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Keillor: He's analog person in digital world

by Howard Siner
Newspaper Enterprise Assn.

NEW YORK (NEA) — Garrison Keillor just wasn't made for the 1990s. His focus is on America the way it used to be. So to speak.

The humorist, who made himself widely known as the native son of the fictional Midwestern town of Lake Wobegon, says growing older has brought him even more detachment. He is now 50.

"I'm at an age at which a man starts to become disconnected from his own times," says Keillor.

As a writer and broadcaster, he offers a wry, low-keyed perspective that can be traced back to his small-town roots in Minnesota. His storytelling is highly popular.

"What I have to write is an account of a world that may have disappeared — but has not disappeared from me," says Keil-

lor. "It's the world of my parents and of my beloved aunts and uncles.

"I want to keep it and preserve it and make it live in fiction and stories. I can't exactly explain why. But, in order to do it, I've got to forget about 1993. I've got to forget about the present."

Keillor's latest fiction, "WLT: A Radio Romance," has just been issued as a paperback by Penguin Books. When the novel made its hardcover debut, *Time* magazine — invoking the memory of Mark Twain — noted: "A case could be made that its author is the most gifted and prodigious humorist the U.S. has heard from since the old steamboat pilot ran aground."

Even more widely acclaimed is Keillor's "American Radio Company," a two-hour variety program that is broadcast nationwide on public radio stations. It has an estimated 1.5 million listeners.

"I do this radio show," says

Keillor. "That's my main career. I do a radio show on Saturday night. It's the best radio show I've ever done. It's turning into a great show, which to my surprise is a great show of dumb comedy. I've discovered that I have a taste for dumb comedy at this advanced age."

His new program is somewhat more topical and cosmopolitan than its folksy ancestor, "A Prairie Home Companion," which ran for many years. But Keillor still includes his trademark report from Lake Wobegon — "where all the men are strong, all the women are good looking and all the children are above average."

To some, Keillor's studied lack of pretentiousness might be an acquired taste. But his deadpan wit can be sharply effective.

He offered on a recent program to recite a limerick at the inauguration of President-elect Clinton: "There was a politician named Bill, / Who thanks to his

patience and skill, / Came out of the limbos / Of draft calls and bimboes / And is standing on Capitol Hill."

Off the air, Keillor admits to being a Democrat.

"Clinton is the first president that I really have high hopes for in my lifetime as a voter. All the others, it seems to me, we saw them too clearly before they even came to office. They were fixed like in a still photograph, and they could never be much better."

Yet Keillor denies that he has any personal ambition to change modern society.

"I have no interest in my writing having an impact on my times, as satirists have usually hoped. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis — these great American satiric writers — they wanted to change this country.

"And I think they did. They were tremendously successful beyond the realm of dreams. They made a generation of us

much more skeptical and much more ironic.

"But I don't have any ambitions in that way. I only want to describe something."

He says: "I love New York. But New York is not what I write about. I love to live here. But this is not my turf and it's not my subject and these are not my characters. All of those people are back in the Midwest."

Keillor isn't the sentimental type, however. He refuses to do "sensitive essays" about the life of rural people. "I'm not interested in that," he says. "Neither are rural people."

His idea of success is having the opportunity to keep on doing his best work. He believes: "Success consists of postponing one's demise — one's disappearance."

But Keillor knows he can't keep the old ways from slipping away.

"I'm an analog person in a digital world," he says.