

his casting agency chooses all the students a soap opera role, he ad- possibility of a job is the "unspoken casting director's door.

NPR's 'Prairie': Depression-era comedy

By BARBARA STEWART
Columbia News Service

NEW YORK — Saturday evening at 6, in the midst of frying hamburgers or dressing to go out, millions of people around the United States are turning on their radios to catch up with A Prairie Home Companion.

In the fine old tradition of Depression-era radio comedy, the National Public Radio show (WNYC 93.9FM) features an eclectic selection of music and anecdotes of Lake Wobegon, a little town in the heartlands of Minnesota — "the town that time forgot and the decades can't improve."

Lake Wobegon, chronicled by the show's creator and host, Garrison Keillor, is as homey and comforting as a grandmother's country home, but also highly ludicrous — the place where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

For its listeners, not a few of whom are fanatics, the citizens and shops of Lake Wobegon become more familiar each week, forming an ongoing saga of hometown life infused with looniness.

Keillor, who for years hosted a successful morning talk show for Minnesota Public Radio, came up with the idea for A Prairie Home Companion in 1974. Growing up in Anoka, Minn. 40 years ago, he would listen, enthralled, to the famous network radio shows — to Fibber McGee and Molly, and George Burns, and the National Sunset Valley Barn Dance.

He wanted to create a show with the old-time humor and intimacy. "My loyalty is to radio. I think its beauty and possibilities are overlooked," he said in an interview.

The first performance of A Prairie Home Companion, held in a musty old theater in St. Paul, attracted an audience of 15. Fewer people sat in the seats than performed onstage. But Minnesotans soon claimed the show as their own. Listening to the weekly broadcast at home, or driving into St. Paul to catch it live became a popular Saturday evening entertainment.

Two years ago the show was beamed across the country by satellite, and quickly attracted two million listeners. Tickets for Keillor's touring performances are scarce. In Boston, fans lined up at 3 a.m. in the snow to buy tickets for a May show. They were sold out an hour after the counter opened.

"It always surprises me," Keillor said slowly, as if waiting for the words to make their way down from his mind. He is a big, shy man who says that he gets up the courage to talk to a theater full of strangers because "I'm very near-sighted and the spotlights hit me in the face. So I'm not so aware of the audience."

Each week, in his quiet, soothing voice, Keillor brings word from the show's sponsors — from Bob's Bank with its slogan "Neither a borrower nor a lender be, save at the sign of the sock," and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery. "If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably do without it."

At the Chatterbox Cafe, Dorothy served up homecooked specialties like tuna noodle casserole with potato chips crumbled on top, and a strawberry cream pie "that makes grown men cry and lose all ambition in life." Another portion of the show, Keillor will invariably say, "is brought to you by Powdermilk Biscuits. Heavens, they're tasty...and expeditious."

Actually, it is Minnesota Public Radio that sponsors the show, though St. Paul grocery store managers say they occasionally get requests for Powdermilk Biscuits "in the big blue box with the picture of the biscuit on the cover," the ones that "give shy people the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

Though he pokes fun at their foibles, Keillor is something of an advocate of shy people. "When I see people who impress me with their wit, grace, and easy charm, I'm not even sure they know my

name," he said. "In their pain, shy people see more clearly."

Toward the end of the show, Keillor will launch into the monologue that is eagerly awaited by fans. "Well, it's been a quiet week at Lake Wobegon," he'll remark, and then tell the story of a child running breathless to school because some older boys told him wild dogs were lurking behind the trees. Or a Latin professor flirting with adultery until he sees his act would have consequences far beyond himself — it would cause someone blocks away to trip and fall the stairs, or a cat to be run over.

"Garrison's got a lot of reserve in him," said Roy Blount Jr., a friend and fellow humorist. "He's extremely unpushy. But he's very brave about taking risks, and runs a real risk of being mushy and evangelistic." Instead, Blount says the show is moving and funny, "a combination of rural Midwestern soundness and New York sophistication."

"Garrison gets back to basics in a delightful way," he says. "People aren't looking for the willfully bizarre anymore. They like quiet, wholesome things now."

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