

Inside the Academy Awards

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The Oaks are stronger than ever

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Good Times

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Call it nostalgic radio

Welcome to the world of *Prairie Home Companion*

By Becky Pratt
Palladium-Item Staff Writer

Well, has your family tried 'em,
Powdermilk (Pow-dermilk)
Well, has your family tried 'em,
Powdermilk (Pow-dermilk)
Well if your family's tried 'em
You know you satisfied 'em
They're the real hot item, Powdermilk

Pity the uninitiated soul who's never been to Lake Wobegon. He's never sat in the Chatterbox Cafe, where Dorothy presides, never celebrated Mass at Father Emul's church, never visited Bertha's Kitty Boutique. He's never tried Ahead! sauce or Powdermilk biscuits. ("Heavens, they're tasty.")

He may even be a shy person who doesn't know he's the victim of discrimination. ("Shy people miss out on a lot of things, like getting library cards, because they're too shy to ask for them.")

But not to worry. The uninitiated can be inducted quickly without any travel time if he just tunes in Saturday nights at 8 to American Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion." That's \$8.5 (Oxford, Ohio) or \$3.5 (Cincinnati) on the old FM dial.

A product of Minnesota Public Radio, "Prairie" is an eclectic mix of music, offbeat humor and stray bits of wisdom that has developed a loyal — not to say fanatical — following. The two-hour show is loosely organized around a fictitious Minnesota town, Lake Wobegon, and broadcast live from the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn.

According to Mary Mochman, a longtime Richmond fan, it's "like an old-time radio show, and yet it's a spoof of an old-time radio show. It's both nostalgic and up-to-date."

Although there are no commercials on PHC, the show boasts assorted imaginary sponsors, among them Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If Ralph doesn't have it, you can probably get along without it.") and Bob's Bank ("... there in the little green mobile home on Main Street.")

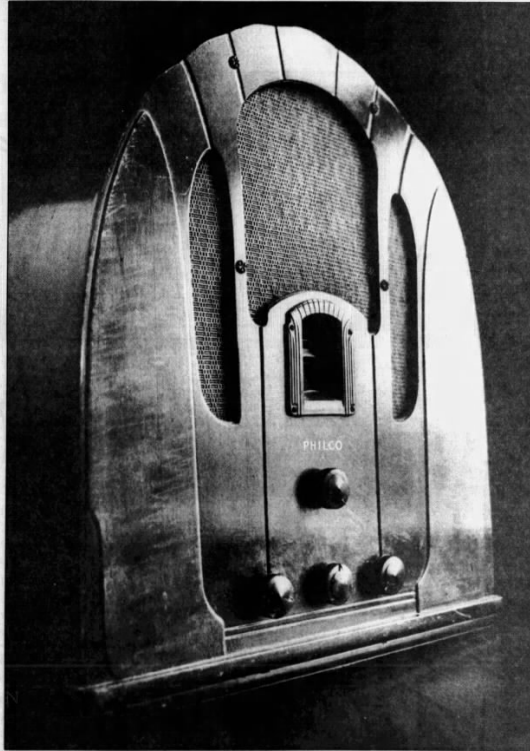
THE POPULARITY of the program has spread, well, like a prairie fire, and Richmond residents are among the faithful who reserve Saturday nights to sample different types of music, hear comic acts and catch the news from Lake Wobegon.

"It's just like curling up in an Afghan in your living room, maybe with a fire and your friends all sitting around," says Dave Woodward, a therapist at Dunn Mental Health Center. "That's why it has so much charm. There's a kind of a glow."

The source of the glow, Woodward and other fans agree, is an unassuming Minnesotan with a melodic monotone, Garrison Keillor. An tour guide to Lake Wobegon ("Gateway to Minnesota"), Keillor sets a scene as if he's setting a table for company — slowly and with great care. Yet he does it with such storytelling ease that the show is a rambling adventure for listeners.

Sometimes sad, often poignant, his Lake Wobegon segments invariably begin, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon" and end with a synopsis of the poor as there: "The women are strong, the men are good-looking . . . and the children are above average."

Woodward, who lived in Worthington, Minn., for several years, says he still laughs when he recalls one of the first shows he ever heard. It had "the lady who laughed the Star-Spangled Banner.



She was from Sioux, S.D., and I still laugh when I think about it." He and his wife, Maggie, often listen to the show while eating dinner "for the good humor and non-electrical music."

Although Woodward says he thinks the show has universal appeal, he says the biggest appeal is "for folks who've grown up in the Midwest."

In Lake Wobegon — in fact, on the

entire show — "Time has slowed down, they don't take anything too seriously. Things are less complicated there. It's part of the non-judgmental-ness," Woodward says.

He says the show also is a gem because it has "such quality acts. It's just the sweetest music . . . and they can do improvisation, they can really cook."

Dan Cori, a student at the Earlham School of Religion, says he discovered the program "by word of mouth" and has been listening to it since last fall. "I guess I like it because it reminds me of the old-time radio shows that you could sit around and listen to . . ."

He also enjoys the humor and variety

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A Prairie Home Companion Sampler

"A Prairie Home Companion" has it all. There's wisdom from such places as the Chatterbox Cafe, where Dorothy says: "We don't serve appetizers. If you're not hungry, don't eat."

There's geography: Lake Wobegon, the little town that time forgot and decades cannot improve, is located "in the exact geographic center of Minnesota." If you don't believe it, just look on a map.

There are homey sponsors, like The Hotel Minnesota, "where there are no tips, you bring a hot dish or a dessert. That's what makes dining such an adventure.

"There's just one place to go . . . it's The Hotel Minnesota."

Jack's Auto Repair: "all tracks lead to Jack's."

Powdermilk biscuits: "They give shy people the strength to do what needs to be done."

Or the Fearmonger Shoppe: "Serving all your phobic needs."

There are also local landmarks and institutions — the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian or the Catholic church, Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. The Whippets Little League team.

Radio

(Continued from cover)

of music ("from bluegrass to gospel to Dixieland jazz") and relates the show to his vocation — he sees host Keillor as having "his own kind of ministry" by using vignettes to expose "basic human foibles."

Among his friends, Corl says listening to the show is "a very intentional time of the week. We call it Saturday Night Minnesota Mass . . . We eat dinner, drink wine . . . listen to the show."

Although the show pokes fun at Norwegian-like Midwestern towns, Corl says it's not a put-down.

"(Keillor) is so self-effacing about it — he's an insider; he's part of it."

Moehlman agrees. "He's said some things that might offend some people," but "it's done with such love."

BESIDES LAKE WOBEGON, there are other

attractions to the show: unpredictable, off-the-wall messages sent between listeners, limerick-like poems set to music, requests for tunes from the Department of Folk Song.

Perhaps the funniest thing about "Prairie" is the type of fan it breeds. Devotees are unabashedly enthusiastic "without shame," says Keillor, and seem to have an uncontrollable urge to introduce friends to the show. Corl says he's "definitely converted friends" into "Prairie" fans.

Mary Ellen Kardong, who also works at Dunn, says the humor works because it contains "an element of truth."

Fans unanimously agree it's humor that steers the show. And it's right on course, they note.

Says Corl:

"It's kind of like a little James Thurber, a little Mark Twain, a little Will Rogers. It's just American humor."