

Garrison Keillor returning to radio with new show

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Garrison Keillor, whose "Prairie Home Companion" stories about mythical Lake Wobegon warmed radio audiences for 13 years, said Thursday he's returning to the U.S. airwaves after a two-year absence. His "American Radio Company of the Air," to be produced by Minnesota Public Radio, will feature sketches, monologues and a variety of American music.

Lake Wobegon will be back in the new show, Keillor said at a news conference Thursday. But he warned that the "town that time forgot" has undergone changes.

"Times have been hard back there, as they have been all across the Midwest," Keillor said. "It's hard to make them into humor."

The program will be performed before theater audiences in New York, St. Paul, Minn., and other cities in a 12-show series to be broadcast live Saturday nights starting Sept. 30.

Keillor, who is in San Francisco for a public radio conference, said the show will have the music of Fats Waller, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, hymns and "all the great things that every American ought to hear at least twice."

The folksy humorist and best-selling author stunned fans two years ago when he called an end to his American Public Radio program with an estimated 4 to 5 million listeners in order to "resume the life of a shy person."

Since leaving the show, Keillor has been unsettled and at loose ends.

"The worst possible thing is when all your dreams come true. And mine did, including some I didn't realize I had. But I felt better about facing up to those things in Minnesota," he said once in an interview.

Despite estimates of a huge audience, Keillor calculated he has about 13,000 true fans while others "talk about buttermilk biscuits and the 'Home on the Prairie Show.'"

When he abandoned Sheila the Christian Jungle Girl, Norwegian bachelor farmers and other

inhabitants of his mythical hometown, Lake Wobegon, he said he wanted to flee the frustrations of fame, including nosy reporters.

Standing on stage Thursday with his hands plunged in the pockets of a gray plaid suit and slowing chewing gum, Keillor generated guffaws when he asked his audience for "one more question, and make it irritable."

After his last "Prairie Home Companion" broadcast in June 1987, Keillor bid farewell to Minnesota for his wife's native Denmark. He returned after he found it hard to work there because he didn't pick up the language quickly.

"I suppose that was kind of embarrassing, too, to have failed so publicly, to have planted your flag so publicly and having to pull it out," he said.

Keillor, 46, now calls Minnesota home again, but also has apartments in New York City and Copenhagen.

"Home is a spiritual place," he said Thursday, "and in some ways I feel closer to Minnesota and Lake Wobegone" living in New York and Copenhagen.

"New York is not a nurturing place. It's an abrasive place, but you need to have a little skin rubbed off" or your sense of humor turns sentimental, Keillor said.

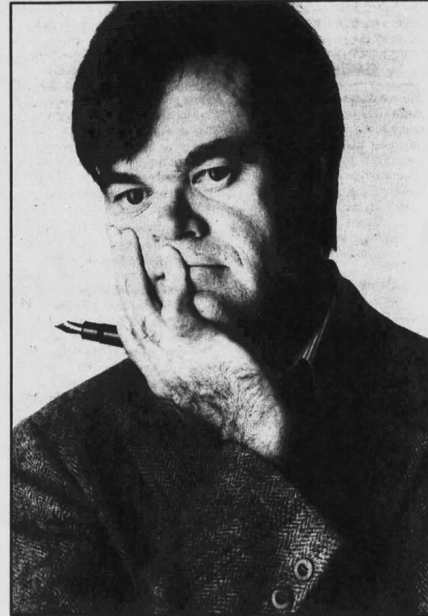
His book, "Lake Wobegon Days," was about his fictional hometown. It generated a resentment that he said took him by surprise.

Keillor said he felt forced to give up his home when the local press took too much interest in his private life. "It bewildered me. I had no idea what they were aiming at," said Keillor.

Keillor added that he felt hatred directed against him, which was entirely strange to him.

Today, Keillor thinks less about that time, which he calls awkward, confusing and embarrassing.

His most recent book is "We Are Still Married," a compilation of letters, poems and stories written during the Reagan years.



Despite a place in Manhattan and an apartment in his wife's native Denmark, Garrison Keillor still calls Minnesota home.