he would listen to his favorite shows and personalities from the latter part of what became known as radio's "Golden Age": The children's program "Let's Pretend," the hilarious small town characters and tongue-twisting wordplay of "Fibber McGee and Molly," the more gentle dialect comedy of "Life With Luigi" and the teenage romantic crisis *du jour* of "Meet Corliss Archer."

One of Gary's idols was Arthur Godfrey, a former radio disc jockey and announcer who by 1950 hosted upwards of ten hours of programming a week on CBS. Godfrey could play the ukulele a bit and sang with a distinct nasal twang. His true gift was the "gift of gab," and the ability to simultaneously poke fun at his sponsors while selling everything from Lipton Tea to Chevrolets in unheard of numbers.

It was Cedric Adams of WCCO radio and television in the Twin Cities who was his real hero, though. Adams was for 30 years the "best known voice in the Upper Midwest." He did the news in an authoritative baritone, but had a folksy and informal style as a host, at one time handling 20 programs a week on radio and TV. He also has the distinctly Minnesotan honor of having a type of hotdish named for him.

As for singing, Keillor's bass voice developed almost fully formed by the 6th grade. He took to the autoharp as well, an instrument he played on stage during the early years of "A Prairie Home Companion." Talking was also not proscribed, and Keillor displayed a storyteller's instincts from an early age. As an adolescent he babysat neighborhood children for pocket money, keeping them "enthralled" (and out of mischief) with what one of his former charges remembered as "incredible stories." Keillor would act out these invented adventures himself, sometimes using stuffed animals or other toys to heighten the drama. Soon he was adding local residents into his fantastic tales, to the delight of his young audience.

Graduating to writing plays, his sister, Linda Keillor Berg, remembered begging for a part, though she was too young to remember her lines. With a bit of pragmatic brotherly genius, he devised for her the part of a pet rabbit--one that did nothing but lie under the dining room table, twitching its nose throughout the entire production. (Justin, Neal. "Sun is setting on Garrison Keillor's great years on Lake Wobegon," *Star Tribune*, 5/12/2020.)

He attended high school in the neighboring town of Anoka, where an English teacher introduced him to the works of James Thurber, E.B. White and the rest of the legendary staffers of "The New Yorker." Keillor was soon writing poems, stories and short bits for the local sports page, already dreaming of someday appearing in that storied magazine. At around this same time, he adopted the name "Garrison," feeling it had more weight and dignity than plain "Gary."

After graduating from high school, Keillor enrolled at the University of Minnesota, home to the oldest non-commercial radio station in the country--KUOM. From 1963-68, Keillor worked as both a student and then a paid newsreader and announcer at the station. He also served as one of the hosts of a five-hour free-form program called "Radio Free Saturday." This less structured show became the first broadcasting outlet for Keillor's own developing voice.

Keillor's other creative outlet was writing and editing for the University's literary magazine, "The Ivory Tower." In his regular column, "Broadsides," his intellect rambled over topics as varied as Old Time Radio and issues of academic freedom. On at least one occasion, when he felt that submissions were not up to his exacting standards, editor Keillor wrote the entire thick

publication himself, using a variety of pseudonyms. This ability to produce copious material on a deadline would hold him in good stead later in his radio career.

The Old Scout

After completing his BA and taking a stab at graduate studies, Keillor tried his luck in New York, but failed to find a job at his beloved "New Yorker" (or anywhere else). He and his first wife, Mary, soon moved to Freeport MN, where he hosted "The Morning Program" on KSJR-FM of St. John's University, just down the road in Collegeville. KSJR is the founding station of Minnesota Public Radio (then the Minnesota Educational Network). It was Keillor's time in Freeport and its environs, more than his Anoka-area childhood, that seems to be the real inspiration for the centerpiece of "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor's stories of the inhabitants of the fictional town of Lake Wobegon. Also serving as inspiration was the tiny village of Marine on St. Croix. That community was home to Ralph's General Store, which Keillor immortalized as Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, a fixture of Lake Wobegon and an "advertiser" on APHC--"Remember--if you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it…."

His stint at KSJR was a bumpy one. He butted heads with station management over his habit of playing country, bluegrass and rock 'n' roll during his classical music program. They were not enamored of his penchant for inserting his now trademark radio ads for nonexistent companies and products into his patter, either. The fictional Jack's Auto Repair was the first of these ("All tracks lead to Jack's, where the flashing yellow lights show you the way to complete satisfaction"), though the entrepreneurial Jack soon developed myriad other enterprises, some of them located in the nearby imaginary town of Lake Wobegon. In March of 1971, Keillor was asked to take a "hiatus" which eventually lasted almost seven months.

After trying to live off his writing income for a bit (Keillor had realized one ambition and sold his first piece to "The New Yorker" in 1970), he returned to Minnesota Public Radio as "GK the DJ" (the title of his first collection of essays--created as a pledge drive premium) on a new station, KSJN, Twin Cities Public Radio in Minnesota. It was at KSJN that Keillor first came up with "A Prairie Home Companion" as the name of his then four-morning a week program--it later became "The Prairie Home Morning Show" to distinguish it from the Saturday night show.

At KSJN, Keillor was eventually partnered with Tom Keith, who ran the board and read sports on the program. Keillor immediately sensed a kindred spirit in Keith, and invented a character for him to play--the bumpkin-ish Jim Ed Poole--who still read the sports, but also trained attack chickens on the side. Jim Ed would talk to Keillor about the exploits of his favorite fowl, Curtis, who sometimes visited the studio (Keith played Curtis as well). Tom Keith would work with Keillor for the next 38 years, playing squeaky-voiced adolescents, friendly bartenders, rude French waiters and animals of all kinds. His specialty was providing "oral sound-effects" for everything from rifle shots and helicopters to dripping faucets and a man being devoured alive by piranhas.

Letters from Lake Wobegon resident Barbara Ann Bunsen began "arriving" and were read on the air, and the sponsors continued to proliferate. Keillor started referring to himself as "the old Scout" (he never said his own name on any of his programs). Soon, APHC and "the old Scout" were gaining a real following in the Twin Cities and beyond.

The next step in the evolution of "A Prairie Home Companion," from the studio to a live variety show with an audience, required getting Keillor, who truly was a "shy person," up on an actual stage.

Out of the clear blue...

An employee of The Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis was a fan of the radio show, and she approached Keillor and some friends about doing stage readings of poetry and prose with music. These performances proved popular, growing into a series of regular appearances under the title "A Prairie Home Entertainment." Keillor wrote some original material for these performances, both prose and poetry. Declining to participate in comedy sketches with other performers, he acted as emcee. At around this same time, with his writing career beginning to pick up (he was doing some "intellectual" sports analysis for a new Twin Cities weekly as well as work for "The New Yorker") Keillor took another sabbatical from the microphone to concentrate on the pen. "The New Yorker" wanted to send him to Nashville to write about the grandpappy of all musical variety radio shows, the Grand Ole Opry.

His assignment was to do a piece on the show's last broadcast from Nashville's Ryman Auditorium. The Ryman, built in 1892, had been home to The Opry since 1943, almost 31 years. He spent a week or so in town, arriving by train at the beginning of the second week of March, 1974. The last show at the Ryman was Friday, March 15 and the first show at the new venue was the next evening.

His piece appeared in the May 6, 1974 issue of "The New Yorker" under the regular feature heading "Onward and Upward with the Arts" and was titled simply "At the Opry." Its tone might best be described as nostalgia, tinged with sadness and reproach. The move from the Ryman, "The Mother Church of Country Music," to the new Grand Ole Opry House, built on the grounds of a recently completed theme park (the now defunct Opryland USA), struck Keillor as just plain wrong. He attended the last Ryman show seated in the engineer's booth:

> The best place to see the Opry that night, I decided, was in the booth with my eyes shut, leaning against the back wall, the music coming out of the speaker just like radio, that good old AM mono sound. The room smelled of hot radio tubes, and, closing my eyes, I could see the stage as clearly as when I was a kid lying in front of our giant Zenith console. I'd seen a photograph of the Opry stage back then, and, believe me, one is all you need. So it was good to let the Opry go out the same way it had first come to me, over the air in the dark. (Garrison Keillor, "Onward and Upwards with the Arts: At the Opry," *The New Yorker*, 5/6/1974, p. 68.)

In the article, Keillor describes how a series of mostly self-imposed difficulties conspired to keep him from attending the first show at the Grand Ole Opry House, so "vibrant and viable" with its "specially designed contoured pew-type benches covered in burnt orange colored carpeting." He was ...

> ...relieved not to be able to go and not have to see the President introduced by Roy Acuff. This was nothing but plain prudery, and priggishness, and ordinary low-grade snobbishness on my part; I was ashamed of it, and I intend to correct it, but I hadn't time to correct it right then, and I left the hotel lest somebody call and offer me a ride. (Keillor 69.)

He went out and spent $6.95 on a used transistor radio at a nearby pawn shop and listened to the show in his room. All the country greats were there, and President Nixon played "Happy Birthday" on the piano for his wife Pat. The President left, and the sponsors rolled by--"on the Goo Goo Cluster candy portion of the Opry, Jim and Jesse McReynolds sang 'Freight Train,'" followed by "Dottie West singing 'Country Sunshine' for Stephens Workwear, Western Jeans and Slacks"...

> And then--then--the moment I'd been waiting for. Sam and Kirk McGee from sunny Tennessee played "San Antonio Rose." It was the acoustic moment of the show, when the skies cleared and the weeping steels were silent and out of the clear blue came a little ole guitar duet. Stunning and simple, and so good after all the sound I'd heard that week --the sweetest "Rose" this side of Texas. I turned out the light, turned off the radio, and went to sleep on it.
>
> In the morning, the radio was on the floor, its plastic cover cracked. I believe it would still work, but I will never play it again. It is my only Opry souvenir. (Keillor 70.)

A Prairie Home Companion

Two months after this piece was published Garrison Keillor was onstage for the first time as host of "A Prairie Home Companion." It is true that he had already been thinking about producing a live radio variety show. He and Minnesota Public Radio President Bill Kling had discussed it after the success of the Walker Art Center performances. It was in visiting Nashville and writing his piece about the Opry that seems to have been the real catalyst, though. It helped crystallize a particular feeling he wanted to evoke with his program, the same one he experienced himself as a child (and again in that Nashville hotel room).

"You listen to the Opry and pretty soon you have a place in mind… and eventually you have got to go and be there too. Its liveness appealed to me then--it charged the show with an excitement above and beyond the music, the old magic of radio as a connection to distant places," he said. (W. David Stephenson, "Live from Lake Wobegon; WILL NPR'S 'PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION' BRING RADIO OF AGE AGAIN?" Special to *The Christian Science Monitor,* 2/11/1982.)

The overall form of the show, an olio of songs, stories and skits with a liberal sprinkling of his trademark ads for invented products (which meant they were permissible on public radio) closely mimicked that of the Grand Ole Opry, right down to various blocks of the two -hour program having different sponsors ("This portion of our program is brought to you by Bertha's Kitty Boutique, for persons who care about cats…").

The most prominent of these "sponsors" was undoubtedly Powdermilk Biscuits:

> Powdermilk Biscuits! Heaven's they're tasty and expeditious. Give shy persons the strength they need to get up and do what needs to be done. Made from whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers, so you know they're not only good for you, they're pure, mostly. Get 'em in the bright blue box with a picture of a biscuit on the front, or ready-made in the brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness.

This sponsor also had its own logo, and a jingle performed by The Powdermilk Biscuit Band, no less. This verisimilitude was another Keillor call-back to radio's past, where Martha White

Flour was a sponsor on the Grand Ole Opry and future Texas Governor W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel and his Light Crust Doughboys peddled Light Crust Flour all over the American Southwest.

In the first years of the program, Keillor and MPR used local talent almost exclusively. The program's budget was very tight, and area performers appeared for scale (or less) just for the exposure. Later, as the show grew in popularity, they could lure name performers, but usually, as Keillor said, "Our guests represent an impoverished cottage industry, recording for little-known purist labels such as Folk-Legacy and Philo. Because of the show's low budget, we have to wait for them to come by." Often, the more well-known musical guests would appear in the first hour of the program and then leave to go play the better-paying gig that had brought them to town in the first place.

The program's increasing profile was in no small part due to the growth of Minnesota Public Radio itself. The network added stations and signal repeaters throughout the state, improving coverage and reception. By 1978, this expanded broadcast network meant that a large number of the program's fans were listening from neighboring states.

Some of these early listeners, remembering when it was still a regional offering, feel that the program reached its peak in the late 1970's, when there was more of a loose, unrehearsed quality to the proceedings. Keillor joked that it was a waste of time to try and describe it to a non-listener, so "don't bother." Roy Blount, Jr.--later a frequent guest on the show--wrote in "The New York Times," "Keillor's weekly National Public Radio show, 'A Prairie Home Companion,' is impossible to describe. Everyone I have met who has heard it has either been dumbfounded by it or addicted to it, or both." (Roy Blount Jr. "Garrison Keillor" *The New York Times Book Review*, pg. 12, 2/28/1982.)

David Black of "Rolling Stone" magazine took a stab at that "impossible" task in a 1981 story for "The Boston Globe": "[T]he show is an electronic version of the turn-of-the-century practice of gathering around the parlor piano on a Saturday night...a mulligan stew of programming: old jazz, 20's and 30's pop tunes, gospel music, ballads, Balkan songs, fiddle, dulcimer and autoharp solos, yodeling and novelty tunes like 'The Teddy Bears' picnic." (Black, David. A Cult Show From the Midwest, *The Boston Globe*, 8/1/1981.)

Though an accurate description, Black's take on the program as the electronic equivalent of the parlor piano is off by one or two degrees of separation. It misses part of what made APHC so successful, and so obviously a product of late 20th century America--ironic distance. In truth, it was programs like the Grand Ole Opry which had filled that "parlor piano" role. APHC was at once an homage to that tradition and a gentle parody at the same time. It evoked feelings and yearnings in its audience for things they mostly didn't remember or never experienced in the first place. It appeared old-fashioned merely by being radio and not television, but under its veneer of wistful nostalgia lurked trenchant social and cultural criticism.

Whatever the true formula for success was, be it satire disguised as earnest wholesomeness, nostalgia, great music, humorous poems, ads for fake products and companies or social commentary delivered though all of the above, the program was poised for bigger things at what turned out to be a very opportune moment.

The Big Time

In 1979, National Public Radio--with support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting--developed one of the first satellite distribution systems for broadcasting in the country--the Public Radio Satellite System, or PRSS. Minnesota Public Radio's Bill Kling had offered the program to NPR for national distribution, but NPR President Frank Manckiewicz thought Keillor a strictly regional phenomenon and declined. Kling then took advantage of the new PRSS and its Direct Access Communication System, or DACS--an early texting service which allowed member stations to send messages to each other. Kling announced that for the next year he was offering APHC to any interested station over the PRSS free to try for one month, beginning with the program of May 3, 1980. This decision by Kling helped Keillor's program become public broadcasting's most visible success since "Sesame Street."

By the end of 1981, APHC was carried on 150 public radio stations with an audience of perhaps 700,000. In 1983, it was heard on 206 stations across the USA, with an estimated two million listeners, and by 1984 it was drawing upwards of 4.5M listeners a week. A program that was derided by its critics as being too slow, too old-fashioned, a throwback to a form of entertainment that was deservedly dead, was by every measure available a huge hit. In 1985, Keillor was on the cover of "Time" magazine. The story inside, entitled "Lonesome Whistle Blowing," was keyed to the publication of the surprise bestseller "Lake Wobegon Days," and compared Keillor's monologues and writings to that of his "New Yorker" idols, James Thurber and E.B. White. In the five years since it had become available outside Minnesota and environs, the program had become a popular culture touchstone, and its creator and host a much more famous person than he ever expected to be. (Skow, John, and Jack E. White. 1985. "Lonesome Whistle Blowing." *Time* 126 (18): 68.)

The News From Lake Wobegon

The references to Lake Wobegon were part of the new program from the start, with more letters from Barbara Ann Bunsen, and then poems like "The Finn Who Would Not Take A Sauna" sent in by the town's self-appointed poet laureate, Margaret Haskins Durber. Still, it wasn't until 1977 that Keillor said the words that became synonymous with APHC, "Well. It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon.…"

The highlight of every show is Keillor's career-making innovation: the so-called "News From Lake Wobegon," a pointedly un-thrilling 20-minute monologue full of childhood tomato fights, drunk preachers, Norwegian bachelor farmers, Minnesota weather (God designed the month of March "to show people who don't drink what a hangover feels like"), and sentimental rhapsodies about the precious things in life.

The segment always ends with the achingly familiar line, "That's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above-average." And then a storm of rapturous applause. (Anderson, Sam. "A Prairie Home Conundrum The mysterious appeal of Garrison Keillor." *Slate*, 6/16/2006.)

Keillor has said in various public appearances that Lake Wobegon ("which comes from the Ojibwe word that means 'the place where we waited three days for you in the rain'") was originally invented as a place to locate all the imaginary sponsors he had begun creating for his morning radio show. Then…

> I invented people who lived in this town, and slowly, inch by inch, this all came

> along...and the women were strong and the men good looking and the children all above average... And early in the morning, out of weariness and despair, trying not to sound as bad as I felt, I invented what came to be sort of my "Magnum Opus," this little town where I would go on, week after week after week, for now forty years, making up these stories...about people who actually are my parents, and who are my parents' siblings. And some people who I grew up among in Anoka, MN, and some people I met later, but mostly my parents' generation. I have been creating through Lake Wobegon, the world of my parents, which was a world of cheerful people. (Remarks by Garrison Keillor at the book launch event for "The Keillor Reader," May 1, 2014 – YouTube.)

Keillor's monologues were--by design--short on specific detail, but still contained more than enough information so that listeners could each create their own image of the people and places of "the little town that time forgot, and the decades can't improve." A town invented as a fictional location for fictional sponsors became more real to Keillor's audience than any of literature's most famous imaginary lands--more real than Oz or Wonderland or Middle Earth, more real than Camelot or Neverland, even more real than their actual places of residence.

This is due in large part to Keillor's unique storytelling gifts. Another reason is the rather prosaic and quotidian nature of Keillor's invention. Lake Wobegon is a town like many others--a small and somewhat isolated midwestern farming community. It is filled with the descendants of European immigrants--Germans, Norwegians and Swedes mostly. It's conservative and fairly religious, with Lutherans and Catholics predominating. There are prominent families--local merchants, owners of car dealerships and restaurants--along with eccentrics, old unmarried farmers, bar stool warmers, town gossips and the like.

Life there follows the rhythms of the seasons, with baseball giving way to ice fishing, gardening to snow shoveling and kids trudging to school, waiting for the freedom of summer. There are meetings, concerts, church suppers and the like. In short, it could be your town, or the town you grew up in but left, or the town where your grandparents lived that you visited in the summer. It is not magical. Far from it, actually--and yet, by engaging us and our imaginations, by making us partners in its creation, Keillor makes it almost seem so. This act of imagination is what drew Keillor to radio from the start, and it's what makes his little town seem so real as well. The "literalness" of film and television actually works against those media in this respect. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but words can paint things in your mind no artist can replicate. As Keillor wrote,

> [P]eople believe that radio was superseded by television, just as the automobile made it unnecessary to have legs. Poor people. It's not nostalgia to recall that radio once had comedians and singers, and it's hard to regard television, which reduces everything to the same size, as an advance. Radio made things bigger. (Keillor, Garrison. Liner Notes - *A Prairie Home Companion Anniversary Album*, Minnesota Public Radio, 1980.)

One anecdote--at the height of the program's popularity in the mid-1980's, the American Automobile Association fielded so many queries from people trying to find Lake Wobegon on their Minnesota road maps that they added it to the map's index under "Towns--Fictional."

Keillor and his little town did have their detractors, but at least some of those negative opinions were based on a mistaken assumption about the nature of the program itself. The stories are quaint, endearing, and sometimes genuinely moving--characteristics that have led the show's

detractors to find it impossibly hokey and dull. Homer Simpson, watching a parody of Keillor on TV with his family, is unimpressed. "Maybe it's the TV," Bart suggests. Homer bangs on the top of his television: "Stupid TV. Be more funny!"

That's a surface reading, though. As Ira Glass, another leading light of public radio storytelling, put it, "Garrison Keillor created a packaging that non-listeners took as real. The actual show is so much more complex, and human, and complicated than non-listeners think it is."

The tales from Lake Wobegon are, in fact, much more richly textured, emotionally complex, and subversive than they first appear. "The News from Lake Wobegon" is dark comedy, and Keillor keeps things dark enough to maintain the tension that dark comedy requires. He has a persistent tendency to undermine the show's picturesque facade in subtle ways…. Even the name of the town itself, supposedly borrowed from a Native American word, is really from the English word woebegone, "beset with woe." (McCarthy, Ethan. Bidding Farewell to Garrison Keillor's Church, *Christ and Pop Culture* - 9/15/2018.)

The Hiatus

On February 14, 1987, Garrison Keillor stepped up to his microphone and told an audience of approximately four million people that the program to which they were listening would end on June 13 of that year. He had been doing APHC, now the most popular radio program in the country, for 13 years, and he was tired. "I want to resume the life of a shy person," he said. "The decision to close is mine--the sort of simple and painful decision that our parents taught us to make cheerfully. It is simply time to go." (Bode, Gus. "Radio show host spins old tales into new narrative," *Daily Egyptian,* October 3, 2005.)

In point of fact, Keillor, even after achieving a level of fame unusual for a radio humorist and writer in 1980's America, remained what he had always been--a shy person, sometimes brusk or even rude, intensely private and viewed by many who knew and worked with him as antisocial. He knew these things about himself, going so far as to invent an imaginary biscuit company whose product gave people like himself "the strength to get up and do what needs to be done." Later in life he realized that he was an undiagnosed high functioning person with autism--most likely what used to be referred to as Asperger's Syndrome, a diagnosis that has since been folded into the overall autism spectrum. (Keillor, Garrison. "What I'm planning to do this winter, maybe," *New Hampshire Union Leader,* Nov 13, 2019.)

So his desire to live life with at least some degree of normal anonymity was the main driver for his announcement. He had recently remarried, this time to a high school friend from Denmark who had been a foreign exchange student when they met at Anoka High School. They reconnected at a class reunion in 1985, married and bought a large home in the same St. Paul neighborhood where F. Scott Fitzgerald was raised.

The local press gave these events too much play for Keillor's taste, delving into personal details of his life and previous relationships he thought transgressed the boundaries of news into prurience. The precipitating event occurred when "The St. Paul Pioneer Press" ran a picture of the new home on the front page, complete with address and the price the couple paid for it. A decision to end the program and decamp to his wife's native Denmark came soon after. (Hiaasen, Rob. "GUY PRIDE - Machismo according to Garrison Keillor" *The Sun;* Baltimore, Md. 17 Nov 1993: 1C)

The program's fans were devastated, but took comfort in a deal that Keillor and MPR struck with pay cable outlet The Disney Channel to broadcast lightly edited versions of the last 17 episodes of the show on a one week delay. As Arthur Godfrey had before him, Keillor allowed the cameras on the condition that his program continue as usual, with few changes or accommodations for television. Many of these shows are available on YouTube and are worth watching for even a casual listener of APHC to see how it all was done, so to speak.

The last broadcast was practically a day of national mourning, both for fans of the program and for public radio stations across the nation. APHC was their single biggest fundraiser during pledge drives--practically the only stations that didn't carry the show were those in more populous areas with more than one public radio outlet, as only one station in each market could run APHC.

This potential financial hit to the bottom line of the stations and to producer MPR led to the creation of a new program by former APHC and NPR personnel designed to keep homesick Wobegonians tuned in on Saturday nights. Called "Good Evening," this live variety show, hosted by NPR's Noah Adams, also called St. Paul's World Theatre home. "Good Evening" worked very hard to capture a "Prairie Home"-like feel, but it couldn't compete with the competition--reruns of old APHC broadcasts--and was gone within a year.

Lake Wobegon might have slowly faded into the mist of Mist County (the fictional location of the imaginary town) like a Minnesota Brigadoon, except for two things that maybe even Keillor himself didn't expect--he missed the United States, and he missed the creative outlet afforded by radio. He was no longer a writer who performed. He'd become, somewhat shockingly for a shy individual, a performer who wrote.

And so, in less than a year, he returned, but not to Minnesota. He settled in New York City, where he fulfilled a lifelong dream by joining the staff of "The New Yorker." He also hosted "A Prairie Home Companion's 2nd Annual Farewell Performance" at Radio City Music Hall, 51 weeks after what had now become the "1st Farewell Performance." These shows continued until 1990, ending with the "Fourth Annual Farewell Performance." By that time, Keillor had already completed the first season of a new radio venture, one that combined many favorite elements of APHC with a bit of "Big City" sophistication.

The American Radio Company of the Air

Launched in November of 1989 from the Brooklyn Academy of Music, what would come to be known as "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company" was a valentine to the metropolis he now called home, a city that he had left after failing to find work in the publishing industry more than 25 years before. Keillor adopted the pose of a naif, a tall Lutheran from the plains gawking at the skyscrapers, which, despite his fame and recent time abroad, wasn't much of a stretch.

Joining him in this venture was a new band, Rob Fisher and His Coffee Club Orchestra, along with comedian Bob Elliot (father of David Letterman regular and "SNL" veteran Chris Elliot and one half of the legendary comedy team of Bob & Ray) and Broadway and New York City Opera performer Ivy Austin. Austin played the title character in what became one of the most popular and innovative features of the program, a weekly episodic "show-within-a-show" called "The Story of Gloria: A Young Woman of Manhattan."

In "Gloria," Keillor and his collaborator, Didi Balle, were attempting something that hadn't been

done on the radio since a program called "The Gibson Family" went off the air in 1935--write a new mini-musical comedy for radio on a weekly basis. As described by Keillor's partner Balle, the serial followed the romantic and career travails of a "slightly deranged" woman in her 30's making her way in the big city.

"Gloria" became at once a vehicle for contemporary satire on New York City life of the early 1990's and an homage to a version of the city once glimpsed through classic Hollywood musicals and the works of the Gershwins and Cole Porter (and the back-issues of Keillor's beloved "New Yorker").

The entire program can perhaps be viewed as a love letter to a city that had shone as a beacon of culture and erudition for a gawky midwestern high schooler in the 1950's. It was successful, too, though not as universally praised as APHC:

> "A Prairie Home Companion" was one of the most popular shows in public-radio history, and was carried by 270 stations when Mr. Keillor gave it up. Now the "American Radio Company" is on only 235. One station that dropped the "American Radio Company" was WHYY-FM in Philadelphia, where the radio manager, Mark Vogelzang, said the price of carrying the show went up and the appeal went down. "People feel he lost something in the translation from the Midwest to the big city," he said. "They don't feel like just because it's from New York, it has to be good." (Barron, James. "Cinema Verite Radio Comes to the Home Screen" *New York Times*, Sec. C, pg. 34, Nov. 29, 1991.)

"Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company" had a somewhat peripatetic existence. When, after two years, The Brooklyn Academy of Music declined to continue hosting the program, Keillor and his cast decamped to the theater at The Lamb's Club for a time, before taking the program on an extended period on the road.

The Prodigal Returns

It was St. Paul native F. Scott Fitzgerald who wrote about the lack of second acts in American lives, but he said nothing about radio programs. Garrison Keillor was homesick again, this time for Minnesota, the state he had left six years before. Tired of roaming, he returned with his "American Radio Company" to his old stand at the World Theater in the Fall of 1992, and broadcast most of the season from that venue. APHC elements that had been downplayed to a degree when the show was in New York slowly crept back into the lineup.

The final bit of pretense was abandoned the following year, and with the start of the 1993 season, "A Prairie Home Companion"--and its "prodigal host," had returned. Keillor's six-year hiatus/mid-life crisis had apparently ended (along with his second marriage).

Apart from the fact that the The World Theater (which MPR had purchased in 1980 to serve as a home-base for APHC) was rechristened The Fitzgerald in 1994 to honor St. Paul native F. Scott Fitzgerald, things seemed much as they had been on the program, despite cast member turnover and the introduction of new but eventually long-running segments like "Guy Noir, Private Eye" and "The Lives of the Cowboys."

Each "Noir" skit would begin with a little mood setting narration: "A dark night in a city that knows how to keep its secrets, but on the 12th floor of the Acme Building, one man is still trying

to find the answers to life's persistent questions--Guy Noir, Private Eye." Initially a spoof of Humphrey Bogart-style film noir, with "Noir" and his traitorous partner Pete (Walter Bobbie) gunning each other down on a regular basis, the sketches became both more topical and introspective after Walter Bobbie's departure. Over time, Guy became more of an "aspirational" detective, being reduced to poodle-sitting and political hatchet work, whatever he could find to pay the rent on his shabby office. Strangely enough, these jobs usually brought him to wherever the show happened to be that week.

"The Lives of the Cowboys," with Keillor as Lefty and Tim Russell as Dusty, was simultaneously an examination of American manhood, the western mythos and encroaching modernity, as the cowboys struggle to fit into a rapidly changing world. At various times they found themselves driving a herd of 10,000 free-range chickens to market, coping with tremendous--and frequent--hangovers, and even performing in the circus, as they did in this script excerpt from April 23, 2005:

> Sue Scott: THE LIVES OF THE COWBOYS...brought to you by Trailblazer Table Napkins...use em as napkins (SMOOSH OF GREASE)...as hankies (NOSE HONK)...or use em to tie up guys' wrists and gag em (GAGGING) and now, here's today's exciting adventure...
>
> (PIANO, UNDER)
>
> Garrison Keillor: It was spring in New York and my partner Dusty and I were just about to leave, having spent two weeks in the Wild West unit of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey circus at Madison Square Garden and we'd stopped in at the Peloponnesus Coffee Shop (AMBIENCE) for breakfast, before we hit the road. --Sure gonna miss show business, Dusty.
>
> Tim Russell: Ha!!! Ridin' a horse around a circus ring in front of thousands of wretched children throwing corn dogs at me-- it was a dark episode in my life, as bad as when I busted my leg in the gopher hole and had to crawl five miles into town with gophers biting me in the butt.
>
> GK: I loved it. The smell of the sawdust...the crowd all excited.
>
> TR: The shame of doing dumb things and people paying to see you do them.
>
> GK: Well, that's what show business is.

Though Keillor's liberal politics had never been a secret, the program became a bit more pointed in its barbs during the administration of George W. Bush, with the ever versatile Tim Russell providing credible imitations of President "W" Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and other current figures, along with frequent call-backs to President Bush the Elder and Henry Kissinger.

Beginning in 1999 and continuing well into the 2000's, Keillor also found Minnesota Governor Jesse "The Body" Ventura an irresistible target, especially when Russell worked up a spot-on impression of the former Navy Seal, wrestler and action star turned politician. This led to a first for the show--a well-publicized, honest-to-goodness media feud.

It started when Keillor described the new governor in "Time" magazine as a "great big honking bullet-headed shovel-faced mutha who talks in a steroid growl." Next, Keillor whipped out--in

three weeks--a satirical novel about a wrestler turned governor: "Me, by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente." Ventura promptly accused Keillor of "cheating" him by rushing the book to print before his own ghost-written autobiography, "I Ain't Got Time to Bleed: Reworking the Body Politic From the Bottom Up."

Next move, Ventura: The Gov announced plans to kill state funding for Minnesota Public Radio, which produces "Prairie Home Companion." He denies he was out for revenge. Previously, however, he had responded to Keillor's snipes with this credo: "I don't get mad, I get even."

Whatever his motive, Ventura argued that Minnesota Public Radio does not need state funds, which pay for transmitters in rural areas. He accused unnamed public radio fat cats of getting rich while accepting taxpayer subsidies. Then he joked that he would like a peek at Keillor's income tax returns.

Instead, he has received a weekly on-air walloping. (Simon, Stephanie. "A 'Wobegon' War of Words Puts The Body in Bull's-Eye," L*os Angeles Times*, 4/11/1999.)

This was also an era when extensive wordplay and tongue-twisting dialogue was worked into sketches, though most often in "Guy Noir, Private Eye." Harkening back to the radio of his childhood and the truth-challenged character Fibber McGee (of "Fibber McGee and Molly"), these alliterative sequences usually found the cast and various guests engaging in rapid-fire exchanges featuring the imaginary, ostensibly Native American and Maine-invoking word Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin.

First appearing in 1998 as the location of a Girl Scout Cooking Award Ceremony in the woods of Maine, this difficult to pronounce word was attributed to the Penobscot tribe and was once defined as "the place of childhood memories where I go and once again feel I am at the center of the world." It soon stood in for the names of towns, high schools and geographic features all over New England.

The broadcast of April 4, 2000 even used the word for a brand of underwear favored by singers everywhere--including professional tenor and music teacher Vern Sutton, who stated, "One of the most common mistakes of singers is to sing from the throat. That's why I recommend Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin underwear for all my students. Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin reminds you that the voice needs to come from down below."

A more typical approach is featured in this exchange from the "Guy Noir" sketch of April 5, 2008, featuring Keillor (GK) and guests country singer Brad Paisley (BP) and his wife, actress Kimberley Williams-Paisley (KWP):

> GK: So when did you become interested in explosives, Sandy?
>
> KWP: I developed a propensity for propellants growing up on the Penobscot peninsula. My papa was a prospector.
>
> BP: Sandy and I met at the Plimpton Prep School.
>
> GK: I think I've heard of that.
>
> KWP: Plimpton Prep is in the town of Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin.

GK: Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin?

BP: Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin on the Penobscot Peninsula -

KWP: My pa was a prospector and his was a Presbyterian pastor who was President of Plimpton Prep which was a post-impressionist prep school for prosperous prepubescent Presbyterians.

GK: Plimpton was a post-impressionist prep school?

BP: Because there was a pre-impressionist prep school for post-pubescent Presbyterians on the Penelope peninsula which is perpendicular to the Penobscot peninsula where Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin is.

GK: And you both grew up there?

KWP: I grew up in a suburb of Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin--(PAUSE) -- called Dobbins.

GK: Dobbins.

KWP: They changed their name from Point Piscacadawadaquoddymoggin. To Dobbins.

GK: And that's still on the Penobscot Peninsula.

BP: Right.

GK: Why did they change?

BP: Shore erosion.

GK: I see.

BP: After awhile there was no point.

Rumors

In September of 2009, Garrison Keillor suffered a very minor stroke. (Walsh, *Star-Tribune*, 09/09/2009.) He returned to work within days, but this event, along with a heart operation some eight years prior, served as reminders that, on the radio as in life, change is inevitable.

On January 15, 2011, with no prior announcement, 29-year-old Sara Watkins, member of bluegrass trio Nickel Creek, found herself tapped as the first guest host of APHC since the Ford Administration. Watkins had the interesting task of introducing Garrison Keillor himself along with the other guests appearing that Saturday, for though he had given over his hosting duties, he was indeed present, playing Guy Noir, Lefty the Cowboy and imparting "The News From Lake Wobegon." He was quoted at the time as wanting to take the opportunity to see at least part of the show as the audience did for a change.

Retirement rumors were batted back by MPR, but then in an interview which appeared in the "AARP Bulletin" just two months later, Keillor stated his intention to retire by his 70th birthday, coming up in 2012. (Jensen, Elizabeth "New Host Needed - Be Prepared to Fill Big Shoes," *New York Times*, AR21, 5/15/2011.)

Additionally, actor and sound effects man Tom Keith, who had stopped touring with APHC in 2001 but still performed in all the shows at the Fitzgerald Theater, died that same year, barely a week after the show of October 22. The only cast member who'd been with the show as long as Keillor was gone.

In classic Keillor fashion, the host waffled back and forth on his decision, retracting comments made to "The Tuscaloosa News" that his last show would be in the Spring of 2013 and in December of 2011 disavowing his impending departure completely.

Things eventually calmed, and in July of 2014 the program celebrated its 40th anniversary in style with a three-day extravaganza at the site of that first show back on July 6, 1974--Macalester College. (Gustafson, Amy Carlson. "'Prairie Home Companion' celebrates 40 years of above average radio," *Pioneer Press*, St. Paul, MN,6/27/2014.)

The Handoff

Keillor was working as hard as ever, but perhaps hitting that 40-year mark, along with the added complication of a new health issue in the form of a nocturnal seizure disorder, allowed him to make a decision and stick with it. In July of 2015 he announced that he would step down after one last slate of road shows, with performances at all of the program's favorite touring locations, from Wolftrap Farm Park to the Ryman Auditorium (where in a way it all began), culminating with a final performance near the program's 42nd anniversary on July 2, 2016. And, he had a replacement already selected...

Chris Thile first appeared on APHC as a 15-year-old mandolin virtuoso in 1996. He returned frequently through the years both as a solo and with his groups Nickel Creek (with Sara Watkins and her brother Sean Watkins) and Punch Brothers. He was tapped to guest host the February 7 and 14, 2015 programs by Keillor, and this time the show's creator actually turned the reins over completely, listening from home. He undoubtedly liked what he heard, as Thile, a 2012 MacArthur Genius Grant recipient and three (later four) time Grammy winner was chosen as Keillor's successor,

Keillor saw the selection of Thile as a return to the program's musical roots, and hoped that, as part of the "New Grass" movement, Thile and his many musical associates would attract a younger audience to public radio. Thile admitted some trepidation but said that they had "lengthily discussed the future of the show with me as host and agree that we should give it a go. There are, of course, plenty of details to iron out, but I'm very excited!" (Associated Press "Garrison Keillor Announces Retirement From 'A Prairie Home Companion'" 7/20/2015. Billboard.com.)

Though Thile was featured regularly, and solo-hosted twice more (January 30 and February 6, 2016), it was still Keillor's show, right through to the July 2, 2016 finale, a three-hour extravaganza that took place at The Hollywood Bowl. His last hurrah even had a title--"Sumus Quod Sumus" ("We are What we Are")--the town motto of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. It was billed as a "duet show," with Keillor getting to sing with a number of well-wishing guests from days gone by, including Sara Watkins and Heather Masse, along with Sarah Jarosz, Christine DiGiallonardo and Aoife O'Donovan.

Listeners heard modern cowboys Dusty and Lefty ride out into the plains one last time, with no destination and no plan; a call from then-President Barack Obama; a raft of impressions by Tim

Russell, featuring voices of deceased celebrities only remembered at all because of Garrison's show; SFX master Fred Newman pulling out all the stops to rescue young Timmy from a collapsed mine shaft with a Sikorsky helicopter; Sue Scott acquiesce one last time to the "natural mellowing agents" of Catchup, and an audience sing-a-long.

There was also a final update from Lake Wobegon, one that dwelt on loss, the "permanence of anonymity," and the impermanence of anything the town's residents, and Keillor himself, had accomplished. He related the experience of seeing one of his own books lying unpurchased at a yard sale, though priced at only 35 cents, and "...of the great literary lions of my day, Fitzgerald and Hemmingway and Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, all the heroes of my youth now lying there, unread… I did not have the experience, I did not have the right childhood to write suicidal poetry...and so...instead, I did this show [though] radio has the permanence of a sandcastle."

His best "legacy," a word he doesn't like to use, may be in the limericks he has written and published. Good limericks, which he believes some of his to be, are often remembered--but their authors are not. This is as it should be. If, as he hopes, some unknown future "immature boy" finds one amusing enough to laugh until "stuff comes out of his nose" just as Keillor laughed in his youth, "...if that is the case, we have come full circle, and what more can you hope for?" And that was "the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

...the permanence of a sandcastle

For fans of the program an existential question soon arose--was "A Prairie Home Companion" still "A Prairie Home Companion" without Keillor and "The News from Lake Wobegon"? Without all the other touches--the advertisements for fictional products, the veteran cast and long-time musicians, the familiar bits and sketches, the control that Garrison Keillor exercised over every aspect of the product? The answer appears to have been no, it wasn't.

Jack Mitchell, a journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who was also a longtime executive director of Wisconsin Public Radio, believed "listeners, in their own minds, had already divorced Keillor from the new format of 'A Prairie Home Companion'… I would've changed the name at the beginning, because it's a quite different show," he said. (Vezner, Tad and Josh Verges. "What's next after end of decades-long Keillor-MPR relationship?" *Pioneer Press,* December 6, 2017.)

As events would prove (events that won't be described in this essay), Mitchell's advice would be taken less than two weeks after his statement was published. The show was quite different, and a number of Keillor's cast and crew had been released as Thile and his new staff tried to make it their own. Then, for legal reasons and the desire to make a clean break from the past, it was announced on the program of December 16, 2017--14 months after Chris Thile's first APHC as permanent host--that the program would now be called "Live From Here." (Berden, Kathy. "'Prairie Home Companion' has a new name: 'Live from Here,'" *Pioneer Press*, Dec. 16, 2017.)

Soon after that, it was announced that the show was leaving St. Paul, and the Fitzgerald Theater. Beginning with the 2019 season, Chris Thile and company would have a new permanent home--Town Hall in New York City (Thile lives in New York). Keillor, so clear-eyed about these

things, could not have missed the irony of the vestiges of his creation finally making it to the big city that he had loved and dreamed of and lived in and left, without him.

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