

The sage of Lake Wobegon

BY JOE LOGAN

SHY OR NOT, GARRISON KEILLOR walked into the glare of a spotlight that shone down on an old theatrical stage in downtown St. Paul, Minn., half-smiled at the packed house and started talking in a Bing Crosby baritone smooth enough to make somebody sit right down and stop what they were doing.

Greetings to Alan, Ann and Amy, who were surreptitiously brought here tonight by their parents, in celebration of their birthdays and as the first in a series of treatments designed to deprogram them from rock 'n' roll music . . . And happy birthday to Arnold, celebrating his 30th. Where should we send the two truckloads of manure and the six pigs! . . . Happy birthday to Bill in Massachusetts, 40 years is nothing to panic about. I am pushing 93 and I still have the best legs in town, says Mabel . . .

As Keillor read from a handful of cards and letters, some authentic, some whimsical, you could gauge how closely the members of the audience were paying attention by watching their eyes — and their eyes followed his every inflection, alternately widening and rolling. The 1,800 people in the cavernous Orpheum Theater were not the only listeners held captive by Keillor's understated, homespun style. It being nigh on suppertime on a recent Saturday night, about three million other people — including 40,000 in the Philadelphia area — also were following Keillor's voice on his live radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Broadcast nationally on public radio for four years now, the show has become as popular in certain circles as chicken at a picnic. Already it has acquired an audience second only to the public radio news show *All Things Considered*. And it generates more donations and revenue, about \$3 million a year, than any other program on public radio.

Exactly why is hard to say. In the whole two hours there is not so much as a trace of sex, violence or deviant behavior, no rap music, no advice from therapists or even any genuinely worthwhile information. Fact is, all that happens on *A Prairie Home Companion* — besides plenty of bluegrass, gospel and country music, plus an occasional Irish folk song — is Keillor and a few others telling stories, spinning yarns and making idle chitchat.

"It's hard to explain to people what it is," says Bill Siemering, station manager of WHY-FM (90.9) in Philadelphia, one of 235 stations that carry the weekly show on Saturdays from 6 to 8 p.m. "Some people hear it and don't like it."

Among those who do, the main attraction is Keillor himself. A lifelong Minnesotan, Keillor (pronounced KEEL-er), is a 42-year-old, pug-faced man who created the show, writes it every week and is the host. He has a story-telling style that is nothing short of spellbinding, and his voice is more soothing than soaking your feet. Yet he is also painfully shy: Every week he must wrestle with the part of himself that would rather just sit in a dark basement somewhere and listen to his

show. One reason he shaved his beard about a year ago is so people wouldn't recognize him as easily.

But what keeps Keillor's listeners coming back every week is the ongoing saga of Lake Wobegon, Minn., a homey little burg of about 500. Lake Wobegon is mythical, maybe a little magical, and the only way to get there is through Keillor's imagination.

They don't have stabbings and killings and such carryings-on in Lake Wobegon. It's a community of howdy-dos and church picnics, of neighbors and chatting across the fence, of wholesome values the likes of which far too many people can only faintly recall. Blatant rudeness passes for scandal in Lake Wobegon, though greed, selfishness, jealousy and bullheadedness do rear up occasionally. As Keillor says, it is "the 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."

Whatever the reasons, *A Prairie Home Companion* has come a long way from its seriously humble beginnings, 10 years ago this month, as a regional show on Minnesota Public Radio. Along the way it has won two public broadcasting awards, plus a Gabriel Award, a Peabody Award and unabashed praise from critics across the country. What once amused locals in Minneapolis-St. Paul now has a devoted following among rubes in Iowa, beach bums in Hawaii and sophisticates in New York. When Keillor took the show on tour three years ago, he packed 'em in in Boston, Washington and Swarthmore. People right here in Philadelphia (not me) have been known to take a train halfway across the continent just to see the show in person.

ON THIS SATURDAY EVENING, THE featured guest was to be Doc Watson, the blind singer with the rainwater-pure voice. But 90 minutes before the show, word was that Doc and his son, Merle, who plays guitar with him, had missed their plane out of South Carolina.

Margaret Moos, the show's executive producer and the woman with whom Keillor has made his home in recent years, was sitting 10 rows deep in the theater, scanning a clipboard and trying to figure out what to do. "I think we can work around it," she said hopefully.

Backstage, Keillor, imposing at 6-foot-4, was dressed in a white linen suit, blue and white pin-stripe shirt, loosened red tie and red socks, wandering among the other scheduled performers: a couple of guitar players, a singing trio, and Butch Thompson, a musical jack-of-all-trades who was Keillor's classmate at the University of Minnesota and who has been with *A Prairie Home Companion* since the very first show.

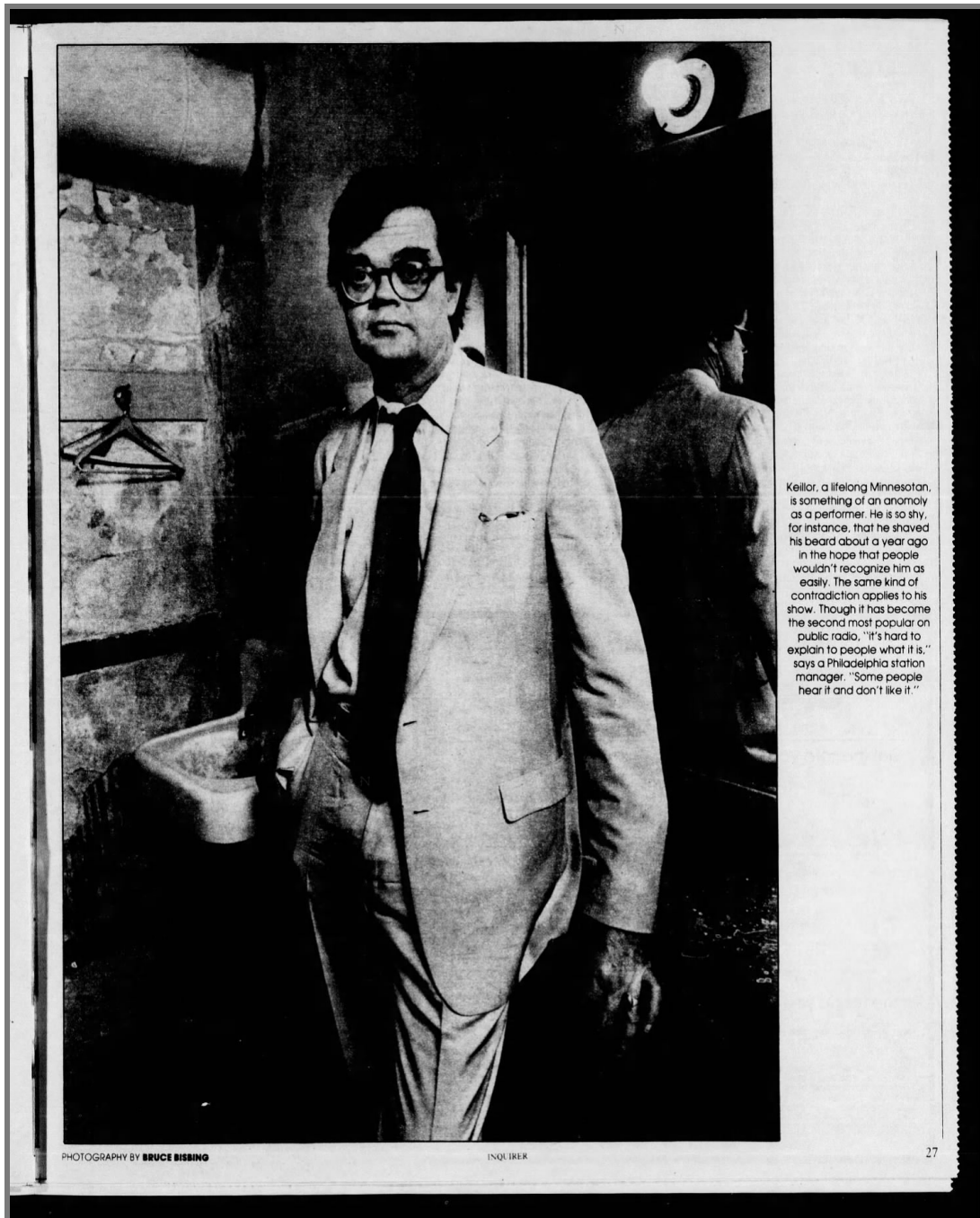
By the time Moos had figured out how to deal with the absence of the main guest, Doc Watson arrived, all apologies and explanations, but without Merle. Keillor walked over to greet him.

"Merle started with us, but his bridegroom fell out plumb under the gum line," Doc said. "We were eating supper last night and he bit into a piece of bread and all of a sudden he said, 'Dad, I don't think I can

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Garrison Keillor, in his radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," has created a town where people drink at a saloon that urges patrons, "Don't sleep at our bar — we don't drink in your bed." It's a place that never existed — but wouldn't it be nice if it did?

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Keillor, a lifelong Minnesotan, is something of an anomaly as a performer. He is so shy, for instance, that he shaved his beard about a year ago in the hope that people wouldn't recognize him as easily. The same kind of contradiction applies to his show. Though it has become the second most popular on public radio, "It's hard to explain to people what it is," says a Philadelphia station manager. "Some people hear it and don't like it."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE BISBING

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make it."

Keillor, who had pulled up a chair, listened in sympathy, then offered, "Could be an abscess."

Doc groined for his weathered guitar case. "I better take a look at my guitar," he said. "With Ozark and Piedmont, you can't always tell." He ran his fingers across the frets, then strummed it. "They ain't hurt it; I don't even b'liev it's out of tune." In no time, Doc had warmed up and was ready to perform.

With four minutes to go, Moos, wearing a Walkman so she could monitor what went out on the air, had moved to her lectern, just offstage. Keillor, stepping over a tangle of cords and wires, walked onto a stage cluttered with microphone stands, chairs, a piano and drums. As the show was about to go live, he turned to the audience and said, "I've never been able to see the show myself, but I know some people who have and they say it is good." Then, still waiting for his cue, "We have a real good time up here, although sometimes we don't realize it until later."

After a half-hour of music by Doc Watson, Butch Thompson and a steel guitarist, it was time for a commercial break. Public radio or not, no show comes to you without benefit of sponsors, however fictional.

Brought to you, Keillor intoned, by the *Sidetrack Tap*, where Wally and Evelyn wait to welcome you in the dim little place there on Main Street. *The Sidetrack Tap is closed until further notice. Wally and Evelyn began their spring cleaning last Thursday and when they turned up the lights they saw a lot of stuff that they didn't know was there. This is gonna take a while. To all you regular patrons, they would just like to say, "Shame on you."*

The *Sidetrack Tap*, where the motto is *Please don't sleep at our bar, we don't drink in your bed*, is far from the only Lake Wobegon sponsor. There are the good folks down at Bob's Bank (*Neither a Borrower Nor a*

Lender Be), where all the checks bear a picture of Bob and the inscription "Cash this, they're friends of mine." There are Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery (*Remember, if you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it*), Jack's Auto Repair (*In God we trust, all others pay cash*), the Fearmonger Shoppe (*Serving all your phobia needs since 1954*). And there is the show's original sponsor, Powdermilk Biscuit Co. (Hjalmar Ingqvist, president) — *Powdermilk Biscuits, made from wheat grown by Norwegian bachelor farmers. They give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done.*

Seventy minutes into the show — after Keillor had walked back on stage to deliver the greetings and the happy birthdays, and after more flat-picking by Doc Watson — it was time for "the news from Lake Wobegon." This is Keillor's 10- to 25-minute monologue that is the show's centerpiece. The "news" can be the latest developments at Lake Wobegon High or Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, a visit from out-of-towners, tales of a romance, or hopes and dreams gone unfulfilled.

Somehow, Keillor is able to take the mundane, ordinary stuff of life — like scurrying around 'cause you're late for work or coveting your next-door neighbor's new car — peer at it through some prism in the back of his head, and transform it into the most engrossing of tales. So when he leans into the microphone, breathes deep and begins, *Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon*, all stirring in the audience ceases. The other performers take seats on one of the aging, tattered couches backstage. Even the half-dozen staff members come to a halt.

This night, Keillor launched into a story about a large Vietnamese family, from baby to grandma, that had somehow taken a wrong turn and ended up in Lake Wobegon, where they'd come down with car trouble.

It was about noon and a dark brown dusty station wagon — *I think it was a Chevy but it might have been a*

Pontiac — pulled up in front of the Chatterbox Cafe and parked there, Keillor began in a whisper. And they all came into the cafe single file, in a procession.

As the family sat and talked among themselves, everybody in the Chatterbox craned to hear. Finally, the young Vietnamese man, the only one who seemed to speak English, walked over to Wayne Tollefson, sitting at the counter, held out the car keys and said, *Could you start my car, please?*

People who know Wayne Tollefson would not ask him what day of the week it is, Keillor said in a soft, soft whisper. He'd say, "I'm not a calendar, you know." It's not that he's mean, it's that he's so afraid of somebody taking advantage of him, which maybe somebody did once a long time ago, that he's leary of people asking him for favors. But this young man didn't know that, so he asked. And Wayne Tollefson said, "What's the problem?"

Wayne got up and went out there. He did it. I guess it had been so long since he had been asked that he had forgot how to say no. And also he's been kind of proud of being able to start cars. But Wayne couldn't start this car, and he sat in the driver's seat, frustrated. And then Wayne noticed the other people in the car with him: the old woman holding the baby, the two boys, the old man in the back. So quiet. They were scared. They were sooo scared.

Then the young man put his hand in the window, and there was money there. About \$17 and some loose change. The young man said, "Is that enough?"

Good Lord, \$17. Six people traveling around Minnesota in an old Chevy and they've got \$17. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Wayne turned around and looked at them in the back seat. They were smiling at him. They were so afraid.

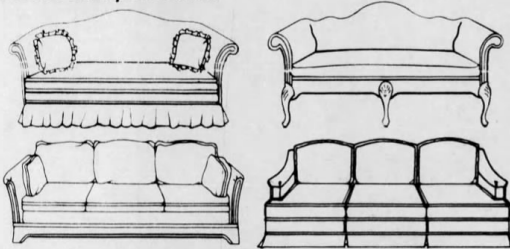
Now, if they had driven past him, Wayne never would have seen them. But the fact was, he was sitting there in the car with them. This was his problem.

Finally, somehow, inexplicably, the car started.

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And he got out and they were so happy. The young man got out and shook his hand and thank you, thank you, thank you, and they all got out and said thank you, thank you, thank you. Oh thank you.

But even as the Vietnamese family drove away, Wayne Tollefson was left feeling sad. Did these people know where they were going, or were they driving around and around with their gas tank getting emptier and emptier? Wayne didn't feel very much pleasure at having helped them. He was already starting to worry about them, more than a little bit. . . .

AN HOUR LATER, KEILLOR WAS SITTING in a hotel bar talking about the show and how he had come up with the night's news from Lake Wobegon. "It happened to me on Thursday in downtown St. Paul," he said. "I felt, as Wayne Tollefson did, a slight pleasure in having done something for them. But I felt worried about them because they seemed to not have resources that we all take for granted: a command of the English language and a little bit of money."

Talking to him, it soon becomes clear that *A Prairie Home Companion* is a direct reflection of Keillor's present and past. As a boy in suburban Anoka, Minn., he grew up in a fundamentalist Plymouth Brethren home, where he was taught the principles of human decency he would later instill in the residents of Lake Wobegon. He attends church regularly.

Says Roy Blount Jr., the writer/humorist who has become a good friend of Keillor's through his semi-regular appearances on the show: Lake Wobegon "is a way for him to pull his various values together. Just like any writer, he's trying to get back to what he grew up with and to try to reconcile it with what he's been

through since. It's not preachy, but his monologue is a lot like a sermon. I think it's a religious show, more than anything else."

It is not, Keillor insists, a celebration of life in small-town America. "To me it's not the fact that they live in a small town; it's that they, like most people in a small town in Minnesota, are church-going people who have a set of ideals and a faith that they try to live up to, and they consistently fail. And they live, more or less, in a constant state of grace and disgrace."

Keillor first found his way into radio at the University of Minnesota station, a career move made largely because it was indoors, unlike his job as a parking lot attendant, and, he thinks, because he was the only applicant for an announcing job. "I liked radio just fine even though I was so shy I could hardly bear to be looked at by the engineers when I was on the air."

His real love, though, was and still is writing, and not long after he graduated from college, Keillor began selling stories to the *New Yorker*. As a boy, he had been taken with the magazine, and when he was 12 he even changed his name from Gary to Garrison in hopes that it would one day be more worthy of its pages. It was a 1974 *New Yorker* assignment to write about the final performance of the Grand Ole Opry in the old Ryman Auditorium in Nashville that got him to wondering about adapting the Opry concept for radio.

Within two months, *A Prairie Home Companion* was on Minnesota Public Radio, and six years later, the president of that company, Bill Kling, offered it to National Public Radio. NPR balked, saying it was too expensive and the appeal too regional for a national audience. Undeterred, Kling created American Public Radio (which today syndicates several highbrow programs to public radio stations), lured Keillor, then turned around and began syndicating his show to NPR stations across the country.

Though Keillor is now a bona fide star of public radio, sought for autographs and interviews, he is not a

big-deal media superstar, and doesn't wish to be. As relaxed in person as he sounds on the radio, he prefers to creep around in the shadows of celebrity. He says he will not try to make the jump to commercial radio or to television. (Interestingly enough, Keillor believes to this day that his parents' pride in him is tempered by his notoriety. "I was not brought up with the idea of becoming even a semi-famous person. It was not considered to be a worthy thing to aspire to." And another time he said, "We just don't talk about [his fame]. It is just one of those ugly little family secrets.")

Nor does he plan to continue doing *A Prairie Home Companion* indefinitely, though he has "much more material floating around for it than I'll ever use." He thinks people will eventually get tired of the show. And that will be all right with him, too. He'll just slip comfortably back into the anonymity of full-time writing.

The success of his first book, a 1982 collection of stories called *Happy To Be Here* — which sold 70,000 copies in hardback and found its way onto best-seller lists and into a paperback printing — enabled him to buy an aging, roomy house in the same St. Paul neighborhood once haunted by F. Scott Fitzgerald. And he's now working on a Lake Wobegon novel, in part to help new listeners catch up with the doings there, but mostly to help finance the education of his teenage son.

For all the success of *A Prairie Home Companion*, it must take Keillor at least a box full of Powdermilk Biscuits to get up and do what needs to be done each week — he draws more satisfaction from the two days he spends writing the show than the two hours he spends performing it.

"This is work that I am not really equipped for temperamentally," he said. "It's odd. It's kind of in conflict with being a writer, because writers really are invisible people. And when people are looking at you, you can't look at them." □

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