

Page 8D Iowa City Press-Citizen Wednesday, April 29, 1987 NEWS FROM LAKE WOBEGON

'A Prairie Home Companion' going...going...gone

By Cliff Radel
Gannett News Service

ST. PAUL, MINN. — The news from Lake Wobegon is not good. Garrison Keillor is leaving.

He's shutting down *A Prairie Home Companion*, and moving to Denmark.

Feb. 14, speaking before a packed house inside the World Theater here where the 13-year-old show originates live every Saturday, he turned in his resignation to four million listeners. He said he was calling it quits so he could "resume the life of a shy person."

Keillor's resignation was not effective immediately. Shy people don't work that way. That's rash and impolite. Shy people take their time and mind their manners. So, he gave his listeners four months' notice. The *Prairie Home* finale is June 13.

After that, Saturday nights just won't be the same.

Nearly a month after posting his going out of business sign, Keillor was working in his office at Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), which produces *Prairie Home* for the 273 stations in the American Public Radio Network.

His clear, soft, resonant voice filled the room. Going at a measured, pause-filled pace, he talked

about leaving the show.

"I'm not sure how well I can explain it," he says. "But since I'm the one going down the hall and out the door, it's probably of greater interest to me than it would be to any reader of yours." Hogwash. Four million people listen to the show.

They'll miss the droll commercials Keillor writes for the show's made-up sponsors, Jack's Pretty Good Grocery, Bob's Bank, Bertha's Kitty Boutiques, the Side-Track Tap, the Fearmonger's Shoppe, "Serving all your phobia needs since 1924," and last but not least, "the biscuits that give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done — Powdermilk Biscuits. Heavens! They're tasty and expeditions!"


They'll also miss the guest list that over the years has included sangers such as Emmylou Harris, Jenn Redpath and Robin and Linda Williams, pickers like Willie Nelson, Leo Kottke, Jethro Burns and Chet Atkins, players like pianist Butch Thompson and the Queen City Brass, writers like Studs Terkel and assorted hog callers and wood carvers.

What they'll miss the most is the show's heart and soul, Keillor's monologue. After June 13, there won't be any more news from his

mythical hometown of Lake Wobegon, Minn., "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

A Prairie Home Companion ... going — going — gone.

"I treasure the people in my audience. They're the reason I do the show. I love to sit and write, but it would be much less of a pleasure to me if I weren't able to imagine an audience somewhere at the end of the writing process."



Garrison Keillor

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So why is he leaving them?

"I went into radio out of extreme personal shyness," he says. "It was a way to talk to people without them looking at me. Radio is immensely private and intimate."

"Later on, I went up on a stage. It didn't seem all that much more public, because the audiences that have come to see the show have

been so friendly.

"In the course of doing the show, I have had the contact — with lovely, funny, admirable people — that I craved as a child and a teenager."

"So, I value this audience. It's been a big part of my life for 13 years."

Somewhere there was a "but" coming. Keillor lowered his voice and whispered:

"But I've come to a point where I can go ahead with the show as an imitation of itself or I can stop."

Keillor took the latter option because he is a man of principle — and he's tired.

"It's very tiring doing a one-man show and that's what this has come down to. I book the acts. I construct the show. I write all of the Lake Wobegon material and almost all of everything else. It's exhausting."

William Kling, MPR's president, says Keillor did this "on two other occasions. Each time he took a year off. Each time he came back recharged with a better idea."

"But," he hastened to add, "this is not to suggest he'll come back this time."

But this time Keillor wants to

get on with his life as a writer.

"I'm going back to what I always wanted to do before I got sidetracked with this show."

"This show jumped to mind one spring day in 1974. I was supporting myself as a free-lance writer, sitting and writing fiction for *The New Yorker* and doing fairly well at it. I was supporting my family. But I was looking for something to do to get out of the house and to do it with some musicians who were friends of mine."

As Margaret Moos, producer of *Prairie Home* from day one, puts it, "the show started as a hobby. It was just something to do on Saturday afternoons."

Ray Marklund, the show's photographer and original electrician ("They needed somebody to plug things in.") remembers the first broadcast. It was July 6, 1974 "and there were 30 people in the audience."

The crowds increased, and, as Moos noted, "people took it more seriously as time went on."

That's putting it mildly. *A Prairie Home Companion* won a Peabody Award in 1983. Keillor won the Edward R. Murrow Award in 1985.