

Otis Pike

Prairie Town Gossip Makes for Enchanting Radio Broadcast

WASHINGTON — The following is not a paid commercial.

Some time ago a friend got me hooked on something. It is not any of the manifold derivatives of the coca plant, or made from poppies, or even a weed like cannabis — but so complete is the addiction that when the craving comes upon me, absolutely nothing can stand between me and my fix.

The craving comes upon me every Saturday between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. EDT. I am hooked on Keillor, must have my Keillor, really need that Keillor.

Every Saturday night at six on National Public Radio, there is a show called "The Prairie Home Companion," hosted by a man named Garrison Keillor. He fibs, he exaggerates, he tells monstrous lies. He also presents the most fundamental truths you can get from the media. He has fictitious sponsors and a fictitious home town, and broadcasts, usually, from an allegedly real place called St. Paul, Minn.

Imagine the best thing that National Public Radio has to offer coming from St. Paul, Minn. The show has two real sponsors, Cargill, the giant grain merchant, and the National Endowment for the Arts. It is one of those rare instances when the taxpayer's money is marvelously well-spent.

The Prairie Home Companion is a potpourri. It has great quantities of music. It may have sacred music from any religion you can think of. It can have gospel or jazz or country or a mandolin ensemble. It is a great, glorious national amateur hour done by professionals and amateurs, too. Mostly, however, it is Garrison Keillor.

Garrison Keillor writes, and writes well, but not nearly as well as he talks. He doesn't speak, he talks — one on one, to whoever is listening.

He talks about his home town of Lake Wobegon, and can make you laugh and cry, sometimes both at the same time. It is hard

to find a very sophisticated man who can spend 10 or 15 fascinating minutes talking about mud. The glory of mud, of letting it slip between your toes, of channeling rivers with it, and sailing little boats down it, of all the things you can do with it. You come to believe that Minnesota mud must be the slickest in the land.

When Ted Turner and Jesse Helms first started making noises about acquiring CBS, Garrison Keillor's Uncle Cargill called him in one day, told him he'd been doin' pretty good with his radio show, and Uncle Cargill had a present for him. He'd bought him CBS.

The Prairie Home Companion had a couple of happy weeks talking about how to operate CBS out of a walk-up office in St. Paul.

The Lake Wobegon sponsors of the show include Powder Milk Biscuits, Raw 1 (the macho cereal), Ralph's Pretty Grocery (where if you can't find it you can get along without it), the Chatterbox Cafeteria and a

kitty boutique. The sponsors underwrite monologues which raise the question of whether Babe Ruth had been drinking when he visited Lake Wobegon, and answer the question of whether fresh sweet corn is better than sex. It is, but only really fresh corn. Sex is better than the corn you get in supermarkets.

As my addiction to the Prairie Home Companion and Garrison Keillor has grown, I have run into other furtive little enclaves of addicts. Don't get in their way between six and eight on Saturday nights. The disease seems to be virulent and highly contagious. Lake Wobegon isn't real, and Garrison Keillor lies constantly and is crazy and anyone who listens to his show is a little crazy, too. Anyone who doesn't is nuts. This was not a paid commercial, it is the only way I could think of to say "Thank you" to someone who has brightened this year of my life.

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