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A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION



Garrison Keillor, left, and the Powdermilk Biscuit Band — Mary DuShane, Bob Douglas and Adam Granger — in 1975.

Preaching the Gospel according to Garrison

Garrison Keillor is the Jimmy Swaggart of the jumble set. Young, urban, upwardly mobile professional types have made Keillor a national craze. We might be immune to the electronic recasting of Swaggart and his brethren TV preachers. But three million of us (including lots of older, rural types, too) are hooked on Keillor. And we tune in to 235 public radio stations around the country each Saturday night to hear him discourse on our life and times during broadcasts of "A Prairie Home Companion," the Minnesota Public Radio show that celebrates its 10th anniversary this week.



Nick Coleman

Like Swaggart, Keillor mesmerizes his audience. And, like Swaggart's audience, we believe in Keillor. He puts us under his spell, whether we're at home by the radio or in the live audience at the World or Orpheum theaters in St. Paul. We let ourselves go, surrendering to the will of the man with the microphone who is experiencing an epiphany in front of us, conjuring up a whole world of images, carrying us to Lake Wobegon, shimmering in our imagination.

And like Swaggart's audience, we reach deep into our pockets. We want to contribute money to the support of public radio when we hear

Farson Keillor telling us how important his mission is and how it can't go on without our help. We want public radio to take Garrison Keillor to all corners of the Earth. We want to share him with those less fortunate than we.

For 10 years now, Keillor has been preaching the Gospel according to Garrison during the lengthy monologues that are the highlight of each week's two-hour broadcast from St. Paul. Keillor's monologues are spell-binding, emotional outpourings befitting Keillor's upbringing in and fascination with fundamentalist religion. Keillor doesn't preach hellfire and

Coleman / 10G

COLEMAN: Monologues full of insight

From/IG

brimstone. His message is wholly secular. But it's like a fundamentalist religious message in many ways. Kellor cajoles us and prods us and pricks our consciences, revealing the flaws and foibles of our lives.

Pastor Ingqvist of Lake Wobegon Lutheran gets stuck in his bathroom but is too concerned about his dignity to call for help. A family is laid low by cabin fever in mid-winter. Married couples are forced to confront the disappointments of their lives together. Young people ponder the mysteries of adulthood.

It's often heavy stuff. But Kellor delivers it in a warm and witty fashion (although a mean edge sometimes creeps in) that is full of insights into the lives we lead.

Each one begins the same way, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon." But quiet doesn't mean dead or no matter how quiet it has been in the life of Lake Wobegon (or in our own lives) there's always something important going on. Yes, we're under Kellor's spell. But it feels so good. The man knows how to get to us. He knows us.

Most of us have a Lake Wobegon, Minn., in our background. Some of us may have been raised in a town like Lake Wobegon. Others of us had parents or grandparents shaped by small-town values. But even people whose families have lived in New York City for generations can identify with Lake Wobegon. It's Everywhere. Everywhere.

Kellor has given several explanations for why you can't find Lake Wobegon. One of the most recent had it that the central part of the state was mapped after the Civil War by a drunken Irish survey team (named Coleman) who left the town off the state map. That explains why there's no way to help visitors to our state when they ask how to find the home of Jack's Auto Repair, the Sidetrack Tap or Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Catholic Church.

But really, there's no need to search for Lake Wobegon. It is all around us. Kellor has proved it. We see our lives in Lake Wobegon and Lake Wobegon in our lives. We love the people Kellor talks about, even as we laugh at them. And, if we think about it, we know we are laughing at ourselves.

Kellor's monologues are magnificent accomplishments of story telling. They are lyrical, poetic dramas, each one building slowly to a point of crisis and then resolving to a happy or bittersweet ending. Much about "A Prairie Home Companion" has changed over its first 10 years and some of the changes haven't been for the better. But Kellor's monologues, which now last 20 to 30 minutes, are brilliant.

The genius of the monologues lies in the utter conviction with which Kellor delivers them. It is an awesome sight to watch him talk about Lake Wobegon. Eyes closed as if in meditation, script pushed off to the side, Kellor stands in a trance, breathing deeply, reaching deep down inside himself in a process of creation and entertainment that is spell-binding. Even filtered through radio, Kellor's voice is magical and has been known to stop many families at the



Garrison Kellor in typical dress in 1976.

dinner table in mid-west as they listen to his words.

The Kellor cult is mushrooming because it rewards its members so richly.

New listeners aren't quite sure what to make of Kellor. It takes time to realize that there isn't any Lake Wobegon and so they laugh at the stories of life there, thinking they're laughing at rubes in some far-off place.

After a while, however, it sinks in that Kellor is speaking in metaphors and the new listener realizes that he may be more familiar with Lake Wobegon than he thought. It's when the listener finds himself inside this world of inside jokes that the conversion is complete. The listener has been initiated and is proud of his membership in an elite circle of Powdermilk Biscuit lovers.

"I think he's magic," says Suzanne Weill, vice president for programming of the Public Broadcast Service and a big Kellor fan since her days as program director at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

"Garrison represents the world the way everyone wants it to be, particularly on the radio. Instead of the hype and the screaming, he gives us that very quiet voice. And the humor is so subtle it makes you feel smart. You're sitting there in the dark thinking you're very smart and that you have this personal relationship with this guy.

"It's a special kind of shared experience. It takes that very down-to-earth, rude, Kilty Boutique-sensibility and turns it into the most sophisticated kind of humor that there is. You're laughing at those people (of Lake Wobegon) at the same time you're feeling very warm about them. It's a nifty little cult and it gives people an enormous amount of pleasure."

Over the past 10 years, Kellor's monologues have become longer and stronger, expanding from five-minute stand-up comic sessions to half-hour masterpieces. They have also shifted in perspective.

In the first years of the program, Kellor presented himself as an observer of life in Lake Wobegon. His own connection to the town was nebulous. He talked about it as if it were down the road someplace from where he lived and his knowledge of its people came from "letters" from Barbara Ann Bussen or stories told by Jim Ed Poole, fleet center felder for the Lake Wobegon Whippets.

But in the past few years, Kellor has become more possessive of his creation. Now he speaks of being from Lake Wobegon, of being personally involved in its day-to-day life, of having grown up there. It's a subtle change and one that has contributed to the power of his monologues. But it also reflects the fact that the whole Lake Wobegon phenomenon has grown to such proportions that it has changed "A Prairie Home Companion" and at times seems in danger of overwhelming the original concept of the show.

When Kellor invented Powdermilk Biscuits as the show's main sponsor, for example, it was a gentle gibe at commercialism. The biscuits came in "brown paper bags with the stains that indicate freshness" and were made from wheat grown by bachelor Norwegian farmers. When the Powdermilk Biscuit emblem was designed, it was a parody of American capitalism.

Now the parody has become an industry in its own right and "Prairie Home" gift items have become the biggest Minnesota export since Spam. Powdermilk Biscuit T-shirts and other inventions from "A Prairie Home Companion" fill a Minnesota Public Radio gift catalog and the sales of the items support a third of the show's annual budget of \$800,000.

From a locally produced music variety show, the show has grown to become a major national radio program that created a new public radio network. Originally distributed by Minnesota Public Radio, the program now is sent via satellite to member stations of American Public Radio, which was created by Minnesota Public Radio and a few other large public radio stations in 1982.

If a station wants to carry the program, it must also join American Public Radio. The cost of the program (about \$1,000 a year) is worth it to most radio stations because Kellor's show has turned into one of the most successful fund-raising tools for public radio, having raised about \$3 million in pledges for the stations that carry the program.

Long-time Kellor fans might be happy about the exponential growth of Kellor's audience. But the program itself seems to have become somewhat stagnant while the focus has been on increasing the show's audience.

Looking back, the show seemed to be at its peak in the late 1970s, when it was reaching the height of its local success and before it went national. Those were the days of constant surprises.

There were people who tapped out "The William Tell Overture" on their teeth and played music on saws or nose flutes. There were Norwegian fiddlers, Swedish fiddlers, Irish fiddlers. There were fresh voices like Claudia Schmidt and her ballads. And outrageous musical send-

ups such as the times when tenor Vern Sutton sang arias made up of chapters from the Yellow Pages.

Who will forget Sutton and Philip Brunelle learning up on Thanksgiving to stitch together a paean of gratefulness suggested by the audience ranging from gratitude for a new marriage to thanking that someone's warts had finally cleared up? Or Charlie Maguire singing about frozen cars, Bill Staines yodeling away, and the Powdermilk Biscuit Band — Bob Douglas, Fiddlin' Mary DuShane, Adam Granger and Dick Rees — picking out bluesgrass tunes and making them seem right at home in Minnesota?

Much of that kind of fun remains in "A Prairie Home Companion" but it's a little less exciting, a little less inventive. It's more polished but sometimes seems a bit too familiar.

Technically, the show is much tighter and performers rarely start singing into dead microphones or trip over plugs as they sometimes did in the old days. But some of the spontaneity and spark of the early days is missing, as well.

With the important exception of Kellor's monologues, "A Prairie Home Companion" seems stuck in a somewhat restrictive formula. The show doesn't have the wing-it quality it once had and that makes it predictable.

Lake Wobegon has been very, very good to Kellor (he earned a salary of \$75,000 from Minnesota Public Radio last year) and G.K. the D.J., as he was once known, has acquired celebrity status, with all the baggage that goes along with that.

He has appeared on "Late Night with David Letterman" on NBC and has been a guest folklorist-in-residence on "Night Line with Ted Koppel" on ABC. He is busy on a book about Lake Wobegon that will capitalize on the commercial success of his creation. And rumors persist that he is interested in developing a TV spin-off of "A Prairie Home Companion" that would give him the potential to reach a much larger audience than the one served by public radio.

Kellor's success has been real and well-deserved. But long-time fans of "A Prairie Home Companion" have reason to worry about the future of the show and its star. Now that the show has been transformed from a celebration of a particular place into a national celebrity show, the question is whether it can continue for another 10 years without becoming a parody of itself.

But in the meantime, we millions of loyal listeners will continue to enjoy Lake Wobegon and the joyful, goofy nature of "A Prairie Home Companion." We'll still be turning on the radio when we come in from cross-country skiing on Saturday afternoons next winter to find out whether the people of Lake Wobegon have had any better luck starting their cars than we have had.

And we'll sit back in rapt attention as Kellor carries us off to the world within his imagination, a world where we want to be at home.

Garrison Keillor / 10 years at Lake Wobegon



Garrison Keillor in a rehearsal of "A Prairie Home Companion" at the Orpheum Theater in St. Paul.

Staff Photos by Mike Zerby

By Jon Bream
Staff Writer

The tall man with "Anoka" scrawled across the back of his windbreaker arrives at 2:15 for the 2 o'clock rehearsal. Of course the others couldn't have started without him anyway. And Garrison Keillor can't start rehearsal without his ashtray.

He fetches a heavy silver ashtray from the wings of the Orpheum Theater and places it atop Butch Thompson's piano. Singers Claudia Schmidt and Vern Sutton are huddled around the piano. Keillor joins them, but there are no hellos. He just picks up a sheet of paper and suggests who should sing which lines to what verse of the song.

"All right," he announces, "Take 1 on the opening number."

The music begins; oops, a false start. Another run-through. Keillor proposes a change. "From the top," he urges. Thompson begins, and the boss taps his foot to the beat.

So it goes at the rehearsal for "A Prairie Home Companion."

Friday afternoons are the time for the organic piecing together of the weekly Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) program that's now heard on 218 stations around the country every Saturday evening.

It doesn't matter where the rehearsal is—the World Theater, MPR's offices or the Orpheum—Fridays are pretty much the same. Keillor and producer Margaret Moe arrive with skits, commercials and song lyrics in tow. The house band is on hand, and the guest performers are expected with their own songs in mind and sheet music if necessary. It's a session of give and take, exchanging of ideas, creating.

On to the second song.

Ten years ago this week "A Prairie Home Companion" broadcast its first live program on KSJN-FM. There were 12 people in the audience that Saturday at Janet Wallace Fine Arts Center at Macalester College and quite a few more listening on the radio. This Saturday, when Keillor and company stage their special 10th-

anniversary program, between 2 million and 4 million people are likely to be tuned in.

Nowadays 10 years is a long time for anything to last—a marriage, a business, a job and especially a radio series.

How does Keillor feel about the 10th anniversary?

"How am I supposed to feel?" responds the founder, creative force and host of "A Prairie Home Companion." "Kind of awkward. . . . I feel kind of sheepish."

He started doing the show for fun. He knew a few musicians, he'd never been onstage before and he thought he might like to try being a stand-up comedian. So why not? But he never stopped to think what the consequences might be.

"I don't feel nostalgic about the early shows," he was explaining on a recent afternoon at his office at MPR. "I don't remember them clearly. I don't think you could feel nostalgic about a live show that you do every week because it falls into a rhythm. It's exciting during it, and then you feel real depressed afterward because the most memorable thing about it is what didn't work."



Clarinetist Willie Humphrey of New Orleans arrived to prepare for the show.

The memory lasts a couple days, he says, until work begins on the next show. He can't even remember shows from two years ago. "Every so often I run into somebody and I think I know them, but I can't place them. They'll come up to me and say, 'I was on your show.' It's embarrassing."

His show, of course, is a radio variety show. Or so he once defined it. He's also called "A Prairie Home Companion" an entertainment show and probably another thing or two. How has it changed over the years?

"It's much more generous than it used to be," Keillor reflects. He figures when you've been doing something for a long time, you either become cynical about it or more generous. Now he finds that the more generous PHC regulars and guests are coming up with more original material and collaborating on more numbers and bits than in the past. "We still do it," he says, "for our own amusement."

He gravitates toward musicians who are not his pals, but quick-thinking, versatile professionals who are easy to work with. He's not trying to push any kind of music in particular—he's featured just about everything including classical, country, folk, Baroque, bluegrass, blues, jazz, vaudeville, opera, mountain music, rhythm-and-blues and gospel. He's had big names like Doc Watson, Minnie Pearl, Odetta and P.D.Q. Bach. And he's had no-names like, well, you don't know them anyway. He's never really had a rock group on the show.

"How 'bout 'The World Theater Song'?" suggests producer Moos, clutching her ever-present script in one hand and her stopwatch in the other.

Keillor flips through a folder, finds the music and hands it to Thompson. "Do you remember the key?" the leader asks.

"C."

Thompson, Keillor and Sutton give it a try. "Let's vary it just a little bit" is the verdict. "On the vamp after the second verse, let's take the tempo down."

Keillor scratches his head and finally lights the cigarette that he has been fingering for nearly two minutes. Time for another run-through. Now he's trying to hit a high note, so he pushes his hand under his chin. Before you know it, he bangs the hand against his ear. "I sound like I'm off-key half the time."

Keillor goes in phases. "I sing for a while, and then I don't sing anymore. I get very little encouragement. I don't ask for any encouragement. I can do it every so often for my own self, but it is not something that our listening audience requests on a regular basis. But I'm a grown-up person, and my feelings are not hurt." He chuckles.



Keillor did his monologue.

Keillor creates things with confidence. He's a take-charge type in rehearsal. His hands conduct the band, signaling the soloists during rehearsal and during the live broadcast too. He kicks around ideas for arrangements on just about any tune, even though he says gospel music is the only music he has a real feeling for because he grew up singing it in church. He's not a dictator. After all, he asks around for opinions. But he does seem like an autocrat sometimes.

"I'm just trying to be definite," he explains, "and hoping people will disagree with me if they think I'm wrong. We have to do the show every week, so there is not a lot of time to meditate on things. You really do have to stick your neck out."

Except when he's got to sing. In rehearsal the confidence suddenly seems to evaporate. He invariably asks which key the song's in. His omnipresent nervous tics shift into second gear. He pulls at the skin over his Adam's apple, he slips his ring back and forth from the base of his finger to the knuckle or he fondles an unlit cigarette or a book of matches.

The next song will be sung by men only. Or so Keillor proclaims. But maybe Claudia Schmidt would like to join in, so he invites her. She makes some kind of crack about androgyny.

"It's an honor to be a male," Keillor declares, and then pauses to ponder about his statement. "Did I say something wrong? Don't women suffer from baritone envy?"

Photo: July 1984

Yes, Garrison Keillor feels compelled to be humorous. After all, he's always identified as a writer and humorist. At least that's the way David Letterman introduced him.

"It's (humorist) an honorable line of work to try to do that for people," Keillor philosophizes. "It's not a profession. The gifted amateurs are far better than the professionals."

Give Keillor an audience, and the humor flows from his mouth. His spontaneous humor is much different from his written humor. In person he can be real smart-alecky. You either guffaw or wince. In print he can be droll, witty or just plain amusing. You chuckle or smirk and go right on reading. On his "Prairie Home" pulpit he practices both styles.

The rehearsal is winding down. The ringmaster concludes the last song with a belch.

"Mr. Keillor, are you going to get here early tomorrow?" inquires producer Moos.

"I've got to write the monologue yet."

"Well, we've got a ton of stuff. Garrison, I think we're going to need you closer to 1:30 if that's possible."

He acknowledges the plea and announces that he's going back to his office, yet he asks guitarist Greg Brown and Schmidt if they need rides. No. OK.

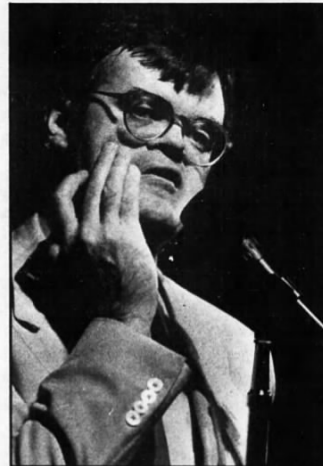
It's 5:15. Keillor tucks his folder under an arm and picks up the ashtray from the piano and returns it to the side of the stage.

Gary Edward Keillor was born 42 years ago, the third child of Grace and John Keillor, who worked for the railroad mail service. Gary grew up in Anoka, singing in a fundamentalist church, listening to the old radio serials, starting a couple of class newspapers in grade school and adopting the more formidable pen name, Garrison, in eighth grade.

He wrote poetry and covered sports for the Anoka Herald. He wanted to become a writer, so he figured he'd better go to college. He enrolled at the University of Minnesota, where he washed dishes, manded a parking lot, studied English and journalism, read newscasts on the campus radio station and edited the school's literary magazine.

He advanced to a job at KUOM, an educational radio station, and then moved on to the Minnesota Public Radio station in Collegeville, Minn., on which he hosted a program of classical music. Radio helped Keillor support his wife and young son, but he really wanted to be a writer. In 1970 he published his first piece in the prestigious New Yorker about a couple who hired a prostitute as a companion for their 17-year-old son as a way of keeping him home.

Meanwhile Keillor had graduated to the MPR station in St. Paul, KSJN, where, on his morning show, he was able to play a mixture of the music of the three Bs he loved: Bach, bluegrass and the Beach Boys. The program eventually became known as "A Prairie Home Companion," a name inspired either by a cemetery he encountered in Moorhead, Minn., called Our Prairie Home, or the Woman's Home Companion magazine, or a combination of the two. Keillor has



"Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town . . ."

explained it so many times he's not sure what the real story is.

After traveling to Nashville, Tenn., to write a story for the New Yorker about the Grand Ole Opry in 1974, he came up with an idea for a radio variety show. In June MPR taped three such shows at Walker Art Center. On July 6 the first live "Prairie Home Companion" aired on KSJN. And the rest is pretty much forgotten by Keillor.

In '82 he discontinued his morning radio show to concentrate on his writing. He published a collection of his New Yorker pieces under the title "Happy To Be Here," which became a best seller and enabled him to become a home owner, something he never thought he'd become. He continues to write for the New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly and work on his second book, which will be about Lake Wobegon, the mythical town featured on "A Prairie Home Companion."

In his spare time Keillor likes to take in a few Twins games, play an infrequent round of golf and read "cheap literature and real sleazy magazines."

What motivates him?

"Curiosity," he says, "and deadlines."

It's 1:35 p.m. Saturday, and Keillor steps onto the Orpheum Theater stage. He's wearing his game face, that familiar white suit and the same torn white tennis shoes he wore yesterday with the blue jeans and button-down dress shirt whose collar was not buttoned down. The "Prairie Home Companion" technicians have already adjusted the stage lights and set up the microphones. Claudia Schmidt and Peter Ostroushko are checking sound levels for their instruments, and Keillor is off in the wings looking for

his heavy silver ashtray.

With the ashtray safely anchored on the piano, sound check and dress rehearsal can proceed. Saturday's warm-up session can get pretty organic. Tempos, who sings what part, additional instruments, just about anything can change. Producer Moos seems more assertive during Saturday's rehearsal than during Friday's. She has to keep things moving and an eye on the clock.

Keillor wants to practice "The World Theater Song," but Moos points out that guest clarinetist Willie Humphrey from New Orleans hasn't arrived yet, and he's going to play on the tune. So she suggests the Department of Folk Song.

As the department convenes, Keillor's other Prairie Home companions wander in. Bill Evans and Red Madlock, the rhythm section of the Butch Thompson Trio. Geoff Bull, a trumpeter from Australia. And, finally, in waddles Humphrey, an hour after he was due to arrive.

Everything stops. Keillor meets the 84-year-old jazzman in the middle of the stage with a dead-fish

handshake.

"Would you believe it," the guest announces, "that I got a whole lot of telephone calls and letters after the last time (on the show)?"

"A Prairie Home Companion" receives about 1,000 letters a week from around the country. Keillor will answer complaints and any complimentary missives that happen to strike his fancy. There are also so many inquiries for interviews that it seems that he needs a press agent as much as a literary agent.

"I'm not a celebrity," insists the man who has been the subject of reports by "Entertainment Tonight," "People magazine," "The Today Show" and Time magazine, to name a few. "There aren't celebrities in radio. I do a show. A star is a person who receives top billing. I don't receive billing." He laughs.

Yet he gets invited on "ABC's Nightline" to talk about what the 4th of July means to the folks in Lake Wobegon. "He (Ted Koppel) asked me once, and he never asked me again," says Keillor. But "Late Night

with David Letterman" beckoned a second time. "Did I get asked back, or did the publisher try to finagle me on?" the writer asks. "I think it was two book-promotional appearances."

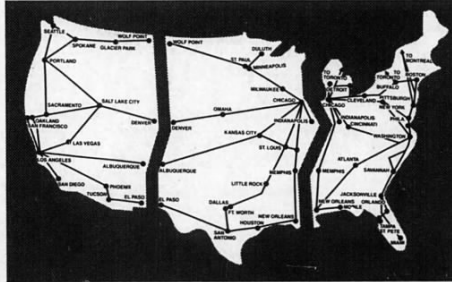
Keillor is notoriously shy. His friends tell him that he's overcome his shyness, so maybe it's now more appropriate to call him coyly modest. Would you believe that in 10 years he has never uttered his name on "A Prairie Home Companion"?

"I don't remember why I didn't in the beginning," he reflects. "I don't seem to pronounce it very well, for one thing. When I talk on the phone, when I make an appointment at the dentist or something and I say my name, I always have to repeat it, sometimes twice."

It's nearly 4 o'clock. Almost time to let the audience in. As usual the tickets have been sold out six weeks in advance. With Bull and Humphrey sitting in, the house band is really cooking. "It sounds great to me," Moos beams. "Let's do the theme."

"Let's do it disco style," wisecracks Keillor.

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The band ignores him and finds the familiar tempo. Keillor picks up his ashtray and heads to the wings.

"A Prairie Home Companion" has had many homes in its 10 years—Walker Art Center, Janet Wallace Fine Arts Center, Variety Hall Theater and the Minnesota Public Radio studio before settling into the 960-seat World Theater in St. Paul in 1978. Because of falling plaster at the theater, the program was forced to move to the St. Paul Orpheum last winter, but plans to return to the World in the fall.

From its early days, PHC has traveled, broadcasting from such places as Lucan and Collegeville, Minn.; Hammond and La Crosse, Wis.; Decorah, Iowa, and Fargo, N.D. In February '79 the program was broadcast to a national audience for the first time as a special for Folk Festival USA. A year later the first national satellite broadcast originated from the Public Radio Conference in Kansas City. In May of '80 the program became syndicated nationally via American Public Radio.

Since then PHC has journeyed to meet its audience, broadcasting live from Boston, New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and Ashland, Ore., among other places. The program has been carried in Sweden and will be heard in Australia this summer.

The two-hour show, which is produced by Minnesota Public Radio, has won two Corporation for Public

Broadcasting Awards as well as the prestigious Peabody Award. It has been public radio's most popular fund raiser, attracting \$3 million to national coffers since '80. The program is supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and underwritten by Cargill, Inc.; its annual operating budget is about \$800,000.

"A Prairie Home Companion" also has become something of a cottage industry itself, producing and selling three record albums, tapes of Keillor's monologues, T-shirts, baseball caps and other souvenirs.

Longtime PHC followers invariably ask three questions: What happened to Keillor's hat, why did he shave his beard and has he worn that same white suit for all these years?

The hat departed Keillor's head about eight years ago. "That was kind of a pretentious hat. Not many people can support a hat as grandiose as that hat was. I just had enough good sense to quit wearing it. Not many people can really wear a feed cap so that it's convincing. I wonder what kind of cap I could wear and really make it believable? . . . Earphones."

Similarly, he dubbed the beard grandiose. His son had never seen Dad's face; beards used to be a badge, but they aren't anymore, and the beard tended to dull his facial expressions, he says. So, in 1981, the beard exited. "It don't mean anything if you're clean-shaven," he says. "It means that you've gone covert."

And this is the third white suit. It visits the dry cleaners every other week. "I don't wear it in real life," he notes. Well, he did wear it two other times besides on "A Prairie Home Companion"—once for a benefit with the symphony orchestra and the other time for a benefit at his high school.

At 4:45 p.m. the Butch Thompson Trio takes the stage to "warm up" the PHC audience. Keillor emerges 10 minutes later in his familiar white suit, red cravat and socks and pale blue shirt. He tells the faithful that he's happy to see them all. "We do have a good broadcast tonight . . . I hope . . . I think . . . I guess . . . What do you think?"

An engineer announces: "Thirty seconds, stand by."

The Orpheum audience hears KSNJ broadcast over the theater's sound system. The clock ticks down. The theme music begins. Keillor bids a welcome. He runs down the names of guests on the show while folding a piece of paper into an airplane.

"And I want you to give a special welcome now to our special friend from down in New Orleans. A man who gives longevity a good name, I tell ya. This man makes 64 seem like an age we'd all like to be someday. Mr. Willie Humphrey on the clarinet." He sails the plane into the crowd and dances off to the wings as the music continues.

"I smoke too much backstage," Keillor says between Camels in his office. His office is organized chaos. On the desk and floor piles of papers and books have been fanned out like a deck of cards. The only other things a visitor remembers about the place is a huge word processor on the desk, an old green chair by the window, a photo of Keillor and his son over the desk, a Minnesota Twins Western Division pennant on the wall and the occupant searching all through the mess for a book of matches.

Not only does Keillor spend his time offstage smoking, but he also looks over his scripts. Sure, they are sitting in front of him on a music stand when he's onstage. But he doesn't want to read them over the air.

Offstage he also tries to listen to the show with the same perspective of the family sitting in its living room listening. But he finds it impossible. "I probably know less about how the show sounds than anyone else."

"Powdermilk Biscuits," the pitchman says, "made from the whole wheat that gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done. The cause of shyness is something that has never been determined to the satisfaction of anybody. Some people say it's caused by heredity. Other people think that you get it from your parents. Some people say it's caused by environment. There are others who say that you get it from the influence of things and people around you. I've always thought shyness is caused by being from Minnesota. Which I am."

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Photo: / July 1984

"I sound like I'm off-key half the time."

"We have to do the show every week, so there is not a lot of time to meditate on things. You really do have to stick your neck out."

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Being a humorist is "an honorable line of work."

Photo: 1 July 1984

10

"I'm a real slow talker," says Keillor with a cadence that's more laid back than measured. He has a good sense of comic timing, but when he's being straightforward you never know when he has finished expounding on a topic. His paragraphs are invariably one sentence long with seemingly enough time for a coffee break in between paragraphs.

"I don't express myself very well. I come from a state of sloow talkers, people who have great difficulty being articulate. Southerners are the most articulate people in America. Wonderful talkers. It seems like there is an image in every sentence they speak, not necessarily a metaphor or a simile. It's more like what English is supposed to be like."

Keillor never thought he'd make his living talking. He never thought of radio as a real profession. Returning to his daily radio show is not in his plans. In fact, if it weren't for "A Prairie Home Companion," he doubts that he'd still be in radio.

"I'd still be writing. I don't know if I'd be earning a living writing. I would have found some honest work to do. The post office, maybe. Sorting mail. That's something I could do."

"We're going to pause here for a brief intermission," Keillor tells his listeners, holding up six fingers to indicate to the theatergoers how long the break will be. However, it's no break for the host. He bends his 6-foot-4 frame over to sign autographs for his legions. Grayhairs, youngsters, young urban professionals, stout farmers, they've all come to "A Prairie Home Companion." He obliges them with a scribble and grabs a handful of popcorn from a box thrust in his face.

Before you can recite the Fearnongers's Shoppe in the Dales, Jack's Auto Repair, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, Powdermilk Biscuits and the other sponsors of "A Prairie Home Companion," the intermission is over, and Keillor has landed in Lake Wobegon, that little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above-average. It's time for a spring-training report on the Lake Wobegon Whippets, the town's softball team.

How much of what happens in Lake Wobegon is actually based on Keillor's life?

"It all starts with people I've seen and known," he explains. "If you're working in fiction, you don't lift things whole out of your life. You could, but it's not as much fun."

It's just about 6:10. That's usually when Keillor begins his monologue, the cornerstone of "A Prairie Home Companion."

"Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town. Love was in its glory. A week ago tonight the junior-senior prom. It went off so well, too. Just a perfect success. Everybody came home alive. And



Keillor and the "Prairie Home Companion" production staff. Behind Keillor, from left, were Marge Ostroushko, associate producer; Margaret Moos, producer; Fred Wasser, sound engineer; Lynne Cruise, technical director, and Thea Johansen, house staff. From Keillor's left were Karen Tofta, associate producer; Steve Koeln, assistant stage manager; Ernie Retzel, stagehand, and Scott Rivard, sound engineer. In front were Helen Edinger, production assistant; Tom Keith, sound engineer; Nina Thorsen, house staff; Ray Marklund, stagehand, and Bill Nicholson, house staff.

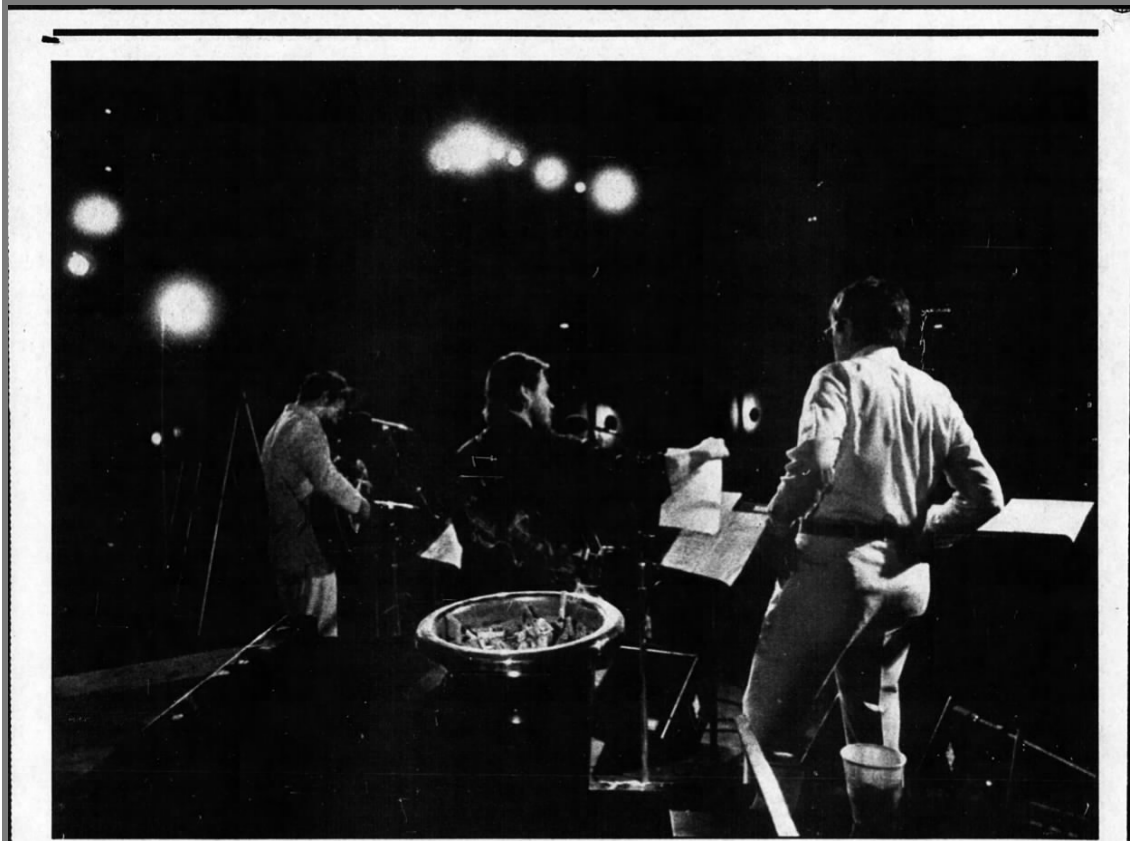
nobody came home too early, you know, so that you'd worry about them. And the ones who came home and woke up a little bit under the weather the next morning said they had learned a lesson they would remember for the rest of their lives. So you can't do any better than that.

"It was a lesson that had something to do with Burgundy wine, gin and pineapple juice. Somebody was trying to make Sangria. And they were off a little bit. But they all learned a lesson from it. . . ."

Keillor usually begins thinking about his monologue on Thursday. These days, he has designated Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays for his book. The rest of the week is devoted to PHC. As late as Saturday morning, he can be found making changes in his monologue.

"There are lots of starts and stops. It happens to people who write humor." Furthermore, he notes, when you're younger you're more economical, as you get older you become more wordy.

His monologues now stretch to nearly half an hour, almost twice as long as years ago. He thinks they are really "first-person essays, not stories, with little dramatic fillings, like baloney in a sandwich." He never rehearses them. And he never reads them, preferring to push the music stand aside.



Keillor's essential silver ashtray was in the foreground as he rehearsed with the musicians.

"Without preparation, you'll be able to take cues from the audience," he says, "and they will lead you through it."

When he slips into his monologue, Keillor seems to enter a different world. He seems lost in Lake Wobegon, somehow possessed like a preacher and as mesmerizing as a magician.

He doesn't buy that observation. The photographs taken during the monologue make him "look like an idiot," he claims. Then his conversation goes off on a tangent, about how he cues into the people in the first 10 rows in the theater and how every so often there's a great laugh, usually a woman, who laughs in key and how he'll do anything to hear that laugh again.

The monologue has run especially long tonight. Moos walks onstage and places notes on the music stands of the various performers as the music continues. The show has to be cut. Keillor walks over and whispers something to Schmidt. Moos whispers to Thompson. The host then asks Thompson: "Take us off with a nice tune, won't ya?" As the band plays, Keillor reads the credits of the cast and crew. "A Prairie Home Companion" fades off the air.

"Thanks for coming," Keillor tells the theatergoers. "Good night." And he heads offstage to the ashtray for another Camel.

It's been 10 years. It's a good time to take stock. If the show were to end now for some reason, how would

Garrison Keillor want "A Prairie Home Companion" to be remembered?

"You sound like you're asking me to write my eulogy," he says, looking his interrogator in the eye for a change. He ponders the possibility. "Oh, I would want it to be remembered by the people who listened to it in the form of some terrific parties on Saturday nights. And maybe some of them would start their own radio show. If people lose one form of entertainment they just transfer it to something else or invent their own."

Well then, how much longer will PHC go on?

"I hadn't thought about a specific length of time," Keillor says, fiddling with a matchbook. "All shows have a short life. Nothing goes on forever, except the Beach Boys."