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Keillor's announcement 'tragedy' for his many fans

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — When Steve Borer of St. Paul heard on the 6 o'clock news Saturday that Garrison Keillor was quitting public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" show — and, indeed, that the show itself would end in June — he wrapped a scarf around his head and went autograph hunting.

"They were talking about the sales tax (on TV), and the next thing I hear, they said Keillor is quitting," Borer said, and he snapped his fingers. "I head downtown."

At a lobby souvenir shop in the World Theater, Borer priced various Keillor-flavored keepsakes, and finally picked up a paperback copy of Keillor's best-selling novel, "Lake Wobegon Days."

Disdaining the group of celebrity seekers gathering in front of the theater in hopes of seeing Keillor come out after the show, Borer walked around to an alley that led to the theater's back door.

"I figured if he's so shy, he'll be coming out this way," Borer said.

A gaggle of newpeople were waiting by the door, and Borer propped the yellow-covered book against a chain link fence where he hoped it would catch Keillor's eye. Looking through the chain link fence and across a street, he could see the lighted headline streamer on the side of the public radio building.

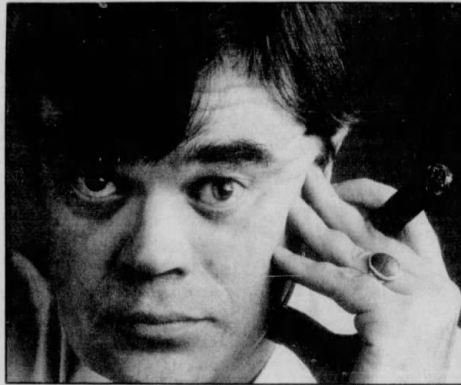
"BABY'S DEATH AT ST. PAUL DAYCARE RULED A HOMICIDE," the electronic streamer said. Then, "LEBANON KIDNAPPERS SAY HOSTAGES IN DANGER," and, after a while, "A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION TO CLOSE IN JUNE."

The streamer also said it was 26 degrees at 6:35 p.m., and the show didn't end until 7 p.m.

At 7 p.m., members of the theater audience for "A Prairie Home Companion" began to trickle out the front entrance. They described their reaction to Keillor's announcement at the beginning of the two-hour broadcast as hushed, letting his words and the soothing tone of voice sink in before whispering to each other.

"By everyone's reaction, I figured it was already common knowledge," said Mary Ann Standriff, who came with her husband, Don, from Cincinnati just to hear the show. "I guess that's how Minnesotans are. People didn't say anything. It's a shame. He's a big hit, at least in our neighborhood."

Bob Halverson of St. Paul, who came to the show with his daughters for Valentine's Day, said he



Garrison Keillor: Swan song in June.

was "stunned."

"At first I didn't think he was serious because he jokes a lot," Halverson said. "But then it slowly sank in. We just sat there in shock. He will be missed."

"An American tragedy. We didn't recognize him (Keillor) as an endangered species. This is terrible," said Gene Samuelson, another Ohioan who made his first visit to St. Paul just to see the show.

"People drive a lot here in the Midwest," he said. "Most people are introduced to him on the car radio. I've been listening to the show for about 10 years. He just became another bad habit."

The people who work in the World Theater gift shop were as shocked as the audience. Though they wouldn't comment on what Keillor's news meant to their jobs after June 13, they said they were as saddened as anyone who heard the news.

"I'll be working at least until June 13," said Jason Legonvarn, a junior at Macalester College. "I only work on Saturdays, but I'm going to Costa Rica this summer anyway."

The manager of the store, who wouldn't give her name, said Keillor's decision "was his personal thing that won't make much of a difference for us."

She added tersely that "other events draw more of a crowd than 'Prairie Home Companion'" before she flipped off the lights and carried her business log out of the room.

By that time, Borer, the autograph-hunter wearing only a tweed sportcoat, was jogging up and down

the alley to keep warm.

A Minnesota Public Radio spokesman came out the back door to say Keillor had snuck out a different way. But Borer kept jogging, his shoulders hunched with cold, beads of sweat on his forehead.

St. Paul Mayor George Latimer was in the audience at the announcement, but said later he had known since Friday that it was coming.

"It's a bittersweet feeling. I understand 100 percent what the man decided to do, and why he's doing it, and I support him. He did his thing here, it was honest, it was himself, it became a national phenomenon, but it's time to move on. I'm sorry to see him go, but you know, I can feel exactly why he's doing it," Latimer said.

The crowd at the front of the theater dispersed quickly. Then the musicians left, and the public relations people, and most of the technicians. A persistent TV news crew, a pretty reporter with a charming British accent and a pretty camerawoman with a quick smile, were the very last reporters by the back door.

"SAKHAROV CALLS FOR OPEN AND DEMOCRATIC SOVIET SOCIETY," the news banner on the public radio building said. "SERIOUS DISCREPANCIES FOUND IN WHITE HOUSE TESTIMONY."

And as the third-to-the-last reporter left, waving to the Channel 11 crew, Borer came puffing up the alley on another lap.

"I don't know," he said, with the first hint of despondency. "I'm starting to think that this maybe wasn't the best night to get Mr. K."