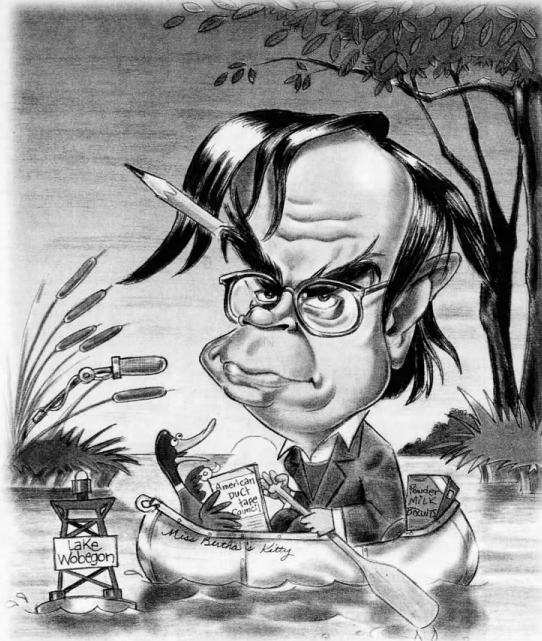


DRIFTING INTO THE MSU AUDITORIUM THIS WEEKEND ...



RICH COPLEY/NET News Service

A longtime 'Companion'

Garrison Keillor's dulcet delivery — and his fictional home — provides soothing comfort to radio listeners everywhere

By Mike Hughes • LANSING STATE JOURNAL

The first time Lake Wobegon visited Lansing, no one knew what to expect. That was in 1981, when "A Prairie Home Companion" was an oddity — a public-radio variety show from Minnesota. One of its first road trips brought it to the Lansing Eastern High auditorium. "I was just checking to see if there were any listeners out there," recalled Garrison Keillor, who will do the show in East Lansing on Saturday.

He had plenty; it turned out. The auditorium was packed and lively.

Still, this was a specialized following. When Keillor returned the next year, he went in a crowded Lansing City Hall elevator without being noticed.

Don't expect that to happen today. Keillor is a national celebrity, a man who pours out novels and short stories and music tapes and more. His show is heard by an estimated 4 million people a week on 538 stations and Armed Forces Radio.

"I just have to wear different clothes and no one recognizes me," he claimed. "I wear pointy shoes, black sunglasses, sequined suits."

He was speaking tongue-in-cheek, as he often does. Keillor, 63, is a unique sort, hard to disguise.

He stands 6-foot-3, with a face that seems eternally dialed to sad. He has a soothing, baritone voice, the sort envied by hypnotists, morticians or air-traffic controllers. That voice has blended in duets with the

ON THE AIR

• "A Prairie Home Companion"

• Live episodes are 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Saturdays on WKAR-FM (89.5); they rerun from 10 a.m. to noon Sundays

• Saturday's sold-out show will be broadcast live from the MSU Auditorium.

• Musical guests this week are gospel star Jearlyn Steele, violinist Aedy Stein and a Scottish group, Battlefield Band.

• Show ran from 1974 to 1987. Keillor revived it as "The American Radio Company" in 1989, then returned to the "Prairie Home Companion" format in 1992.

world's greatest singers, including opera's Renee Fleming and gospel's Jearlyn Steele, a Keillor favorite who will be on Saturday's show.

"I'm a struggling singer," Keillor said. "I'm an English major who got lucky."

This English major has had a huge effect on

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Woe be gone is he

For newcomers, here's a guide to the mythical Lake Wobegon:

• Keillor's monologues always begin, "It has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my hometown." Things are always quiet, it seems.

• Key businesses include the Chatterbox Cafe, the Sablestock Tap and Art's Bait and Night O' Rest Motel.

Also, of course, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery.

• The Lutherans all drive Fords, bought from Clarence at Bensen Motors; the Catholics all drive Chevys from Florian at Krebsbach Chevrolet.

Saturdays.

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Keillor: 'Prairie Home' voice made his Lansing debut 24 years ago

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music tastes. "Prairie Home Companion" has put a fresh focus on folk music, said local folk expert Bob Blackman. "And it goes way beyond that. Dixieland, opera, jazz — a lot of different genres have been affected."

So have individuals. That includes people who have been regulars on the show — Pat Donahue, Butch Thompson (coming to the Wharton Center on Dec. 3), Peter Ostroushko — or frequent guests.

"It's had a huge effect on a lot of careers," Blackman said. "Look at (folk singers) Robin and Linda Williams, for instance."

Keillor's approval can boost a person — or maybe a building. Saturday's show will be live from the oft-disparaged MSU Auditorium. The building is being renovated and will play a key role in the next few months; first is Saturday's live radio show.

"Garrison Keillor was very in-

Just passing through

For flavor, here's a passage from "In Search of Lake Wobegon," in which Keillor describes:

"Wally of the Sidetrack Tap, where old men sit and gradually come to love their fellow man through gradual self-medication."

"It was Wally's pontoon boat, the Agnes D, on which the 22 Lutheran pastors crowded for a twilight cruise and weenie roast. ... The Agnes D, pitched to starboard. They were plunged into five feet of water and stood quietly, heads uplifted, and waited for help to arrive."

trigued by the history of the building," said Michael Brand, who is executive director of the Wharton Center and supervises other auditoriums. "He was intrigued by the idea of re-invigorating an old building like this."

The auditorium's deep wood design reflects its 1940 birth. For this man and show, it's ideal.

Keillor was born in 1942 and grew up in then-tiny Anoka, Minn., in a quiet, Protestant

family. He graduated from the University of Minnesota, married, had a son and began writing free-lance fiction and nonfiction. Since money was tight, they lived in a farm house near New Munich, a town of 314 people.

People rarely spoke to him. Keillor said. "I was an outsider. They were German people, and they had had problems with outsiders."

Still, they played an important part: They would be one impetus — exaggerated wildly — for the mythical Lake Wobegon.

When his writing career sagged, Keillor took a morning job with Minnesota Public Radio in 1969. He continued writing for magazines and visited the Grand Ol' Opry.

That's when he decided to try a northern variation on the Opry. "A Prairie Home Companion" — the same name as his radio show — debuted on July 6, 1974, with 12 people in the theater audience.

Keillor pretended the show was from the town of Lake Wobegon, a mythical place sort of like New Munich and other spots in Stearns County. When he revisited the real places five years ago, one thing struck him:

"It was the fact that people know so much about other people and still are able to live in a civil way with each other," he said.

This is not what others are accustomed to. "The people in the suburbs have often chosen to ignore each other. (In small towns,) you see people much too clearly."

That became the root for "Prairie Home Companion." It had:

- The weekly news from Lake Wobegon. "I write that on Saturday," said Keillor, who often improvises changes during the show. "I just dash things down."
- Notes from people in the audience. "I don't select them; I don't even see them until I read them on the air."
- Music.
- Prepared comedy bits, rang-

ing from commercials to full sketches involving such characters as Guy Noir, Private Eye.

Those last two have re-adjusted over the years, Keillor said. "The show has tilted a little more in a humor direction."

In the early days, the musicians had to step into the sketches. These days, he has professional actors, writers and sound-effects people; on the road, Fred Newman is his one-person sound shop.

Yes, that's the same Newman who hosted the "Mickey Mouse Club," back in its days of Britney

Spears, Keri Russell and Justin Timberlake.

"He is amazing," Keillor said. "The sounds that come out of him are astonishing — horns, fax machines, coffee pots, anything."

With people like that, Keillor said, the show is easy to take on the road. "I just walk along like the average 7-year-old. People take my hand and show me what to do."

Well, like the average world-famous 7-year-old, anyway.

These days, Keillor would be recognized in any elevator, with or without a sequined suit.

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