

A radio home companion

Variety host Garrison Keillor has something that folks like

If you go ...

... you already have tickets. *A Prairie Home Companion* at 5:45 p.m. today in the University of Kentucky Singletary Center for the Arts is sold out. Hear it at 6 p.m. on WUKY (91.3 FM). Rebroadcast 2 p.m. Sunday.

By Rich Copley

HERALD-LEADER ARTS WRITER

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Watching red wine swirl around in his goblet, Garrison Keillor contemplates the broadcast of *A Prairie Home Companion* from a few hours before.

"I thought I had a good idea with the Bush and Gore bit, but when we had them start dancing together the audience went dead," Keillor says in his deep, deliberate cadence that has become music to the ears of *A*

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- Tonight's show is likely to include some local color on Lexington.
- Highlights in the life of *A Prairie Home Companion*'s Garrison Keillor.

Prairie Home Companion fans.

Well, "dead" might be a little strong. There was some genuine laughter in the audience.

But after 26 years on the air, Keillor still laments what he perceives as a dud.

The 58-year-old writer and

host says he doesn't believe in confidence, which is stunning considering what he has done with his show.

With more than 2.8 million listeners a week on 490 radio stations nationwide, *A Prairie Home Companion* has become a radio phenomenon in the ages of TV and now computers.

In St. Paul, where half of the broadcasts originate each year, people camp out for hours in

See **KEILLOR, A11**



People wait in line for hours at the Fitzgerald Theatre in St. Paul, Minn., to buy tickets for A Prairie Home Companion. Keillor had the building named for author F. Scott Fitzgerald, a St. Paul native.

ANDY KING

Writers have taken look at Lexington for material

By Rich Capley
HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

They've been watching us. Days before Garrison Keillor set foot in Lexington, Andrea Murray, the show's copywriter manager, and Russ Ringask, truck driver/writer (what other show would employ someone with that dual job title?), have been scouring the city looking for local color. Call them the scout team for A Prairie Home Companion.

Their findings will be shared with the rest of the nation tonight when the radio show is broadcast from UK's Singletary Center for the Arts.

"We're looking for interesting stuff you don't find in books," says Murray, who visited Lexington in September. "I could have found out how to make bourbon on the Internet, but going to a distillery, you find out things you don't find out on the Internet."

At Kenedel's, she discovered tidbits such as the reason Kenedel's grandpas face west instead of east, like those at most tracks. (Jack Kene intended for training and racing to be in the morning so the sun would be at the crowd's back. Now that the track presents afternoon racing, the sun drenches the crowd.)

Ringask also took in some Kenedel culture, sitting in at the sales on Thursday.

Those local traditions, plus a few others, may well end up as subjects on tonight's show.

In his role as trucker/writer, Ringask usually drives the show's equipment to the destination city and then heads out to investigate.

"We try to make it look like we didn't just fly in that morning," he says. "We want to find stuff that resonates with the local audience."

Ringask taps sources such as librarians and bartenders to point him to different destinations and historical tidbits.

Since getting here Wednesday night, he's dined at Columbus Steak House, checked out the UK campus and watched a Cats game at Two Keys Tavern.

Some things that have piqued the scout's interest are Horse Mania and last year's controversy over the showing of *Jacks Daily* and *Hot Chick* at the Kentucky Theatre.

"That's the sort of thing that will get someone's attention in the audience," Murray says of the X-rated movie controversy.

After letting the city soak in, Ringask and Murray write up reports for Keillor.

They never know what exactly will make it into the show's scripts, though Murray says she's developed a "feeling for things Garrison."

"He wants the scripts to have a local flavor," she says. "Other-wise, what's the point of doing the show in Lexington?"



Garrison Keillor
NORWALK: ANOKA, MINN.
Age: 58
Current residence: St. Paul, Minn.
Family: wife, Jerry Lind; three sons; daughter, Ann, 3; son, Jason, 32.
Books: *A Prairie Home Companion*, 6 p.m., Saturdays on WUVU (12.1 PM), and *The Writers Almanac* daily after the 8 a.m. news on WUVU.
Books (selected): *Happy to be Here* (1982), *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), *Leaving Home* (1991), *We Are Still Here* (1991), *Out of a Radio Romance* (1993), *Me*, by Jerry (Big Boy) Keillor (1999), forthcoming; *1952 Lake Wobegon Summer* (2001).
Other writing: He currently writes for *Time* and in a column for *Saturday*, the online magazine. He has written for the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*.
Wanted about the government: Keillor has been in a high-profile spot with Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura, whom Keillor has lampooned to numerous times, including his 1999 novel, *Me*, by Jerry (Big Boy) Keillor.

Keillor: Host couldn't leave show for long

From Page One

front of the Fitzgerald Theatre to get mall tickets. Every broadcast sells out a lot like the Lexington Opera House.

Tonight's broadcast from Lexington was the quietest yet in recent memory at the Singletary Center for the Arts. Fans are coming from as far away as Maine and North Carolina.

Wrinkling his well-crooked brow, Keillor says it's a phenomenon he can't explain. But the show's fans are eager to oblige.

His insights into human nature are fascinating, says Eastern Kentucky University English professor Dorothy Sutton, 62. "His satire helps us keep our values and priorities straight."

Carol B. Dillon of Lexington writes, "He has made Lake Wobegon and its inhabitants with all their foibles and weaknesses very real and much loved."

"It's something you don't find anywhere else in this day and age," says Steve Davis, 51, a Fayetteville, Ark., health-food store owner who drove nearly 12 hours to St. Paul for last Saturday's broadcast.

A lot of fans say they admire Keillor's writing, and he considers himself a writer first.

So why go into radio? In a word, survival.

"I had to earn a living to support my wife and small child," Keillor says, sinking into one of his living room's overstuffed couches.

The early years

He was born in Anoka, Minn., 1942, the third of six children.

After graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1966, Keillor took a stint as a reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press and liked it. But he didn't see journalism as a long-term career. Then, he went to work with Minnesota Public Radio.

"It wasn't a bad gig," Keillor says. "I saw radio as something to do over the long haul."

After a few years spinning records, he decided to take a stab at a radio variety show. The first broadcast in the summer of 1974 attracted a live audience of 12.

But with its erudite, folksy feel, *A Prairie Home Companion* built an audience and became a regional hit.

In 1980, Minnesota Public Radio began distributing a national broadcast.

"Garrison really didn't think it would work as a national show," actor and sound effects man Tom Keith says over a pre-show dinner. "He thought it was a regional show. But I always thought it would work."

"People who live in big cities probably think all little towns are like Lake Wobegon, and people in small towns get the jokes."

Keith was right.

In the early 1980s, Lake Wobegon, Keillor's fictional hometown, started to make a big on the national radio.

Keillor's books, particularly *Lake Wobegon Days*, became national best-sellers.

Prairie Home seemed to have settled in for good. Keillor even championed a \$17 million renovation of the World Theatre in downtown St. Paul, the show's home. He later had the theater renamed the Fitzgerald in honor of St. Paul's most famous writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald.

But in 1987 Keillor pulled the plug. He was burned out, unhappy about close scrutiny of his personal life in St. Paul, and wanted to pursue his dream of being an important writer.

It didn't last long. After a few months away, he found he was itching to get back on the air.

In 1988, Keillor returned with a show called *The American Ro-*

day night."

Marie Louise Lacquette of Versailles saw that happen.

Several years ago, she had a friend who had retired and wasn't doing very well. Lacquette told her friend about Keillor's show.

"It cheered her up," Lacquette says, recalling her friend who has since died. "Her closest friends had died and she lived alone. It was something she looked forward to."

It's those listeners that keep Keillor delivering the news from Lake Wobegon each week, and he's not going to rest on his laurels.

"I have no sense of accomplishment," Keillor says, the deep lines around his mouth angling downward. "The good part is, if you have no sense of accomplishment, you're always this busy bee, you're always working, and I love that."

"I'm a writer. That's what I do. Writers are focused on the next thing. Writers don't collect trophies. Writers are happy when they have something going on, and having confidence is bad back."

For people in trouble

"Sometimes you kid yourself, imagining radio is an art medium. But the most useful thing is to imagine doing the show for people in trouble, people in pain, people who are sick, people who are elderly, people who are incarcerated in prison. All those people really need you — people who cannot go out and do something on Saturday night."



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