

8D SUNDAY DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE, ROCHESTER, N.Y., FEBRUARY 12, 1989

# Garrison Keillor is back and musing about Lake Wobegon

After 18 months' absence from air he hints at return

By Beth Ashley  
Special News Service

Wearing red socks and red-rimmed eyeglasses, the man from Lake Wobegon sat on a stool and thanked a packed house for coming to see him at the College of Marin, near San Francisco.

"I deeply respect you for facing up to the inevitable disappointment of meeting someone you have only known through stories and on radio," said Garrison Keillor, a hint of a smile on his judgmental face. "You have formed a picture of someone who is finer than anyone is prepared to be."

If audience members were disappointed, they didn't show it. THEY SAT RAPT for two hours while Keillor, in a somewhat dreamy baritone, answered questions about his new life in New York City and his old friends from the fictional Lake Wobegon, who faded from sight when he fled his 13-year-old radio show 18 months ago.

The sharpest applause of the night came when he said he was thinking about "reviving the show that made him famous." That radio station is a place I have sorely missed." He left, he said, because the show was about to become "dangerously successful and expanded and developed and exploited."

"I would hate to have disappointed you, and I was on the verge of doing that."

KEILLOR HAD a few other serious moments. "You are people to whom I have been whispering for years things I might never have told my own mother, and certainly wouldn't have told my own father," he told the audience.

He was comfortable. There was no sign of the man who in June 1987 left his home in the Midwest and flew off to Denmark, presumably forever, to "resume the life of a shy person."

He always had planned to leave the radio show when it was no longer fun, he said in an interview away from the stage, twiddling a tie bag in his slender fingers. And after he had done it for 13 years, it began to seem like going down into the mines every day — it felt like I went down to the mines and by 2 o'clock my canary died."

WHEN HE WENT to Denmark with his new wife, a former Danish exchange student he had known in high school, he meant it when he said he wanted to live among strangers and to reclaim his anonymity.

"One is sometimes a little bit dramatic about these farewells," he said.

He spent a "beautiful" summer in Denmark, "writing a lot of letters to my aunts and to old friends from college days, people I had regretted not being in touch with." When it was over, he and his wife, Ulla, returned to this country, where they bought an



Garrison Keillor in New York City. He is thinking about reviving his show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, and the mythical Lake Wobegon.

apartment on New York City's Upper West Side.

Part of the problem with Denmark was language, he said — he speaks no Danish — but the main factor that brought them home was "my wife told me that living in Denmark may have been my plan, but it was certainly not hers. She is a city girl who grew up in Copenhagen."

THEY CHOSE to live in New York City because "she's very aware of not being an American. In New York, she is less aware. She loves being in a city where her English is at least as good as half the other people's."

Now that he's back, Keillor has no intention of leaving again. He now has an office at the *New Yorker* magazine, where he is a regular contributor and has the freedom to "just do my best." And he has plenty of other things to keep him busy: He is booked for a performance at Carnegie Hall, he is working on a novel on the death of radio, and in April he will issue another book of stories called *We Are Still Married*.

If he can find "the right people to work with," he'll revive his radio show soon, this time broadcasting from New York City.

He said New York has proved a compatible choice for him, in spite of making his fortune as the quintessential country boy, spinning tales from the American heartland. "(It's) a city where you walk, where everything is close at hand. The dry cleaner and the grocer and the drug store are all within two blocks. I walk down the street and catch a train to my office."

THAT DOESN'T MEAN he has forsaken Lake Wobegon country, which still feels like home.

"That's where people talk like I do. The people talk slow, they have the same sense of humor, they are ironical in the same way." He smiled into the distance. "I still go to Minneapolis a lot, and

go to the country north of there, where I visit my aunts." One should always stay in touch with one's aunts, he said: "It's the only way to learn about where you come from."

Life in Minnesota has changed plenty, too, he admitted. "The big change came when people came in from the farms and went to live in the city" — but he still identifies with his grandfather, a farmer.

"My grandfather was the same person to everyone. He didn't have a lot of different roles, different lives. He lived in a world he understood extremely well, so he was able to tell stories about it."

"This world" — he gestured around the bookstore he was sitting in, where people at nearby tables were staring — "does not encourage one to tell stories, because it is really beyond our understanding. We don't really have an idea how those people get along, how they make their way in the world."

KEILLOR SAID his grandfather settled in the town of Anoka, Minn., in 1880. "And there I was in 1950. I had a place, I belonged there, I had a right to be there. I didn't brag about it, but I was proud of it."

He is pleased with *We Are Still Married*, named for the title story about a couple who break up when *People* magazine visits to do a story about them.

Keillor, the formerly shy person,

rose to leave. "I'm not sure anymore if I am a shy person," he said after a pause.

"I have decided it's a little bit self-centered to be shy; you have to give it up after a while."

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