

Keillor's successor comes on straight as a hammer

By Chuck Raasch

Gannett News Service

Noah Adams, who got into radio because it was better than selling shoes, isn't exactly sure how he'll follow Garrison Keillor as the host of the radio show to replace Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*. (The show, heard nationally, airs at 6 p.m. Saturdays on WXXI-FM 91.5).

But he knows what he won't do, and it's not Keillor II.

"I am not going to be doing standup comedy, and I am not going to be dancing or singing on this program," the Kentucky native said over a recent breakfast in Washington, D.C. "I'm not going to be wearing funny hats, telling jokes. I don't tell jokes very well."

And what happens if *Prairie Home* companions don't like how he's assuaging their loss of Powdermilk Biscuits and the latest gossip from Lake Wobegon?

"If we do a program and somehow people start storming the (St. Paul) World Theater with spears and torches . . . well, it's not going to be the worst thing in the

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Friends describe Adams as taciturn and reluctant to show his wry sense of humor. While Keillor is tall and owlish looking, Adams is short, with a salt-and-pepper beard and a baritone seemingly made for the microphone.

Although they are not friends, they share a love of literature, music and words. (Asked if he was tired after 11 years at NPR, Adams said: "I would never use the term 'burned out' unless I was talking about what the Indians do to make a canoe out of a log.")

He counts among his closest friends some of the nation's top writers, such as *The New Yorker* magazine's John McPhee. Adams once claimed he read a book a day.

Adams says he despises the East-West Coast mentality that looks down upon the middle of the country — land that Keillor has celebrated and gently satirized for years.

"You know, I came from Kentucky, and we don't know much down there, but we know better than to stand in line in a

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world," Adams said. "I'll find something else to do."

"The job I really enjoyed more than anything else was construction labor. I just liked the people. And you could see what you finished at the end of the day."

Therein may be the biggest difference between Keillor and Adams.

Keillor would find ticklish little tales of humor and humanity in construction work, but it stretches the imagination to think this mysterious man would be out

pounding nails. Adams, though, comes on as straight as the hammer, making you believe he'd just as soon build a garage as host what many consider to be radio's best news program, National Public Radio's critically acclaimed *All Things Considered*.

Adams, 44, is leaving *All Things Considered* this month and in July will replace Keillor, whose whimsical stories of life in Lake Wobegon have built a devoted national following.

Adams straight as a hammer

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restaurant, eat bad food, wait 10 minutes to pay the check and pay too much money for it," Adams said.

Adams grew up in a big frame house with a twin brother, Jimmy, his parents and grandparents in Ashland, Ky. His father was in the Navy, then worked for the Post Office; grandpa sold newspapers in a little stand downtown. Great-grandpa used to fidget with crystal radios in a rundown shed out back. ("I remember him as this eccentric old man at the back of the house playing violin, and we would take meals to him.")

Still, Adams will not romanticize his childhood, as he illustrated once when he interviewed country music star Naomi Judd, whom he went to high school with in Ashland.

"She painted it as a little charming Kentucky Appalachian village back in the hills," he said, smiling slightly. "Well, it's not. It's a river town, a steel mill town of 35,000 people. An ordinary sort of place. But a good place."

Adams, likewise, has never had a romance with radio. When he was kicked out of college in a disagreement with a teacher, two jobs were advertised in the newspaper — disc jockey or shoe salesman.

He became the "Sandman" on late-night request radio. Michael Barber, who grew up two doors away, recalls that Adams was into "rock and roll, not hard rock or heavy metal like today, but Presley, the Platters."

"The whole family was introverted," said Barber, now a school principal in Johnson County, Ky. "But they were excellent neighbors. They were pleasant. But they were not outgoing people."

Friend and fellow Kentuckian Bob Edwards, host of NPR's *Morning Edition* program, says Adams is most comfortable in the intimate, yet insulated world behind NPR's microphones.

"Usually we are talking technically to millions, but you only see the engineers in front of you," Edwards said. "You never see the people you talk to, so there is some sense of comfort in that for shy people like me."

"For all of Garrison's illusions of being shy, he had that live radio audience and he was magnificent

in that forum," Edwards added. "Noah is probably even more shy than Keillor, so that will be interesting."

Adams has no illusions. "It absolutely concerns me," he said. "It is something different. My first thought was I couldn't do it, there is no way I could do it, but I thought about it for two months and it became easier and easier."

Officials at Minnesota Public Radio, where *A Prairie Home Companion* originates, had been trying for five years to get Adams to go to work for them producing documentaries. He has been to Minnesota at least seven times, he said, including a trip to the Boundary Waters wilderness area last summer. Keillor's exit opened a new door.

"I could have sat down and figured out 10,000 scenarios for my future and that never would have occurred," Adams said. "Which is why it is an intriguing situation."

He said he lives for more than just his work, but he knows the act he's following is going to be hard to match.

"People understand (Keillor) is a genius in humor and a storyteller, but all these things could be true without his radio perform-

ance," Adams said. "I understand how hard that is, because to a radio audience it sounds so easy. But it's like anything else. If it sounds easy, then it was a lot of hard work."

His program, though far from defined, will retain a Minnesota voice.

"I think the program should be coming from Minnesota, it should not be some amorphous entity . . . We will do whatever we can do to locate it in people's minds. Which is not to say I am going to try to learn the Minnesota accent."

Writers will read their works on the air. Musicians will perform. Satire of current news and trends is a possibility.

Edwards thinks listeners will have patience with Adams because Keillor has made *Prairie Home Companion* sort of a national family, and good families have patience.

Perhaps, but the family has changed.

"I got a call from the Ashland paper and they asked, 'Is Ashland going to be the next Lake Wobegon?' I thought that was really funny," Adams said. "And I said, 'no, of course not, I wouldn't attempt to do that.'"