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ENTERTAINMENT

# 'Prairie Home' turns 35

Host Garrison Keillor is not sentimental about its longevity

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — For the 35th anniversary of his "A Prairie Home Companion," humorist Garrison Keillor will be in "Lake Wobegon" when he reads the news from Lake Wobegon.

But don't assume Keillor is all misty about the milestone.

"I'm not sentimental anymore. I used to be, when I was younger," Keillor told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday at his Prairie Home Productions office, an old radio station in St. Paul.

"The thing about sentimentality is that sentimentality gets in the way of your memory. And it's a sort of a fog. It obscures your clear memory. I'm much more interested in trying to remember clearly what went on, who I was, what we did, back in 1974 (when the show began) than I am in warm feelings about it."

Keillor caps the latest season of "A Prairie Home Companion" with a Fourth of July broadcast from Avon, part of the central Minnesota region that helped inspire Keillor's make-believe hometown, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

The performance marks 35 years since Keillor's public radio variety show debuted on July 6, 1974, at Macalester College in St. Paul. That show, broadcast live, was watched by about a dozen people. "A Prairie Home Companion" is now heard on nearly 600 public radio stations nationwide, attracting more than 4.3 million listeners a week.

After today's "Prairie Home" performance at Tan-



Garrison Keillor laughs during a live audience dress rehearsal of a skit for "A Prairie Home Companion" in April 2007 at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn.

glewood with actors Martin Sheen and Steve Martin. Keillor plans a "grass-roots show" for the Fourth of July, with longtime special effects man Tom Keith, the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band, the Lake Wobegon Brass Band, the St. John's Boys' Choir and singer Andra Suchy.

Keillor, 66, says he's looking forward to doing the show's monologue, in which he often tells tales of Norwegian bachelor farmers or the Lake Wobegon Whippets baseball team, "among people who know Lake Wobegon better than I do."

"This is a challenge, a worthy challenge. But nobody's going to get up and say congratulations to 'A Prairie Home Companion' for having lasted that long. That's not for us," Keillor said.

Avon, a town of 1,300 about 72 miles northwest of Minneapolis, is near where Keillor lived as he tried to eke out a living as a freelance writer in a farmhouse near Freeport about 40 years ago.

Having Keillor broadcast from the town on Middle Spunk Lake helps Avon solidify its claim to being Lake Wobegon, city administrator Jodi Austing-Traut said.

"I think it's part of our identity, and it's very exciting to have a celebrity coming to our town," Austing-Traut said. The Lake Wobegon Trail, a 46-mile hike-and-bike pathway that opened in 1998, goes through the middle of Avon.

Keillor is unshaven and wearing a black T-shirt, faded blue jeans and red tennis shoes (but no socks, not even his signature red ones) as he answers questions at his desk. Behind him the shelves are stacked with books by authors such as Mark Twain and Keillor himself. He examines a paper clip or his cup of coffee, leans back in his creaking chair and occasionally chuckles, saying at one point that he sounds "like an old person." (Keillor has a Facebook page but doesn't brook Twitter's 140-charac-

ter limit. "I need more words than Twitter," he says.)

Keillor says the bookstore he opened in 2006 — Common Good Books in St. Paul — is "sort of slowly making its way. I don't know. It's not making money. Nobody makes money with bookstores."

"I love bookstores. I love to hold books in my hand. And to give that up is painful. It's like if Minnesota passed a law against fishing, it wouldn't affect the food supply that much. You know, if we passed a law against guys going out in a boat with a rod and a reel and bait and fishing for sunfish and crappies, people would still eat, nobody would go hungry who hadn't before. But it'd be painful. It's a part of our culture."

Keillor says "A Prairie Home Companion" — named after a cemetery in Moorhead — was "all kind of accidental, and all kind of amazingly underplanned and undermanaged. And that part we continue today — we are a seriously understaffed and undermanaged radio show."

"But I don't remember being nervous at all," Keillor said of starting the show, "because I thought it was just kind of a joke, you know. I was a writer, and you know, I knew this was a mistake. But you know, I thought that if I didn't do it, I would regret, I would always wonder what if I had done it? So I went and did it, and, you know, here you are — it's a mistake that's gone on for 35 years."

"A Prairie Home Companion" opens its next season Sept. 26 at the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul, followed by its traditional street dance and meat-loaf supper. The show will spend part of the season on the road, with stops planned in San Francisco, Seattle, New York and Tucson, Ariz.

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