

When Garrison Keillor came home to Bettendorf

(Garrison Keillor, whose book, "Lake Wobegon Days" hit the best-seller lists a dozen years ago, is hopefully heading back in that direction. He's followed up with a new companion novel, "Wobegon Boy," writing from St. Paul, Minn., where he belongs, and from where he continues to broadcast his "A Prairie Home Companion." What few know is that Keillor once lived in Bettendorf. Following is the story of his visit to his old home place 10 springtimes ago, when he came to Davenport for a appearance at Adler Theatre to benefit the Bettendorf library.)

"Spring is a favorite time in my life," he speaks softly. He looks out the bus window at the yellow burst of forsythias, and is eager to be home again.

We turn onto Oak Street in Bettendorf. This was mostly pasture when Garrison Keillor was a toddler.

The lanky literary saint, the bard of Lake Wobegon, closes his eyes a moment. He is ruffled in a tan suit, as one would come to expect, and the striped tie is loosened at the collar.

"I was so little when I lived in Bettendorf, yet I remember." He pauses, and when he speaks his voice is like a melody of the plains. "I remember a steep hill, and steps."

We stop in front of the big, white, two-story house at 2829 Oak St. He spent his early childhood here — the World War II years with his mom and two other kids in the family, while dad was away in the service. His curious eyes snatch at everything, the ferns budding by the wide front porch, and in the hallway he rubs the ears of a black-and-white cat, poking through the stair rungs.



Keillor

"The stairs, yes, there is something about the stairs, the way they turn in a crook at this corner," he says, so quietly, so softly. "Why do I remember these stairs?"

He speaks so kindly of the big old house: "It is a good feeling to have someone living in the house where you grew up. Houses are meant for people and love.

"And this place is so neat." He cracks a little joke of someone having tidied up for his visit. He pauses in the hallway to read aloud a shiny placard with the words of Joshua:

"Choose you this day when ye will serve. And then he tells a story how his mother at dinner would caution the family: "Christ is the unseen guest at every meal." Garrison shakes a finger: "I always had this feeling that someone was looking over my shoulder."

He remembers his mother describing the happy life in this Bettendorf home, especially the kitchen, listening to the radio with her own kids, and her sister and husband and their batch of kids.

Upstairs, he wanders to a northeast corner room. "You know, I have a feeling this was my bedroom. I really believe it was." He looks out the window, through lacy curtains, and talks tenderly of the greening springtime of Bettendorf.

He is as curious as the cats at his feet. He stares at one of those trap-door things leading to the attic:

"What a place for a kid to climb." Then he jokes, twinkling, "Did anyone find any of my old manuscripts hidden around here? You know, I began writing when very young."

We walk outside again, and he is pleased to have been home again.

"I wanted to see my childhood," he says, with that Keillor sad tenderness.

Back at Bettendorf library, over cookies and pink punch for a chosen few, he is astonished to see a snapshot of him as a child. One of the Lybecks has a tiny picture of a bunch of kids, and there's little Garrison!

Out by the library checkout counter a lad has a card, "Garrison Kline," tied about his neck. His parents, the Mark Klines of Davenport, named him after their folk-hero, Garrison Keillor. The author offers advice:

"That's an awfully stiff name for an innocent little child. I think you better get a nickname."