

■ Economic Club of Southwestern Michigan



H-P photo by Nicolina Curcuru

A SING-ALONG: Garrison Keillor leads the Economic Club audience in singing "America The Beautiful" at the beginning of his whimsical speech Wednesday evening.

Public radio's storyteller charms his audience

By **TED HARTZELL**
H-P Metro Editor

BENTON TOWNSHIP — The man who spins yarns for millions of radio listeners every Saturday evening brought his enchanting storytelling to Lake Michigan College Wednesday evening.

Garrison Keillor, who makes Lake Wobegon, Minn., seem more real than a real town, drew steady laughter from his audience at The Economic Club of Southwestern Michigan with his characteristic sweet humor, served up with a dash of shock and occasional sadness.

He even had the audience stand and sing "America The Beautiful" at the beginning, and "Home on the Range" at the end.

Dressed in a conservative gray suit but wearing a red tie and red socks, the 58-year-old writer of 11 books and host of "A Prairie Home Companion" mixed memories with a few current observations.

Among other things, he recalled adolescent lust for his cousin Kate and the intoxication of a shiny black Underwood typewriter, an oppressive father and an encouraging mother, and Aunt Sharon's heavenly creamed onion and peas dish.

When someone asked him if it was true that Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura really grew up in Lake Wobegon, Keillor quickly replied: "No, my governor is a fictitious person. He comes from South Minneapolis, where fiction is a way of life."

Listeners of National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" — and there were evidently many among the 1,100 people who ate dinner in the Mendel Center's Upton Hall — were treated to several Wobegonian themes they have been hearing for years on the air about that little town out on the prairie that is "made up in almost equal parts of German Catholics and Norwegian

See **KEILLOR**, page 2A

2A — Thursday, October 12, 2000

KEILLOR

Continued from page 1A

Lutherans," and where "all the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the children are above average."

The dinner audience, and hundreds more watching the speech on closed-circuit television in a nearby auditorium, heard about Darlene, a waitress at The Chatterbox Cafe who is well connected with local gossip. "Darlene is part of the media" in Lake Wobegon, Keillor declared. "She is the media."

And they heard about the world's largest pile of burlap bags, which has its own Web site.

And about Mr. Ziegler the hardware store owner's son, who turned his crusty old man's single store into a chain of mall outlets, got rich and then decided, in an entirely un-Wobegonian way, to move to Florida and enjoy life while he was still young enough.

Wobegonians cast a dim eye on outright enjoyment of life. That is why those who go to Florida to escape the Minnesota winters "must not admit to having a wonderful time" there, Keillor said. "Florida is a dangerous place," he intoned in his slow, deep voice. "People have gone down there and it has changed them."

That happened to Lake Wobegon's ushering team, The Herdsmen, who went to Florida for the National Lutheran Ushering Championships. They had to herd 500 Unitarians through a Lutheran service, but were defeated because there were too many aisles for their usual game plan.

Their defeat reinforced the smug stoicism of the folks back home, who are certain that no good can come of enjoyment.

Good comes instead from enduring tough things. "Of course, the season that refreshes our sense of ethics is winter," Keillor said.

Keillor's people mix their piety with their gossip. "We were Christians and we believed in forgiveness, theoretically," he said. "But we liked to know exactly what we were forgiving people for."

The one strand that tied all his yarns together Wednesday evening was his answer to the question he more or less asked himself: Why do I write?

Keillor said he was drawn to writing even as a little boy and adolescent. His stories made other kids laugh —

**'I wanted to
kiss girls and
I wanted to tell
stories, even if
Hell would be
involved. What
you want, you
want, and God
knows anyway, so
why not tell the
others?'**

— Garrison Keillor

like the kid who blew his food through both nostrils in the school cafeteria. Or they charmed the girls.

One story, a ghost-written confession, even tried to save his cousin Kate from banishment by her strict family when she got pregnant out of wedlock.

His uncle gave him the Underwood typewriter for his 14th birthday. "I never saw anything so beautiful in my life," he said.

"I started writing stories on my Underwood typewriter because my mother was impressed." He wrote stories about dogs that talked, about a tornado that cured a person's blood disease by shooting curative blades of grass into the person's skin, and about a boy very much like him who had Hollywood actors for parents.

"I wrote stories to protect myself against the Halvorsen boys. They didn't beat me up because I wrote stories that amused them.

"I wanted to kiss girls and I wanted to tell stories, even if Hell would be involved," Keillor said of his ultrastrict upbringing as a member of the Sanctified Brethren. "What you want, you want, and God knows anyway, so why not tell the others?"

The great thing about being a writer is how plentiful the material is. "Nothing bad ever really happens to a writer. Everything that happens to you is material" for stories. "In this way people earn a living. Eventually it all becomes a story."