

# Midwest virtues, courtesy of Keillor

Lake Wobegon tales told with S.D. twist

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VERMILLION - Vermillion and Lake Wobegon, Minn., became sister cities for a day Thursday as author, storyteller and small-town Minnesota's most recognizable voice, Garrison Keillor, spoke at the DakotaDome on the University of South Dakota campus.

The event, part of Al Neuharth's Freedom Forum Legacy Series, could be a precursor to a full-fledged visit from Keillor's realer-than-real hometown. Keillor said after the event that he hopes to bring his popular public radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion," to Vermillion. "I really would love to," Keillor said. "I think the music museum here is just extraordinary. It would make a great show from Vermillion that I don't think you could do anywhere else in the country."

Thursday night, Keillor treated thousands of fans to a speech that at times resembled his radio musings and dipped and swerved into politics, crime, religion, terrorism and American life.

To be sure, many of Keillor's favorite themes and quirks were on display - the earnest, incredulous "real people," the references to Jell-O as a salad, the many Lutherans who populate Keillor's mind.

Jeff Freeman, who teaches in USD's art department, said he had heard a version of the story Keillor told, a tale about the circumstances surrounding a water-bound collision between a pontoon boat full of Lutherans, a man parasailing with a bowling ball filled with his mother's ashes strapped to his waist, and a hot-air balloon.

"There's always an element of truth there. He's our equivalent of Mark Twain," Freeman said. "But without as much sarcasm. Mark Twain was really sarcastic."

Despite his upbringing in Minnesota, Keillor's South Dakota ties are few.

"Our family never traveled for pleasure," Keillor said of his many childhood trips through South Dakota, "only to visit family."

Those trips, conducted at high speed by a father bent on making good time,

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## ON TV

Garrison Keillor's talk in Vermillion will be rebroadcast at 1 p.m. Nov. 13 on South Dakota Public Television (Midcontinent Communications cable Channel 8 in Sioux Falls).



PHOTOS BY GRANT GRIFFITH / FOR THE ARGUS LEADER

Minnesota Public Radio personality Garrison Keillor spoke Thursday at the USD DakotaDome while being recognized in the Al Neuharth Freedom Forum Legacy Series.

'You can never tell a story decently unless you can imagine yourself in the place of anyone in the story. This is a principle that is often ignored in journalism.'

Garrison Keillor, Minnesota Public Radio



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## Keillor: 'He's the best storyteller in America'

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didn't afford much time for sight-seeing.

"We could not stop at the Corn Palace," he said. "I never got to see it until I was 64. It would have been even more wonderful at the age of 8."

His radio show staged a live recording at Mitchell's Corn Palace this summer.

Although Keillor is best known for his extemporaneous stories, he started the evening on a different tack.

"Instead of talking about freedom, I think we should exercise it, so I will," he said, before chastising Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers as under-qualified.

"She will probably be confirmed because nobody wants to vote against a nice lady," he said.

Keillor, one of the few remaining performers who can claim to be a real live storyteller, also talked about storytelling itself.

"You can never tell a story decently unless you can imagine yourself in the place of anyone in the story," Keillor said. "This is a principle that is often ignored in journalism."

The distance – not so much physically as philosophically – between America's coastal cities and the Midwest is one of Keillor's underlying themes.

He mocked Washington, D.C., journalists, whose greatest

fear, he said, "is to be sent out to the Midwest to ... interview taciturn people about soybeans and stay in low-grade motels, where the shampoo comes in plastic packets."

"He's so honest and tells such a great story," said Julie Madden, a fan who grew up in Huron. "My cheeks hurt from laughing."

"He's the best storyteller in America," said Casey Crawford, a mass communications major at USD. "Whenever I'd drive home to see my parents at Christmas, I'd listen to 'Prairie Home Companion.'"

After Keillor finished, a few brave souls stood up to pose questions.

A man from the town of Nimrod, Minn., whose name no one quite caught on account of his Minnesota mumble, regaled Keillor with a story about his hometown, where a town of 50 allegedly holds an annual celebration for a group of 10,000.

"I'd like to go there," Keillor said, "right now."

As the story and its teller labored about the details and hunched over the microphone without a question in sight, Keillor finally brought the meeting to order.

"Thank you, sir. I've been telling stories about people like you."

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