

F4 Austin American-Statesman Monday, July 9, 1984

'Prairie Home Companion' relies on humor, wisdom

By JAMES M. TARBOX
Knight-Ridder News Service

ST. PAUL, Minn. — People who claim to know — about 2,000,000 of them — rest in the confident assurance that Lake Wobegon sits peacefully somewhere in the bucolic heart of Minnesota.

In fact, Lake Wobegon is on no map. Yet, for two hours every Saturday evening, this Brigadoon-on-the-Prairie comes to life in the hearts of the listeners of public radio's most popular program, *A Prairie Home Companion*. And in no heart does it loom larger than in that of creator Garrison Keillor.

In a hopelessly cluttered office overlooking the demolition of a stately old movie palace and an adult book shop to make way for St. Paul's World Trade Center, Keillor took a break from working on his novel about the mythical "city that time forgot and the decades cannot improve" to reflect on the 10th anniversary of the show and the seeds of his own experiences, which blossomed into the mythical hamlet.

"MY PARENTS held out against TV until about 1956, I'd guess," he said, recalling the influence of radio on his development of the program. "They were fairly long holdouts for our neighborhood. Instead, we listened to the radio until its dying days. I remember Jack Benny, Fibber McGee and Molly, Amos and Andy and Baby Snooks, all those great old shows."

Keillor, now 42, grew up in Anoka, Minn., the son of members of the Plymouth Brethren, a conservative, fundamentalist sect. The family stuck pretty much to itself, he said.

"I remember sitting in the dark, trying to hide so I wouldn't be sent to bed, just so I could listen to the folks tell stories, the relatives reminiscing about their own childhoods."

KEILLOR'S STORY-telling legacy is nourished from the same well of inspiration that fed Mark Twain, Will Rogers and James Thurber. In addition to his 30-minute monologues each week, he also has written several stories for such

magazines as the *New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly*, many of which were collected in the best-selling *Happy to Be Here*.

"I think the current monologues are much different than they were even just two or three years ago," he said. "They're more adventurous. It's a difficult thing to carry off when comedy veers in the direction of sentiment. There is a connection between comedy and sentiment that people who do comedy are especially aware of. I feel gratitude and passion for people who laugh at my dumb jokes."

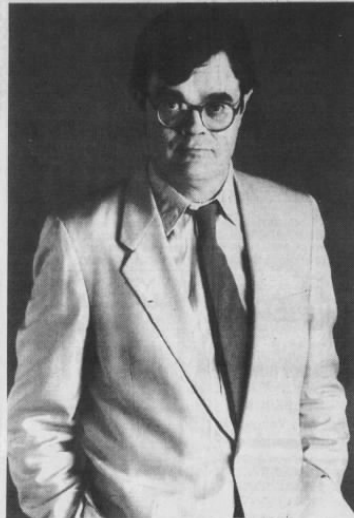
KEILLOR WON'T do topical humor, he said, because he won't "just push some button for people. I've never done a joke about herpes on the show, for example, and I never will. I don't do airline jokes and very little about politics. That's just not what our audience wants to hear."

What the audience does want to hear is the music of such guests as folk singer Claudia Schmidt, clarinetist Willie Humphrey or such other musicians who are working in town and Keillor has inveigled into appearing on his show. And there are the regulars — the Butch Thompson Trio, Greg Brown and Peter Ostroushko.

There are the wonderfully imaginative commercials for such Lake Wobegon merchants as Bob's Bank, where you can't get a check cashed if they don't think the money will be spent wisely; Bertha's Kitty Boutiques; and the Fear-monger's Shoppe, serving all phobias since 1954. And, of course, Powdermilk Biscuits — "heavens they're tasty — and expeditious."

BUT MOSTLY listeners tune in for the reminiscences of life in the small town that are the highlight of *A Prairie Home Companion* and during which Keillor recalls, with-out benefit of notes or script, events of the near and distant past in "hometown" Lake Wobegon. Invariably, the stories start out howlingly funny and end with a gentle poignancy and moral lesson, however slight.

Keillor said his closely knit fam-



Garrison Keillor, creator of the popular *Prairie Home Companion*, says his show grew naturally out of his childhood of family stories and radio-listening.

ly didn't have much contact with outsiders when he was growing up. "There are no converts to Catholicism in the family," he said. "One aunt became a Baptist, and my sister married a Baptist and became one. But that's not moving very far away from the original path, I guess."

"I don't think I ever met a Jewish person before I went to college, and I never was in a Catholic church until I was in my 20s. Our parents didn't talk to us about it

his adopted "hometown" with the working title *Lake Wobegon, Our Home* that is scheduled to be at the publisher's by August. A pre-dawn arrival at his office in Minnesota Public Radio's new building here is not an infrequent occurrence, he said, claiming it's a "wonderful" time to work.

"I'm writing like a crazy man here the last few months. The farther along I get, the more I think of to write about. Just this morning I wrote four pages about washing dishes (which he did while attending the University of Minnesota), and when I got finished, I wanted to go right out and do it again."

It was also while attending the university that Keillor first became involved with radio. And when he got on at St. Paul's KSJN, his initial contact with mass popularity was as host of *The Prairie Home Morning Show*, during which he read the news and played bluegrass music.

A Prairie Home Companion made its debut July 6, 1974, to a live audience of fewer than 20 people. "The small audience didn't bother me at all," the notoriously shy Keillor explained. "I was nervous enough as it was. I was a writer, not a radio personality."

KEILLOR SAID he really had very little problem selling the idea for the show to his boss, Bill Kling. "He listened to my pitch and said, 'Do it.'"

It was a great fortune to get to work in such a small operation at the beginning, Keillor said. "We got to do more things and learn how to do it right."

He got things right enough that in 1980 the show was offered nationally. It remains the only nationally broadcast live radio show, and has garnered, among many others, the prestigious Peabody Award for excellence in broadcasting.

THE SHOW started out playing small halls, but in March 1978 it moved into a "permanent" home

in the World Theater in downtown St. Paul. Last January, however, the show was forced to move quickly to the nearby Orpheum Theater when pieces of plaster started falling from the ceiling of the World.

There's a kind of paradox surrounding the show's success. In that while the audience is bigger and the common-denominator element shrinks, Keillor feels he is taking greater chances with the show now than at any time in the past.

"The musicians, especially, and I take a lot more risks now," he said. "There's much more material prepared for just one performance and with very slim rehearsal time. Anything could go wrong, but we're pretty fortunate."

KEILLOR SAID he doesn't really think much about his audience when preparing each week's edition. "By the time the audience hears the show it's in the past, anyway. We're done with it, except to put it on. They have the right to be alienated, to be upset with what we do. And they can turn off the radio if they don't like it — though I hope not too many people will tune us out."

"If I started thinking too much about pleasing the audience, I'd start trying to copy the so-called successful shows. There's no future in copying somebody else; that's no way to live."

Keillor said he has done some 470 live shows, about 20 that have been taped and several on the road. "I like going on the road," he said. "We always get a very hot audience when we travel. It's very exciting to play in places like New York and Boston, and so are the small towns."

"Radio makes things bigger in the imagination. When the audience sees us on stage, they're really excited about what they're going to see."

Prairie Home Companion is broadcast at 9 p.m. Saturdays on KUT-FM, 90.7.

"THE GREMLINS ARE ON THE MARCH INTO SCREEN LEGEND"