

'Prairie' faces its last hurrah

TOM ROGERS

The city of Nashville, the inspiration for one of public radio's most popular shows, will draw much of the limelight as *A Prairie Home Companion* rides into the sunset.

Garrison Keillor, who started *Prairie Home Companion* in 1974 after visiting Nashville to report on the Grand Ole Opry's departure from the Ryman Auditorium, will end his weekly chores with the show June 13.

His last hurrah is making its nod to Nashville, with appearances by performers well known to Music City.

Doc Watson appeared on April 11; John Hartford, Chef Atkins and the New Grass Revival will appear on May 9; the Red Clay Ramblers on May 23; Ralph Stanley, the Clinch Mountain Boys and, tentatively, Emmylou Harris on May 30.

Discussions are underway for Atkins also to appear on *Prairie Home*'s final program June 13, according to Christelle Langer, Minnesota Public Radio's communications director. She said other performers may be added as the roster fills for the show's final weeks.

Keillor, 44, frequently has acknowledged his debt to Nashville and the Grand Ole Opry. He came to Music City for *The New Yorker* magazine to write of the Grand Ole Opry.

The Opry moved from its longtime home at the Ryman Auditorium

in downtown Nashville to the Opry House at Opryland in March 1974.

Keillor launched *A Prairie Home Companion* in July 1974. Nashville has changed since then.

Keillor stayed then at the Andrew Jackson Hotel, which he described for *The Tennessean* seven years later as a "tall, skinny building" in downtown Nashville. The hotel since has been demolished.

Keillor never has forgotten his tie to the city. He included Nashville on the nationwide tour he made in 1985 while the World Theater, his home base in St. Paul, was being restored.

During that visit he presented a Friday night show at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center — in which he answered questions about residents of his popular, mythical town of Lake Wobegone, Minn. — and then did his radio show live from the same auditorium the following night.

Atkins and Harris appeared on that radio show. They and other Nashvillians also frequently have appeared on *A Prairie Home Companion*, especially during the last few years.

Keillor also has taped promotional spots for WPLN-FM, the National Public Radio affiliate that airs *Prairie Home Companion* in Nashville. WPLN broadcasts the show live at 5 p.m. Saturdays.

Listening to WSM Radio's *Grand Ole Opry* was part of his childhood

at Anoka, Minn., Keillor said in an interview in 1980, the year *Prairie Home Companion* began national distribution.

Today *Prairie Home Companion*, named with typical Keillor humor after a cemetery, airs over more than 170 stations and reaches an estimated 4 million listeners.

It ranks with National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* as public radio's most popular show.

Produced in St. Paul by Minnesota Public Radio, *Prairie Home Companion* is distributed by St. Paul-based American Public Radio.

Cable television's Disney Channel is taping and cablecasting the show's final segments.

Minnesota Public Radio officials say MPR will continue to offer the show until June 1988 and perhaps later if interest is high enough.

MPR will air tapes of earlier shows, some aired before *Prairie Home* went national in 1980. It also will offer tapes of live performances never before broadcast.

Ironically, Keillor is leaving the microphone just as he appears most successful: His best-selling book of 1985, *Lake Wobegone Days*, has sold about four million copies in hardback and paper; his show has been picked up by cable television and will reach many of the Disney Channel's three million subscribers; since 1985 he again is happily married.

But he has become a celebrity in his own city, and he doesn't like it.

"I thing that the writing that I do about Lake Wobegone is based on tiny things that I see around me, and on my contacts with people," he said.

"And these contacts and this life that I live that enables me to be a writer about a small town is eaten away by public attention.

"In just the simplest and most practical way, I used to get a lot of wonderful ideas for stories and characters from people whom I knew casually, and I cite these only as an example — from people who come in and empty your waste basket, men who come in

and fix lights at the office, other people who work at the radio station, people you run into in a cafe and have a casual conversation with.

"And in order for you to gather this material...you have to be an ordinary person, you have to have some semblance of unanimity. And I don't have that anymore in St. Paul and I really can't do the show here except as a caricature of itself. And I really don't think I can do it elsewhere.

"So I choose to step out. I could still, I think, sit in an office without any contact with anybody and write about Lake Wobegone, but I think it would start to lose its pleasure for me."

So he and his wife, Ulla Skaevnar, and their children will move to her native Copenhagen, Denmark, after he leaves *A Prairie Home Companion*. Lake Wobegone, which Keillor has peopled with residents most of us know, will be going with him.

"I want to keep writing about it," he said.

He's hoping to write a novel about Lake Wobegone residents: What I'd like to do is start these people out on some bright summer day and see what happens to them."

And someday he would like to see the town launch a movie. He said he and filmmaker Sidney Pollack have discussed the idea but other chores for both of them have forced it onto hold.

Keillor's weekly *News From Lake Wobegone* reports are the touchstones of *Prairie Home Companion*. Fictitious Lake Wobegone residents like Pastor Ingvest, Clarence and Irene Bunson and others, born of Keillor's imagination, appear as regularly on his show as guests like Atkins, Harris or Scottish folk singer Jean Redpath.

Anyone who has followed *Prairie Home Companion* detects autobiography in the Lake Wobegone reports. Prior to his remarriage, Keillor often talked in his monologues about love, sentiment and families. Now a sense of one-way departure has crept into his re-

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