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TV

From Wobegon to New York state of mind

By PAUL GEITNER

GOOD-HEARTED. Generous. Heroic. These are words you might expect Garrison Keillor to use to describe the sturdy Norwegian inhabitants of his mythical Lake Wobegon.

However, today when the best-selling author and former host of American Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" uses those words, he isn't talking about the small Minnesota town "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

These days he's using those words to describe—New Yorkers?

"I'm very high on New York," said Keillor, a 45-year-old Minnesota native who is now one of Manhattan's newest residents. "To my mind it's a city of heroic and very humorous and very considerate people."

It's been almost a year since the tall, soft-spoken Keillor announced that he was ending his 13-year stint on public radio. The storyteller who made Lake Wobegon, Minn., into the quintessential American small town said he wanted "to resume the life of a shy person."

After his final radio show June 13, Keillor and family moved to his wife's native Denmark, where he spent the summer struggling with the language and setting up house.

"Some days it seems that I am living the immigrant dream in reverse, starting with success in America, then the voyage, then the life of servitude in the Old World," he wrote in "A Letter From Copenhagen," the introduction to "Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories," published this year.

In an interview at a Manhattan coffee shop—a far cry from Lake Wobegon's Chatterbox Cafe—Keillor said he and his wife, Ulla Skaerved, a one-time foreign exchange student he met in Minnesota and married in 1985, decided to try New York about three months ago.

"It is hard. There's a great deal to endure, living here," he said in the slow, Midwestern cadence that's instantly recognizable to the 4 million people who listened to him on the radio each Saturday night.

For instance, there are New York drivers. Keillor, who arrived here with his 1985 Chevrolet Blazer, said he put it in a garage and hasn't seen it in over a month. "We were brought up to be polite and to defer to the other person" on the road, he said. But if you drive that way here, "you'll never get home for dinner."

New Yorkers also have a different tone of voice, a way of "quietly yelling" at each other that offends the mild-mannered Lake Wobegoner.

Still, living in New York is worth it, said Keillor, who calls the city "a model of not only tolerance but, I think, of a good-heartedness that I like."

"The most wonderful thing is the anonymity and the feeling of being alone here. Living practically in each other's laps the way they do. (New Yorkers) are, I think, extremely sensitive to individuality."

It was a loss of privacy in his hometown of St. Paul, Minn., following the success of his 1985 book, "Lake Wobegon Days," that forced Keillor to quit his radio show and leave the state in which he had lived all his life.

"It was a lovely dream that I had that I would be a writer who stayed at home, that I wouldn't run off to the coast as others have done," he said. "I wanted to tell stories about Lake Wobegon to the people of Lake Wobegon, but it's not possible; it can't be done there."

Part of the reason stems from what he calls a piece of Minnesota folklore — "the old caution that we've all heard since we were little kids, and that is: 'Don't think you're better than other people. Don't think you're different or special.'"


"I don't believe in that anymore. The pursuit of talent is not the same as vanity—it just isn't—and I am afraid that where I come from it is. You have to be very careful about appearing too different, because people take it to mean that you think that you're better."

KEILLOR misses radio. "When you quit something that you've done for 13 years, you grieve for it," he said. "I want to do another 'Prairie Home Companion' farewell show. Maybe do an annual farewell . . . every year come back and say goodbye again."

Plans are in the works, but Keillor said no date has yet been set.

Keillor has a small office and "a typewriter that doesn't work" at The New Yorker, for which he has written since 1970. But aside from occasional pieces for the magazine, he doesn't plan to do much writing for a while.

"For a year or two, I think it helps to pull out of it, to take some time to walk around and look at things and listen to people," he said. —AP



MANHATTANITE: Garrison Keillor, by way of Minnesota and Denmark

TUESDAY'S PRIME TIME