

SATURDAY NIGHT

SPECIAL

Live and direct from the heart of the heart of America, Garrison Keillor gets you where you live — wherever you live. The news from Lake Wobegon may not be real, but it's true.

By Mary T. Schmich

Every Saturday evening, while America is fixing dinner or shining shoes, preparing for an evening out or wishing for one, a shy man lopes onto a dusty, pockmarked stage in St. Paul, Minnesota, and starts talking, kind of slow and real gentle, to two million people.

There he is, the architect of the shy-rights movement, actually standing in front of an audience of almost 1,000. A banner that says "A Prairie Home Companion" and another that says "Powdermilk Biscuits — Heavens! They're Tasty!" hang behind him. The 1.99 million who aren't sitting in the faded, baroque theater are tuned into radios from Central Florida — where there are 8,000 listeners — all the way to Kodiak, Alaska. From the tropics to the tundra, they know him only by that deep, sweet voice that performs some of the cheapest therapy around.

He is wearing horn-rimmed glasses on his bulldog face. The pants of his beige suit, which just misses casual elegance, stop an inch short of socially proper length. His shaggy brown hair is rumpled. Doesn't look like much of a guru, though he's been called one, or even a low-ranking celebrity, though he is indisputably that.

He begins to sing. His baritone is reasonably musical and, at very least, probably better than it was when he honked his way through Miss Falconer's 9th-grade choir back in 1956. A little later he'll be hunching over an autoharp that he plays passably, and he'll be telling stories — funny, sad stories that make his listeners laugh and cry and in a few cases nod off to sleep.

Unlikely as it seems at first glance, the dour hulk of a man presiding over this theater is one of America's literary elite. He has been hailed as one of America's funniest men. He is credited with reviving the live radio show, a notable feat in an era when the airwaves are ruled by "information updates" and *Billboard's* Hot 100.

His name is Garrison Keillor (rhymes with dealer). But he's not going to tell you that, at least not on the air. For rea-

sons of modesty, timidity or maybe just dramatic style, he never says his name during the show. He says it's partly because he can't pronounce it right.

Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion* has been broadcast live over Minnesota Public Radio almost every Saturday night since 1974, and nationwide since 1980. (The show was so named because it was to be a companion to *A Prairie Home Morning Show*, which Keillor used to host weekday mornings in St. Paul.) Though *A Prairie Home Companion* goes touring around the country twice a year, it is usually broadcast from the World Theater, a former vaudeville house and onetime porno theater in downtown St. Paul.

The program's biggest sponsor is the mythical Powdermilk Biscuits, "with that whole-wheat goodness that gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done; biscuit mix in the big blue box or biscuits already baked in the big brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness." The format is simple: a little talk, then a little music — ragtime, bluegrass, jazz,

an aria here or there, Scandinavian folk tunes, Russian ballads, an occasional melodic recitation of the Yellow Pages — and a little more talk. All of this on commercial-free National Public Radio (in Orlando, WMFE-FM, 90.7), sandwiched between Bach, Bartok and long news shows. Even Keillor has said that the show sometimes seems slightly out of place on public radio, "like a cowboy come to prayer meeting."

America's self-proclaimed tallest radio comedian (6-foot-4) is more storyteller than comic, more cracker-barrel philosopher than show-business star. The stories he tells on Saturday nights are about growing up in semi-rural Minnesota and about being afraid and shy and lonely and sometimes heartbroken. They're about the goings-on at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Catholic Church, at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Dorothy's Chatterbox Cafe and other institutions of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, the town "that time forgot and the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average." Lake Wobegon (pronounced woe be gone) covers a few ficti-

tious square miles in the agricultural coldlands of Minnesota, land of 10,000 lakes, a state settled by Scandinavians, Lutherans, Catholics and farmers. It appears on no legitimate map, occupying, rather, the border between Keillor's imagination and his memory, and the imaginations and memories of his listeners. That's where he wants it to stay. When a Vermont magazine published an article on the show in January, complete with a colorful cartoon map of Lake Wobegon, Keillor was not happy, his colleagues say. Never, never, should Lake Wobegon be fixed in the tangible world.

Though the town's culture is rooted in the traditions of Minnesota, its people and places seem to ring as true to audiences in Boston and San Francisco and Orlando as they do to listeners in St. Paul.

"We never really expected the show to catch on," says Marge Ostroushko, the friendly, down-to-earth associate producer. "But it seems like everybody has lived in the Midwest at some point in their lives, has some memory of it, some relative who lives here."

Any tour of Lake Wobegon would have to include stops at the Powdermilk Biscuit factory (warning: you can buy them only in Lake Wobegon, so don't bother trying elsewhere); Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"); and Bob's Bank ("the friendly bank in the green mobile home right on Main Street, where your money is safe and the door is always open, where every check you write has a picture of Bob on it and the inscription, 'Cash this. They're friends of mine'").

Then there's Jack's Auto Repair ("In God we trust, all others pay cash") and the Fearmonger's Shoppe ("Serving all your phobia needs since 1954" with merchandise such as elevated toilet seats to protect against snakes). And, of course, you'd stop for a brew or two at The Sidetrack Tap ("Where Gene Autry, Bing Crosby and Lefty Frizzell still lead the hit parade on the jukebox. Don't sleep at



The cover: Orlando Sentinel cartoonist Ralph Dunagin, whose imagination is nationally syndicated itself, based his vision of Lake Wobegon on what's shared by all the listeners of *A Prairie Home Companion* — the spoken words of Garrison Keillor.

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our bar — we don't drink in your bed").

Each week Keillor issues news reports from Lake Wobegon. One week he recounts how Father Emil, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, crawled out of his sickbed and went around town hearing confessions door-to-door. "To catch up on the caseload, I guess," Keillor says. "He's done it over the phone before, but in a town like Lake Wobegon, that's not safe." Another week he talks about Lake Wobegon's only adult jogger. The fellow causes such a stir that people get in their cars and follow him to find out where he's running to.

Ludicrous as Keillor's yarns can be, they are also touching and telling, and while the world of Lake Wobegon is largely fanciful, he takes his creation very seriously. "It's my family," he says. "It's the people I grew up with."

Keillor was born in 1942 in Anoka, a suburb of Minneapolis, where his Canadian grandparents had settled around 1880. A few years later, his father bought an acre of land in the nearby truck-farming community of Brooklyn Park. The area was mostly cornfields then, and the Mississippi River flowed a block and a half from the Keillor property. On half their land, the family cultivated a vegetable garden. On the other half, they installed a basement they lived in for four years until the upper part of the house was finished.

Gary (he changed his name to Garrison in high school because it sounded more distinctive) was the third of six children, one of four boys. John and Grace Keillor

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PHOTO / MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO

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reared their children as members of the Plymouth Brethren, a small, fundamentalist Christian group that frowns upon drinking, dancing, card-playing, pridefulness and other detours from a strict interpretation of the Bible's commands.

No longer an adherent of the faith, Keillor nonetheless puts together a show that sometimes deals with values in a way that is almost religious. In some of its more fervid moments — say, when the audience is singing along to "Amazing Grace" — the show feels like a tent revival. Even Keillor once said that the program "down deep in its heart is a gospel show." He appended a qualifier, however: "A gospel show is not a contest to see who can praise God the best."

Keillor's parents now live in Orlando, as did his sister, Judy, until she enrolled recently in fundamentalist Bob Jones University in South Carolina.

Like his son, John Keillor is quiet and wry and not overtly impressed with *A Prairie Home Companion's* success. "Success of that kind isn't everything," he says. "And some of the shows I don't go along with. Some of the music I don't care about, and that's because it seems like it never ends."

But he collects clippings of every article that mentions his son, and he chuckles over some of Gary's songs and poems. One song, written shortly after he and his wife moved to Orlando in 1972, moved him so much that, he says, he thought about packing and heading back to Minnesota:

*O we thought that you loved Minnesota
And that Anoka was your happy home.
When we woke up this morning, you had left us.*

*O Father why did you roam?
On the table you left us a letter.
We read it with tears in our heart.
It said, "Please forgive me for leaving,
But I feel I must make a new start.
I am going to live in Orlando
Where I can be warm all the year,
But when I die bring my body
Back to lie in the prairie so dear."*

John Keillor says he doesn't recall his son's being particularly funny as a child, though Gary did write skits that the neighborhood kids performed in the garage. Nor did the elder Keillor ever consider his son particularly shy. The Gary he recalls would rather throw clods of dirt at his siblings than weed the vegetable patch, and would have dropped out of school to write full-time for the Anoka newspaper had it not been for Grace Keillor's pleas.

In that pre-Pac Man, pre-Walkman, pre-Happy Days era, the Keillor kids would stretch out on the floor next to their Zenith console radio and listen to broadcasts from such exotic places as Nashville, Salt Lake City and Winnipeg. The memory of those imaginative explorations, of Jack Benny and Fibber McGee, of George and Gracie, has guided Keillor's radio work ever since.

He entered broadcasting in the early '60s while an English major at the University of Minnesota. He figured he could make 50 cents an hour more as a campus radio

broadcaster, even a very shy broadcaster, than he could parking cars. "Even a shy person learns to bear up under pressure when money is at stake," he once said.

He'd been doing his morning radio show in St. Paul and selling humor pieces to *The New Yorker* magazine for a few years when, in 1974, the idea for *A Prairie Home Companion* came to him. He was in Nashville to write a story for *The New Yorker* on the Grand Ole Opry, one of his childhood favorites and the grandest and longest-lived radio variety show on the air. Sitting in his hotel room listening to the Opry on the transistor, it occurred to him that a similar show might work back home. Two months later, Minnesota Public Radio aired the first performance of *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Twenty-five people sat in the audience for that first show. These days, all 962 of the shabby red seats on the chipped linoleum floor of the World Theater are sold out six weeks before each

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performance. The show is broadcast via satellite to 202 other stations. Fans write letters at a pace of 100 a day, sending wedding photos, birth announcements and philosophical ramblings. The Los Angeles City Council last year made Lake Wobegon the sister city of Los Angeles, commemorating the affiliation with a huge calligraphed resolution that hangs outside Keillor's office.

In Orlando, the show is a top fund-raiser for WMFE-FM, bringing in more money for each hour it's on the air than any other program, according to program manager Peter Dominowski.

Among the 8,000 listeners in this area is Dr. Thomas Seymour, president of Rollins College. "The show is a sentimental reminder of what old-time radio was like," he says. "And Keillor's essays are as skillful and witty as any commentaries as I've read. They stand with E.B. White and James Thurber." The show appeals to listeners all over the country, he says, because "the prairie and Midwestern American roots and values are very close to all Americans."

So eager is Seymour to have the show visit Orlando during one of its occasional tours that he has written Keillor and called Keillor's father to make his pitch.

The show will go to the East Coast next month, and to San Francisco and Seattle in the fall, and it is tentatively booked for a small-town tour in the spring of 1984. Staff members at WMFE say they dream of bringing the show to Orlando, but that at present they can't afford the \$10,000 it would cost.

Despite the multiplying signs of his success, Keillor maintains that reports of his achievement are grossly exaggerated.

"The show hasn't been successful," he insists. As for the alleged two million listeners, he scoffs: "The people who measure audiences don't know what they're talking about." When quizzed about his newfound fame, he admits only to being a "semi-unknown celebrity."

What fame he has achieved he owes to his ability to re-create the America of his childhood — of many people's childhoods — and to his

knack for making people understand that their phobias, their eccentricities, their disappointments don't make them weird — or at least no weirder than he is.

"So often he'll tell about something and I'll be surprised to hear it out loud over the radio, because it'll be something I thought I was the only one who ever thought it or experienced it or knew about it," wrote an elderly Norwegian Lutheran woman from Lansing, Michigan. "I wonder how many people spend thousands of dollars on psychiatrists just to figure out that simple thing?"

I knew before you said goodbye, the way I'd feel today. Lord, it seems like I've been through this a dozen times before." Keillor stops singing and calls across the backstage: "Hey, I really got that song cracked."

This is as formal as rehearsal is going to get.

Sutton he doesn't like the ending and that they'll have to improvise when the time comes.

He is smoking Camel Lights non-stop and will keep up the pace all the way through the show, except during his intermittent appearances onstage. It is a display of nerves that contrasts with his apparent calm.

What's Garrison really like? The other members of the show hear the question a lot.

"What you hear is what you get," says Sutton, a university music professor and opera singer who appeared on the first show.

"Garrison is very close to himself," says Ray Marklund, a 64-year-old stagehand who has missed only two shows in nine years. "He spends a lot of time to himself, thinking and writing. He is not that outgoing or bold. He gets nervous, but he can take care of the unexpected."

"I think he might be bewildered by all this



Keillor, left, does a piece with musicians Robin and Linda Williams onstage during a live broadcast.

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It's Saturday, 4 p.m. The show begins at 5. The *Prairie Home Companion* family — regular stage crew, regular performers and some visiting musicians — putter around the homey backstage or sit around on tattered couches. Some munch popcorn, delivered in big buckets from the lobby, and sip Leinenkugel's "strong beer." Most, like Keillor, stick with coffee and Cold Spring Sparkling Mineral Water.

On stage, a Russian folksinger and her pianist are practicing a song; the best time to fall in love, she's singing in Russian, is when the apple blossoms are in bloom.

Keillor is roaming the dimly lit backstage, talking briefly with the musicians, reading over notes. As usual, he has written out the entire script, mostly on a word processor in his office at the modern Minnesota Public Radio station a block from the theater. But he will go on stage empty-handed, leaving the script in a small dressing room.

He hands a typed skit, a spoof on a fictional restaurant called "The Opera Lunch," to opera tenor Vern Sutton, one of the regulars. He tells

success," says jazz pianist Butch Thompson, who heads the Butch Thompson Trio, another regular part of the cast. He has been a friend of Keillor's since they were in college together, and, like Sutton, he was on the first show. "He must feel there's some way to do it better. I always feel this is a wonderful opportunity, and you want to make sure you're not wasting it. It's just the way we're raised, I guess."

Since 1980, when the show was first broadcast via satellite throughout the country, it has become more professional. The sound has improved; the performers actually rehearse at least once. No longer is there the chance that Butch Thompson will appear on stage mid-show, as he once did, to find the piano locked.

Originally, says producer Margaret Moos, "it was a hobby, something we did on Saturday afternoons." She is a big, friendly woman consid-

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ered to be the show's organizational foundation. "Some of the early shows sounded like we were broadcasting from the bottom of a garbage pail."

But it's the audience, more than the show, that is different now.

"The first shows attracted college students," Marklund says. "Some seemed to think this was part of the protest movement. Now we have an audience of bankers and business executives."

This evening's show will include some Russian songs and some art songs. (You know they're art songs, Sutton tells the audience, because they're in English and foreign languages.) As it does every week, the show includes greetings to listeners from other listeners. These are all authentic. They are one of the ways that listeners from the backwoods of Washington are drawn into a community with listeners in New York City high-rises.

This week the messages are set to the tune of "The Blue Danube" and sung by Sutton and Janis Hardy:

To Babushka from Stashu — Gesundheit! God bless you

And from Don to Kris Campeau,

Who's going to marry him or at least he thinks so.

And we'll say, Love to Anne — from a shy Chicago man . . .

Evo and Gene Bluestein, a father-and-son team originally from Minneapolis and now from Fresno, California, are there to sing old-timey songs. They are among the lucky few to make it onto the show on the strength of audition tapes. Most of the musicians are selected from about 200 performers who have already been on the show.

Keillor will sing the song he's got cracked — "Heartbreak Don't Hold No Surprises No More" — as well as an original song from Bertha's Kitty Boutique in Lake Wobegon. It is set to the tune of "Swanee River":

*"All the world is in the fast lane
Everywhere I'm at
I'm tired of the best and brightest
I miss my old bobcat."*

Not all the selections will please all the people, but, as Marklund points out, "It's like Minnesota weather. If you don't like it, just wait a minute, it's about to change."

Critics frequently describe Keillor's work with such words as "skewed," "wacky," "loony" and "cockeyed." In *Happy to Be Here*, his recently published collection of stories and essays, he writes about the local Transit Commission's efforts to make bus-riding a happy experience by offering free coffee and maid service on regular rides, and by providing an "affinity bus" so passengers can travel with those who share their interests. Another story is titled "Your Wedding and You: A Few Thoughts on Making It More Personally Rewarding, Shared by Reverend Bob Osman." He also writes about the terrors of learning to swim as a child and the fear of falling down as an adult.

Like his work, Keillor is quirky. He can be chatty and easygoing on stage, but out there in the real world, stripped of the Lake Wobegon camouflage, he is reticent.

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