

SUNDAY, JUNE 10, 1984

DAILY NEWS, BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY

Airs live on WKYU-FM

'Prairie Home Companion' nationwide hit

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — In a cluttered office cubicle in downtown St. Paul, America's Tallest Radio Comedian is thinking long and hard about shag carpets, church suppers and cast-iron deer.

It is Wednesday, and Garrison Keillor's mind is on Lake Wobegon, Minn., the fictional "hometown" he created, a town that 2 million Americans feel they know as well as any on the map.

Come Saturday, Keillor will do

"A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard live 5 p.m.-7 p.m. each Saturday on WKYU-FM.

what he has done most every Saturday for the past 10 years: don a cream-colored suit, red tie and red socks and stand before a tangled web of microphones in a shabby St. Paul theater.

There is a halting cadence as rich and soothing as a swallow of sorghum, the 6-foot-4 expatriate with the bushy eyebrows and jutting jaw will bring America the news from "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve."

If the decades have been unable to improve Lake Wobegon, the same does not hold true for the radio program that showcases it. When "A Prairie Home Companion" made its debut on July 6, 1974, the live audience totaled 20 people.

Success didn't come overnight. It wasn't until 1980 that the show went national. The following year, it won the George Foster Peabody Award and has since grown into a coast-to-coast hit, attracting more than 2 million listeners — multitudes by public radio standards.

Each week, 1,000 fans fill the Orpheum Theater in downtown St. Paul, outnumbering the hardy souls of Lake Wobegon by 500. General admission costs \$5, and tickets are sold out two months in advance.

- ACROSS**
- 3 Surge
 - 4 Christian era (abbr.)
 - 5 Heartbeats
 - 6 chart (abbr.)
 - 7 Element
 - 8 Logos
 - 9 Nothing
 - 10 Mao — hung
 - 11 Is inclined
 - 14 Weight
 - 15 Baby bear
 - 16 Disappointment
 - 20 Apologizing
 - 22 Golfing aid (abbr.)
 - 23 Pismire
 - 25 Gentleman
 - 26 Frequently (poet.)
 - 27 Small spot
 - 28 Eligible
 - 30 Common newt
 - 31 The bull (2 wds., Span.)
 - 33 Insect egg
 - 34 Court order
 - 35 Legal order
 - 37 Upper surface
 - 40 Theodore, for short
 - 41 Shortly
 - 42 Beverages
 - 43 Card game
 - 45 Most homely
 - 47 Conceited person
 - 50 Piker stake
 - 51 Natural ability
 - 52 Joustings
 - 53 Unlocked
 - 54 Soviet Union (abbr.)

- DOWN**
- 1 Flower
 - 2 Expel

The show, produced by Minnesota Public Radio station KSJN, is carried by 216 public radio stations across the country, and it is credited with raising \$3 million for public radio.

The Orpheum is the show's temporary home; A Prairie Home Companion had to vacate the World Theater, owned by Minnesota Public Radio, when chunks of ceiling began raining down on the heads of paying customers. A fund-raising drive to restore it is now under way.

Fans tune in to hear an eclectic blend of fiddle, piano and banjo music, and to listen to off-beat guests like Dr. Tom Weaver, who tags out a rickling rendition of the "William Tell Overture" on his teeth.

They tune in to hear "ads" for "sponsors" like Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"), the Fearmonger's Shoppe ("Serving your phobias needs since 1964"), and Powdermilk Biscuits, available "in the big brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness."

But mostly, they tune in to hear Keillor, who lopes onstage midway through each two-hour show to deliver a 30-minute monologue from the town where "the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

Nothing too earth-shattering seems to happen there, enabling Keillor to start all his stories the same way: "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon." The audience learns that Wally and Evelyn finished spring cleaning over at the Side Track Tap and the "dim little place on Main Street" reopened, amid stern reminders that the Side Track is not a pigsty. This is accompanied by the usual admonition: "Don't sleep at our bar, we don't drink in your bed."

They are informed that the Buehler twins are celebrating their 15th birthdays, or that prom night is drawing near and the girls of

Lake Wobegon High are stitching the last bows and ruffles on yards of dotted Swiss organza and tulle.

Lake Wobegon actually was founded on Keillor's morning show, which ran from 1982 to 1983. He invented sponsors to make the show seem more successful; understandably, considering he once broadcast over his college radio station for a year before realizing that the transmitter didn't work.

Powdermilk Biscuits, the ones that "give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done," was his first sponsor. Jack's Auto Repair ("All tracks lead to Jack's") signed on at about the same time.

They were joined by Bertha's Kitty Boutique, with its designer cat collection; Bob's Bank ("Save at the Sign of the Sock"); and Skoglund's Five & Dime ("Where you really do find things that only cost a nickel").

By 1976, a town had sprung up to house these sponsors, and listeners began meeting such colorful citizens as Father Emil, conservative pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church.

He presides over a flock that includes Harold Starr, publisher of the Lake Wobegon Herald Star; constables Gary and LeRoy; and poet laureate Margaret Haskins Barber, whose work is decidedly more spirited than lyrical. And there's Senator Knute Torvaldson, who never held elected office, but whose mother thought the name "Senator" had a nice ring to it.

The exact location of all these folks is never divulged. Keillor describes Lake Wobegon as "kind of a hole up in the center" of the state, which causes confusion for tourists who persist in trying to

The American Automobile Association got so many requests for directions that they finally included Lake Wobegon in their Minnesota index, along with a note explaining that it is imaginary. Keillor also refuses to provide much physical detail, a lesson he learned the hard way. He recalls getting a lot of mail from unhappy listeners the week he told them too much

"It was a mistake," he says sadly. "I violated people's pictures. People have their own images of it, and they're as valid as mine."

He will tell you that it's the sort of place where houses are generously decorated with religious art, and where shag carpets ("the kind you rake") cover the floors.

"There are cast iron deer and rock gardens in the yards, and large stones painted white on either side of the driveway. Church women still do wear hats, navy with veils, maybe a few flowers on one side, and they come home afterward and serve Sunday dinners of chicken, ham or pot roast of the string kind."

From time to time, Keillor says, "I move things, rearrange people, and listeners correct me as someone you knew would correct the name of an aunt, or a date, or a trip you took together. People are very proprietary."

But most letters that arrive these days are similar to one that was postmarked Washington, D.C. "This city of Washington, I suspect, can use a good bit of Lake Wobegon. It would help us over some of the rough spots," said the letter, signed by Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun.

Standing before live audiences bigger than those of most Broadway theaters each week is an unlikely occupation for a kid who grew up shy in Anoka, Minn., smuggling copies of the New Yorker magazine into a "good, fundamentalist home in which we were taught there wasn't a whole lot a person needed outside of the King James Bible."

In those days, he was just plain Gary, a quiet and "strangely well-behaved" child who preferred reading to sports and who was blessed with a wild imagination.

Now, he is a frequent contributor to the magazine he once was discouraged from reading, and a collection of his New Yorker and Atlantic pieces, "Happy To Be Here," became a best seller in 1982. A new book, a history of Lake Wobegon, is due at the publisher's in August.

A graduate of the University of Minnesota, Keillor lives in St. Paul with his wife and son, who, like the Buehler boys, just turned 15. "You steal where you can," Keillor says.

Keillor is still shy; he never gives his name on the air; when talking to strangers he tends to direct his gaze at his shoes, and he greets an interviewer with an enthusiasm that most people reserve for their oral surgeon.

"A person in the course of his or her life can follow a path one step to the next and suddenly look around and find yourself in a place you never dreamed you'd go," he says.

"That's possible for shy persons, you see. So the fact that I stand out on a stage and do a show in front of an audience every week doesn't mean that I'm not shy. It only means I wasn't watching where I was going."

There are morals lurking in these folksy stories about children going off to college in the "big city of St. Cloud" about small-town snubs and neighborly acts of kindness, but Keillor strives to keep them subtle.

"All comedy is preaching, but it can't show its hand," he says. "He thinks success corrupts people and they forget where they came from. They become hardened and cynical, and they do disastrous things to themselves."

It's a lesson that bears repeating as A Prairie Home Companion prepares to celebrate its 10th anniversary with a special broadcast July 7.

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Children Unde