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'Prairie Home' radio is audio smorgasbord

So, the Sport Shop downtown is closing forever.

When my dad was player/manager of the mid-Fifties Fond du Lac Blues, a Rock River League team, he'd take me along on equipment buying visits to the wondrous back back room of that sporting goods store on Main Street.

The owner's new Louisville Sluggers were interesting. His new catcher's masks were mysterious. But to a 6-year-old boy, there's nothing in all the world like the fragrance of a box of a dozen freshly incubated baseballs, each one seeming to glow in the surrounding phosphorescent blackness.

That sort of remembered experience is the heart of a weekly radio show called "A Prairie Home Companion." The usually live Saturday broadcast on National Public Radio (5 p.m. on Wisconsin's network) has a mixture of elements unique to the show: music of wide eclecticism, satiric skits, imaginary sponsors and sometimes downright goofy behavior.

But two million listeners wouldn't tune in to the two hours without the wistful monologues of host Garrison Keillor. The news from his composite hometown of "Lake Wobegon" is at first current — often "not too much happening back there this week" — then inevitably shot back to Keillor's youth in a real woebegone Minnesota village.

His stories are a lot like me reminiscing about small-time Midwest baseball. Just as I remember both the good (trips to the Sport Shop) and the bad (vicious slivers from the old



Earwaves

By JOE KOWALSKI

Fairgrounds grandstand, ballplayers spitting and swearing, terrifying line drive fouls), Keillor's tales are hardly Currier & Ives portraits.

I suppose they might be compared to Cliff Arquette's "Letters from Mount Idy." But those were mostly punchlines in paragraph form, read from a piece of paper. Keillor will go for 15 minutes or longer, largely off the top of his head. No, compare him more to Vachel Lindsay the troubador. Or better yet, to William Faulkner who, in his novels, peopled a whole region of vivid, three-dimensional characters.

The host's storytelling voice is a baritone which falls somewhere between that of Gary Owens ("Laugh-In") and that radio announcer who tries to bully us into buying warehouse foods. A listener can only shake his head and enjoy such improvisational prose as his 18 minutes last month defining "Elegance." It had to do with front doors without sidewalks and "mud rooms" and the senior prom and romantic novels and first cigarettes and



HARRISON KEILLOR

orange vests from the county highway department.

And Now a Word...

Public radio can't have real sponsors, of course, so the PHC troupe has invented a dozen or so over the nine years of its existence (nationally syndicated since 1980), including:

Bob's Bank, the friendly bank in the green mobile home 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." Save at the sign of the sock.

The Chatterbox Cafe, where the coffeepot is always on, which is why it tastes that way.

The Fearmonger's Shop, serving your phobia needs since 1954.

Powdermilk Biscuits, made from whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers.

Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery: If you can't get it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it.

Bertha's Kitty Boutique, in all suburban shopping centers: Teasdale, Chippendale, Clydesdale, Airedale, Mondale....

The Lake Wobegon Herald Starr and its editor, Harold Starr.

A new listener will have to take in more than one program to learn to swallow its refreshingly dry humor and to become familiar with its many essential cliches. But in a country where the past 20 years of live radio has meant phone-in talk shows — it's worth the dialing. And that's not even considering the music on "Prairie Home Companion," which I'd better get to next week.