

War in the Gulf

CF native thanks Keillor

Humor helped him while in captivity

ST. PAUL (AP) — A Chippewa Falls native who found a mental escape from his ordeal as a human shield in Iraq by listening to tape recordings of Garrison Keillor's folksy radio shows thanked the humorist in person Saturday.

Ralph Leidholdt of Lakewood, Colo., was invited backstage at the World Theater to meet Keillor before his touring "American Radio Company" was taped in front of a sold-out audience of 925 that included Leidholdt and his wife, Rosemary, as Keillor's guests.

The 62-year-old Leidholdt, who attended Stillson School in Chippewa Falls, handed Keillor some Iraqi money that he had smuggled out of Iraq in his shoe.

"That's to pay you for all of the good times you gave me while I was in hostage camp," Leidholdt told Keillor during a brief chat between his rehearsal and performance.

Leidholdt said it was worth about 20 cents in American money.

Keillor autographed a copy of "Lake Wobegon Days," writing inside, "Free at last only to be trapped at my show."

Leidholdt told Keillor he had to leave behind in Kuwait other books Keillor has written.

"Well, they'll be puzzled by them," said Keillor with a chuckle.

Leidholdt told Keillor that tape recordings of his shows helped him get through his captivity.

In an interview, Leidholdt said, "They passed the time, and they provided that sense of humor to keep you up. If you don't have that sense of humor as a hostage, you've lost it."

"American Radio Company," a live, nationally broadcast show, is produced by Minnesota Public Radio and distributed nationwide by American Public Radio.

Leidholdt is an engineer who is on a vacation from his job with Operations Management International Inc. of Kingwood, Texas. He was due to come home Aug.



Associated Press

Ralph Leidholdt, right, a Chippewa Falls native, shakes hands with radio show host Garrison Keillor Saturday night after rehearsal. Leidholdt was held

hostage as a human shield in Iraq, during which time he listened to tape recordings of Keillor's show.

2, when Iraq invaded Kuwait. He had been working for 13 months as the project manager on a multi-million dollar contract with Kuwait's Ministry of Public Works, running a wastewater treatment plant and an irrigation system.

He and his wife, who was at home in suburban Denver at the time, had tickets for Keillor's touring show Aug. 4 in Denver.

When Denver's Fiddler's Green Amphitheater, where Keillor performed two days after Iraq invaded Kuwait, learned that his fan missed the show and why, it offered to fly him to the St. Paul performance.

Leidholdt, who said he didn't suffer any mistreatment in captivity, hid for 50 days in his Kuwaiti apartment and then for 73 days as a "guest" of Saddam Hussein following his capture.

He said he survived his ordeal by listening twice daily to his collec-

tion of 38 tapes of "American Radio Company" and Keillor's previous show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

"They were really a godsend, I'll tell you. Every day we were in hostage camp... I'd put on my Sony Walkman and put in a program and walk while I was listening," Leidholdt said.

It was among the few forms of entertainment available and provided an important emotional link to home.

"We had Iraqi TV, if you like Hussein bashing," Leidholdt said facetiously. "We'd call it Hussein bashing, but they would just adulate Hussein every night," he said.

Leidholdt shared his tapes with fellow hostages at an explosives manufacturing facility 37 miles southwest of Baghdad, where they were confined in a compound surrounded by corrugated metal sheet-

ing blocking view of the outside world.

"From what I can determine on CNN, it was bombed last Saturday," Leidholdt said.

When former world heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali secured the release of Leidholdt and other hostages held as human shields in December, Leidholdt brought out all 38 of his Keillor tapes. They're part of his larger collection of 134 tapes.

Listening to the shows brought back memories of growing up as a Norwegian-American in Chippewa Falls and driving from his family's Wisconsin home to college at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.

"Any town past St. Cloud is like Lake Wobegon. I guess that's why I relate to it so much," Leidholdt said, referring to the mythical town Keillor spoke of in his former radio show.