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'Hello, love'

Gossip from Lake Wobegon: Keillor wants to be left alone

By Richard Phillips
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ST. PAUL, Minn. — Far over icy forests cold, past lakes so blue and coyotes bold, frets a pale, enchanting Scotsman with a golden voice and a flair for the mythical. Hello, love, it's Garrison Keillor.

Ah, love. The undoing of so many of us, love's foibles are a bread-and-butter issue for that bright but bashful bard of "A Prairie Home Companion" — or they were until last autumn, when Keillor sullenly declared limits on the subject and threatened to move his American Public Radio Network show from Minnesota because of newsy gossip about his private life.

"Garrison is not talking to the press about this. Nor is anyone else at Minnesota Public Radio," says Sally Pope, vice president of the St. Paul-headquartered venture and wife of its president, Bill Kling.

The lid on love has been in force since October, when word leaked that the executive producer of "A Prairie Home Companion," Margaret Moos, had departed — quickly — from both Minnesota Public Radio and the stately home she shared with Keillor in St. Paul's elegantly Victorian neighborhood of Crocus Hill.

Soon the reason became known. America's 6-foot, 4-inch champion of a down-home, family-oriented way of life had fallen head-over-heels in love with a onetime classmate he apparently hadn't seen in 25 years.

"Hello, love" — Keillor's mellifluous welcome to some 2 million listeners every Saturday evening — suddenly took on new meaning. Margaret Moos was out. Ulla Skaerved was in. And Garrison Keillor said it was nobody's business.

"I guess most of us were puzzled. We thought, 'It's a rug pull. Dump the old woman.' Some of my feminist friends said, 'Yup, uh-huh, what do you expect?' But we really don't know the facts," says Susan Jacox, a social worker for Hennepin County, Minn., and an avid listener of "A Prairie Home Companion," which is broadcast Saturdays over 269 public radio stations.

In 1962, Keillor dedicated a book of essays about the Upper Midwest to "Margaret, my love." Sometime last summer, disaffection had set in, possibly sealed in an early August night at the Sheraton Northwest Hotel in Crystal, Minn., not far from the Minneapolis hamlet of Keillor's boyhood. The occasion was a reunion of Anoka High School, from which Keillor had been graduated in 1960.

"I introduced them, I guess," says Carl Youngquist, an Anoka real estate agent and boyhood friend of Keillor's.

Youngquist, a reunion organizer, had called Keillor weeks earlier, asking him to emcee the evening. "Garrison was excited about coming. But I sensed he was not all that comfortable being emcee. Besides, it was Saturday night and he was doing his show in Red Wing."

Keillor arrived at the reunion about 9 p.m.

Sometime that evening, several former students were introduced to the gathering of 162 graduates. One was Ulla Skaerved, who since high



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Garrison Keillor and his bride, Ulla Skaerved, pose with their children. From left: Morten Skaerved, Malene Skaerved, Garrison Keillor, Ulla Skaerved, Mattias Skaerved and Jason Keillor.

school had married, had a family, and gotten divorced. Keillor had the same experience. "She gave a lovely, very emotional talk for about five minutes on the AFS foreign exchange program and her lasting friendships here," Youngquist recalls.

Afterward, a small group of quiet-minded alums withdrew from the reunion room and its blaring music. "I was part of the group. So was Ulla. So was Garrison. I left about midnight. Garrison was still there, drinking Coke. Ulla was still there, too, I think."

The rest is history. Keillor soon began referring to Skaerved on radio as "my true love."

Keillor commuted to Denmark throughout autumn. He and Skaerved were married near Copenhagen in December, five months after her reunion with a comic but painfully bashful classmate known then as "Gary."

Margaret Moos is long gone, reportedly to California as a freelance producer (MPR won't say where). A grandniece says the Keillor family has been requested not to talk. MPR staffers likewise have been instructed to avoid comment.

"Garrison was a very private person, even in high school," says Youngquist, who played golf with the 43-year-old creator of "A Prairie Home Companion" the day before Keillor was reunited with Skaerved. Youngquist adds, "I know this: It's not Garrison's nature to hurt anyone."

Tongues nonetheless have wagged coast-to-coast ever since. In Minnesota, where tongues are said to wag more wholesomely, if not loyally, it's unclear whether people are talking more about Keillor's love life or the disclosure of his hefty salary in the Minneapolis Star and Tribune.

Keillor himself has steadfastly refused to provide helpful details, though he has counterattacked over the issue of privacy intrusion in several radio monologues with fantasy anecdotes about media persecution of "Shy Persons."

He also created "Coleman," the drunken Irish surveyor, and "Rick," the mangy Irish dog, who "sits around, watches TV, roots around garbage and stinks up the bed" — both presumably references to Star and Tribune media critic Nick Coleman, the only reporter singled out by MPR for isolation after breaking news of Moos' departure in his column. Coleman is of Irish descent.

"My story came out after the Time magazine cover on Garrison last summer. I had written a (fantasy) piece about what folks in Lake Wobegon thought about it all. Then people started calling me up and asking about Margaret."

Because Moos was executive producer of Minnesota's most notable radio program, Coleman decided it was news. His next story began, "Garrison Keillor is getting married but all the news is not happy from Lake Wobegon..."

Associates and officials at Minnesota Public Radio insist Keillor is simply protecting his privacy. "He's very definite that his private life is not his public life. He wants to be able to walk down the streets of St. Paul," says Cathy de Mool, head of promotions for MPR. "His reaction was of frustration at being hounded by the press. People began driving by his house and pulling into the driveway."

Others suggest Keillor also is trying to shield an artfully honed image as Minnesota's bard of wholesome living — a noble pursuit in this land of upright and moral Scandinavians. Recent disclosures

about his salary (\$173,000) and the purchase price of his new home (\$310,000), however, combined with Moos' departure and his threat to move from Minnesota, did nothing to enhance that image.

Among many in this land of sky-blue waters, living immodestly is a sin of egregious proportions.

"People around here don't like a public display of wealth. They're also hard on people who have 'made it,'" observes Kay Sexton, a Keillor friend and vice president of B. Dalton Co., the bookseller based in Minneapolis.

Modest living, along with stoic love and acute shyness, are recurring themes in Keillor's amusing anecdotes about Minnesotans in general and Scandinavians in particular. That the revered creator of Lake Wobegon and its simple way of life could rub elbows with immodest living raised eyebrows.

"I was shocked to learn the salaries of Keillor and the station's management," says Edward L. Henry, a longtime supporter of MPR and a former board member.

"That kind of money to people in Lake Wobegon is a salary that can't be imagined. His own personal life doesn't reflect the values of Lake Wobegon. He's on his second wife and abandoned one other gal. He was in a position to be a role model. But with details of his personal life now so public, I don't know," says Henry.

Back home in Anoka — now a Minneapolis suburb of about 13,500 — and probably throughout Minnesota generally, it is felt that the man in red socks and kindly voice has paid a considerable price for success. Keillor remains a folk hero whatever his salary or marital inclinations.