



Tribune Photo/SANTIAGO FLORES

Writer, broadcaster and humorist Garrison Keillor regaled the Southwestern Michigan Economic Club with stories, jokes and song Wednesday night.

## Humorist Keillor tweaks meaning from life stories

Wryly, 'Lake Wobegon' creator lulls listeners into magical moments of mind

By JIM MEENAN  
Tribune Staff Writer

BENTON HARBOR — To the infrequent visitor to Lake Wobegon, its beauty would appear to be in the reflection it offers to those who peer inside it.

What they see is, perhaps, a reflection of their own life.

And when delivered by the author of "Lake Wobegon Days," Garrison Keillor, in his understated but eloquent style, often with a humorous twist at the end, the wisdom as well as laughter is easily seen, and likely accepted.

Such was the treat a full house of 1,500 received Wednesday when Keillor spoke to The Economic Club of Southwest Michigan at the Mendel Center at Lake Michigan College.

Keillor invented Lake Wobegon, an idealized town full of characters made human and hardy by Minnesota's winters. He tells their stories weekly on his national radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

Keillor, who hosted the first broadcast of his radio show in 1974 and now has 2.6 million listeners on more than 450 public radio stations, proved why he has had such success Wednesday.

Along with the wisdom that came from the tall and gracious speaker, there was quality, rich and wonderful fun, homespun in Keillor's unique style. For this was not only a writer, but a man who knew how to speak on that which he had written.

Using nary a note, while fiddling with a tiny piece of paper, he spoke for well over an hour.

Among his gems, which were many:

■ "One of my secrets is that my voice induces sleep," he said, poking fun at himself. "People under stress often listen to get sleep. Twenty minutes of my monologue will sometimes take two weeks to hear."

■ "Nothing is bad to a writer. All that happens bad in their life becomes material. Our ancestors learned to survive this way."

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## Keillor

And he shared his Lake Superior Economic Project.

"All the water from Lake Superior will be diverted to Keokuk, Iowa, and from there to the Colorado River to fill the Grand Canyon. We will sell it to the Sunbelt for \$31 for 1,000 (cubic) yards.

"It will no longer be important as Lake Superior, but will be tremendously successful as a canyon," he said, his tongue planted softly but solidly in his cheek.

"We will have casinos. Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota will become cash cows. We will become the home base for most Fortune

500 companies."

He also spoke of the "evils" of going to Florida, noting that one time a Lutheran church in Lake Wobegon sent a team of ushers down to the Sunshine State to compete in the National Lutheran Ushering Championships. Keillor frequently tweaks Lutherans on his radio show.

"Sixteen teams of ushers had to usher 500 Unitarians into a Lutheran service," he said. "There were nine ushers on each team. The Lake Wobegon team, the Herdsman, lost. They were used to the three-aisle offense and this church had four aisles."

He added that after this visit four of the ushers were no longer seen in church on a regular basis, so "dangerous" was Florida.

A frequent contributor to Time

magazine, Keillor has received numerous awards, including a Grammy for his recording of "Lake Wobegon Days," and in 1994, he was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications.

In the question-and-answer session, which was sprinkled with humor, he answered a question regarding Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura.

"My governor is a fictitious person," he said of Ventura. "He invented himself and what he didn't invent, I have added to.

"He comes from Minneapolis where fiction is a way of life, where people from Lake Wobegon go and invent themselves as sophisticated people, who have never seen the farm."

Upon reflection, Keillor's waters run deep, but are worth the swim. Certainly that's what his audience found Wednesday as they listened attentively to his wonderful stories and laughed often.

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