

Decade in Lake Wobegon: Keillor's anniversary show

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LAKE WOBEGON, Minn. — You won't find this town in any atlas or even in the most detailed of maps. Nor should you try reaching Lake Wobegon by mail.

But tune in the radio any Saturday and listen to the soothing voice of a tall, shy fellow named Garrison Keillor as he tells stories from Lake Wobegon — "the town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve."

Wobegon (woe-be-gone) exists only in Keillor's imagination, but it's as real as can be to the more than two million listeners of "A Prairie Home Companion," a live radio show celebrating its 10th anniversary this weekend.

The two-hour program — heard on 235 public radio stations — has come a long way since its debut July 6,

1974, when Keillor played to an audience of 12 in a 400-seat theater. The applause was so sparse, he recalls, that listeners at home "could hear the footsteps of performers retreating offstage."

Saturday, Keillor won't have to worry about filling the house. All 1,600 tickets in St. Paul's Orpheum Theater were sold two months ago. Fans are coming from as far as California and Florida to celebrate a radio show that in the age of television has become a national cult.

The program, a slow-paced blend of story-telling, comedy and music, centers on Wobegon, home of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian and Powermilk Biscuits. As Keillor says in a voice as soft as corn silk, those biscuits "give shy persons the strength to do what needs to be done."

Each Saturday, dressed in a cream-colored suit (his only suit, he contends), a red tie and red socks, Keillor sings, does parodies of commercials and, in a monologue that can last 25 minutes, delivers the news from Lake Wobegon, a town decidedly out of step with the modern world.

His purpose, he says, is "not to be nostalgic. It's more a matter of upholding a small-town, rural culture that I identify with."

He may tell of the time Uncle Ed had to go to Minneapolis, and at a city park asked, "Why are all those people running around?"

"They're exercising," he was told.

"Why?" he replied. "Can't they find work?"

Or Keillor may discuss how Lake Wobegon's residents handle problems: "They don't believe that everything that goes wrong is the result of a failure of communications or a

misunderstanding or a lack of B-1 vitamins. People sometimes spend a great deal of time trying to understand problems — only to come up with new and different problems ... in Lake Wobegon they save a lot of time by simply calling it sin and forgiving it and to hell with it."

Many listeners have adopted Wobegon as the hometown they never had.

In Seville, Ohio, Kurt Ludwig, "an Ohio bachelor farmer," (Wobegon is home to Norwegian bachelor farmers)

tapes each show and listens to them the rest of the week. "There's a sense of place and home in his material," Ludwig says.

In Minnesota, the American Automobile Association's tour book lists Lake Wobegon as an "imaginary community" for tourists who wanted driving directions.

The show does 40 live broadcasts a



Garrison Keillor
Prairie Home Companion

year, mostly in St. Paul, but also takes to the road. "We need to travel around to make sure there still is an audience," Keillor says.

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He needn't worry. In New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, the show sold out, with ticket prices up to \$20. Last year, the show helped local stations raise \$3 million, more than any other weekly program.

Keillor, who turns 42 next month, is a reluctant celebrity, as self-effacing as he is tall (6-foot-4). Although he's been in magazines and on network television, Keillor says he's rarely recognized and prefers the "anonymity" of radio.

The July issue of *Connoisseur* magazine names him (along with comedians Woody Allen and Richard Pryor) among 131 "super achievers" about to become "national monuments."

"That's great company," he says "but to be named a monument makes me feel a bit heavy ... and a little worried about pigeons."

Scene

will be held in Wilson Park from noon to 7:30 p.m. Sunday, emphasizing human

Keillor grew up in Anoka, Minn., a small town on its way to becoming a suburb of Minneapolis. He explains that when Anoka got so big "I hardly recognized it, I had to create a town for myself: Lake Wobegon."

His parents were members of the Plymouth Brethren, a Protestant sect that banned dancing, card playing and going to movies. Keillor rebelled but recalls his "older relations" as "wonderful storytellers" whose purpose "was to imbue us with compassion."

Keillor worked at the University of Minnesota radio station, but returned to radio only after he failed to earn a living as a writer.

Now he contributes satirical essays to *The New Yorker* and is paid a reported \$75,000 by Minnesota Public Radio. He also is writing a book about Wobegon, "a collection of pieces trying to make themselves into a novel."

It was an article he wrote in 1974 about Nashville's Grand Ole Opry that gave him the idea for a variety show, done live with an audience, "like radio used to be."