

Radio program evokes nostalgia

I LONG ago abandoned the prairies of Saskatchewan, where my mother baked with frozen dough before the Pillsbury Dough Boy ever discovered a Kelvinator.

I've returned perhaps half a dozen times, almost always in July; maybe once or twice in August, but that was risky. I've not journeyed north of the Mason-Dixon line just for the fun of it for a decade or more. My inclination runs strongly to Caribbean vacations in the summer, much deeper south in the winter.

I was seven when I boarded a Canadian National Railroad Pullman car and waved a frozen mitten to those woebegone souls leaning into a crisp wind of a Saskatoon winter, and chugged east to the warmth of southern Ontario. The Niagara Falls-St. Catharines area on the southwest shore of Lake Ontario is viewed, particularly by snow-bound prairie dwellers, as the banana belt of Canada.

You mustn't laugh unless you've spent a winter on the prairies.

I do not often reminisce over sledding trips across a Saskatchewan slough with frozen toes and nose and the temperature hovering near zero.

So when I heard a voice "as soothing as a mentholated cough drop" coming over National Public Radio at 5 p.m. one Saturday introducing "A Prairie Home Companion" I astonished myself with a wave of nostalgia.

I promptly switched off the program.

But I have a friend who does not remember prairie winters, largely because she never endured one. And she has become a neo-prairie dweller through this program and its imaginative host.

So now on many Saturday afternoons I am trapped in my own nostalgia, frigidly recalling why it is so important to have a companion on the prairies. Any companion.



Bill Gordon
News Editor

This companion is particularly delightful.

That the two-hour, live program, originated, hosted, and written by Garrison Keiller, gets a warm welcome in Minnesota, where it is broadcast from St. Paul, or in Maine or New Hampshire, perhaps is not surprising.

But the enthusiastic response from the south, and around the nation, might astound you until you've tuned in WUWF one Saturday evening at five, just before The Boston Pops broadcast.

The wit, if you listen carefully, is sophisticated and warm, (there's warm again, prairie dwellers love it), universal, and some enthusiastic fans insist, magical.

The show arrives in Middlebury, Vt., bringing 2,000 pounds of broadcasting equipment and a run of good weather, it is reported in "The Chronicle of Higher Education". It is May, and the sun is shining for the first time in days as people begin to line up — hours early — for the live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion."

It is an overwhelming success, its charm even more apparent in person than on the air, which is no surprise to anyone in Middlebury.

Some of those Vermonters who are inclined to describe the program as magical find that meaning on the day when the performers and crew are packing to leave town. It snows.

The magic and wit and warmth are credited to Keiller.

Besides his monologue, which occurs when he delivers the news of the week, the show features a number of "commercials" for products and services available in Keiller's mythical town of Lake Wobegon.

The prime sponsor is a product called Powder Milk Biscuits, "made from whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers in the rich bottomlands of the Lake Wobegon valley, so you know they're not only good, but pure, mostly. The biscuit with that whole-wheat goodness that gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done." Or another: "Bob's Bank, where the motto is "neither a borrower nor a lender be," or Bertha's Kitty Boutique, or Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery.

And so it goes.

Almost four years ago Minnesota Public Radio made the program available live, via satellite, to stations across the country. Only 30 carried it at first, but before the year was out "A Prairie Home Companion" had won a George Foster Peabody Award for Distinguished broadcasting and had signed up 193 stations. They now boast more than 200, including The University of West Florida's WUWF which first aired the program last summer.

The music is folk, a little blue grass, good old "Turkey in the Straw" fiddlin', some Canadian Brass or almost anything else that might tickle your musical taste.

One recent show, I swear, featured a bagpipe trio that only a true, woebegone prairie dweller could love — and then only from afar.

And while I revel in a vivid, orange sunset over Santa Rosa Sound one warm Saturday evening a few weeks ago and tune in Garrison Keiller's midwestern mentholatum I tell myself, what a fine, fine place to feel nostalgic about the prairies.

"Oh, my, what a time we had."