

AN AMERICAN CLASSIC

Keillor charms fairgoers with perfect mix of bawdiness, reverence

By JEFF INMAN
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Most people think of Garrison Keillor, the host and heart of National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," as a high-brow kind of guy.

He can quote poetry and Bible passages with equal ease. He's a file server of classic American songs, he sings with the voice of a pipe organ and he can tell a story about his "native" Lake Wobegon, the fictional Minnesota setting for his tales, with all the charm of Mr. Rogers taking off his shoes.

At 63, he's basically become America's grandpa, with a comforting voice and a face that gravity has pulled like taffy.

Yet as the show's cast performed Sunday night at the Iowa State Fair, it became obvious that grandpa knows a thing or two about fart jokes and dirty songs. With the lights of the midway glowing nearby and the nearly 7,700 fans in the Grandstand laughing uncontrollably, Keillor launched into a bawdy joke song that was as surprising as it was funny. The Lutherans back home would have needed defibrillators by the time it was done.

But that's what has made "A Prairie Home Companion," based in St. Paul, Minn., an American classic for more than 30 years. While it's built around the standard variety show format — musical guests, odd skits and a touch of homey goodness — Keillor has always been able to inject his performances with the unexpected.

Whether through song selection, like opening with his version of Greg Brown's "Iowa Waltz" after getting the audience to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner," or during one of his "Prairie Home" radio plays in which he portrays private eye Guy Noir, Keillor is always placing seemingly polar ideas next to each other.

He's got a reason, though. It's like Keillor is searching for that perfect slice of Americana. He's endlessly mixing and matching



DAVID PETERSON/THE REGISTER

Judge and jokester: Humorist Garrison Keillor entertains a crowd Sunday at the 4-H Building at the Iowa State Fair, where he appeared as a celebrity judge. He brought his "Prairie Home Companion" show to the Grandstand that evening.

in hopes of hitting upon that two-hour segment that truly defines this country and its people, whether they're young, old, Midwestern or something else.

So maybe a few fart jokes, provided by sound effects master Fred Newman, were more than fitting when stirred in with a couple of hymns, some Jerry Lee

Lewis, a bit of blues guitar, and stories about a rampaging pig launching missiles at the Ferris wheel. In fact, like his jabs at the Butter Cow and references to rhubarb, they were darn near essential.

And as Keillor closed the evening sitting on a bar stool, his red sneakers peeking out from

under his suit, telling one of his rambling stories about the odd events and eccentric characters in Lake Wobegon — this one involved a naked parasailor, 24 Lutheran ministers, a lakeside funeral and a dog that smelled of rotting fish — it became obvious that he is, in fact, what he has been searching for.

Keillor is a casual contradiction: spiritual and earthy, intelligent and crude, sophisticated and simple. He's just like the country he so often sings about.

He's the heart of America, fart jokes and all.

Freelance writer Jeff Inman of Des Moines knows only one joke, and it's not a good one.