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Experimental: Garrison Keillor says an old enough format, like his radio variety show "Prairie Home Companion," can have a way of seeming new.

Our town gets a visit from Keillor's town

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Humorist and storyteller Garrison Keillor enjoys state fairs, so he's delighted to be bringing his comic variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion," to the Indiana State Fair on Wednesday.

"I love the food, but I have to stay away from it," Keillor said in a telephone interview from St. Paul, Minn., where the show is usually produced. "Fortunately, I've had all the food before, so all I have to do is smell it to remember how it tastes."

Keillor, 61, likes crowds, and he said state fairs, special events and ballgames are about the only places left where people gather in large numbers.

"Cities are really spread out and have become diffuse," he said. "People don't come into the center anymore. They're all out on the fringes."

"Being in a crowd is the only way you can see what America really looks like. Otherwise, how would you see it? You won't find any real people on TV. They won't show them."

In Keillor's world, you don't have to be a svelte blonde to get airplay. His show, which airs on more than 500 public radio stations each week, including WFYI-FM (90.1), thrives on quirky characters that listeners see only in their imaginations.

Wednesday's production is the first of 16 stops on the Rhubarb Tour, which will not be broadcast.

The local gig will be essentially the same as the radio show, which features storytelling, comedy sketches and music. Guest performers make occasional appearances, but regulars include Keillor, actors Tim Russell and Sue Scott, a sound-effects guy and a band.

Keillor deliberately doesn't describe radio show characters in such recurring sketches as "News From Lake Wobegon," the fictional setting for his signature short stories of small-town life.

"If you leave out details, people paint them in themselves," he said. "They think of people they've known or places they've been and fill in

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Garrison Keillor

See Keillor, Page E8

Keillor

■ Chronicler of small town is in love with big cities.

From E1

the blanks better than you could ever hope to. They do this all the time and then give you credit for it."

Keillor, who grew up in Anoka, Minn., has become almost synonymous with small-town charm. Yet, ironically, he hasn't lived in a small town in more than two decades.

"I'm really a big-city person," he said. "I love cities. I'm crazy about them. But a small town is a wonderful literary device. It's a great place for stories in which many different lives intersect and have to interact."

"You can do that in a city neighborhood, but it's more difficult because neighbors in urban areas hardly speak to each other. If you look back on great American literature, most of it takes place in small towns."

Asked if he ever ran out of ideas for the show, which has aired off and on since 1974, Keillor said he never gets stumped. "I don't get writer's block. Never have had it. A person in broadcasting can't afford it. It's more common among people who are trying to hit the ball out of the park."

"They look at what they've written and decide it isn't good enough. But I'm not trying to hit the ball out of the park. I'm just trying to hit singles."

Perhaps. But many would consider his show a home run, especially when you consider its format. Variety shows on radio were all the rage before television and the Internet, but in 2003 they're darn near extinct.

That's the beauty of the format, Keillor said.

"If you choose something from a bygone era that is bygone enough, people don't remember it and they think that you invented it," he said.

"Very, very old things, when you bring them back, seem experimental."

■ Call Star reporter Courtenay Edelhart at 1-317-444-6481.

A Prairie Home Companion

■ **What:** Garrison Keillor's live performance of a comic variety show. The Rhubarb Tour, with stops in 16 cities throughout the month of August, will not be broadcast.

■ **When:** 7-30 p.m. Wednesday.

■ **Where:** Marsh Grandstand, Indiana State Fairgrounds, 1202 E. 38th St., Indianapolis.

■ **Tickets:** \$25 or \$30, including fair admission. Call the state fair box office at 1-317-927-1482 or contact Ticketmaster, 1-317-239-5151 or www.ticketmaster.com.

■ **Listen:** "A Prairie Home Companion" airs 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Saturdays and 10 a.m. to noon Sundays on WFYI-FM (90.1), and at various other times on more than 500 public radio stations nationwide.