

Radio home to manipulation, Keillor says

GROVERS MILL, N.J. — The "War of the Worlds" radio drama about invading Martians unleashed widespread hysteria in 1938, but similar public manipulation is "happening all the time" today, says writer Garrison Keillor.

Keillor, creator of the "Prairie Home Companion" radio series, said 1938 was an innocent age compared to the present, when some jaded, cynical writers and politicians abandon objectivity in order to entertain with shock value and fear.

Keillor said his Uncle Jim, a gentle farmer who listened to a crystal headset radio in the bedroom of his Minnesota farmhouse, was his only relative who believed the broadcast 50 years ago Sunday and thought the world was ending.

Uncle Jim was among up to 1 million Americans who believed the Halloween eve broadcast of Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre of the Air.

Keillor "Prairie Home Companion" series on National Public Radio included homespun reports on life in the fictional community of Lake Wobegon, Minn.

Sunday ended a four-day celebration of the 50th anniversary of the "War of the Worlds" broadcast



File photo

Garrison Keillor

by the community randomly chosen as the setting for the invasion by scriptwriter Howard Koch. Closing events included a theatrical production of the broadcast.

Keillor applauded the off-beat celebration.

"It's a case of a community who was such a victim of the media 50 years ago to have a chance to come back and exploit its victimization," he said. "It's a form of justice that's so rare."

Keillor joined a psychology professor and a historian Saturday to examine the question: "Could it happen again?"

"It's happening all the time," Keillor said. "For my Uncle Jim, panic was an event, and for us it's a way of life."

He cited the media's emphasis on entertainment, and its fascination with the bizarre and perverse.

He noted Republican presidential candidate George Bush's campaign commercials that portrayed Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis as soft on crime by depicting criminals moving through a turnstile.

Keillor said "the engine of our politics" has become fear of people who are different, of drugs, and of crime.

"Entertainers are after an effect. Journalists have another code of ethics, and so should politicians." They must be faithful to an objective reality, he said, adding that "We have to insist on a difference."

Keillor said the "War of the Worlds" play by Koch, who later won an Academy Award for "Casablanca," was "ethically very questionable."