

'A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION': LIVE FROM AVON LOCAL VOICES SHINE IN KEILLOR BROADCAST



Times photo by Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com

Andra Suchy and Garrison Keillor sing "Side by Side" on Saturday during the 35th anniversary Fourth of July show of "A Prairie Home Companion" in Avon.

By Adam Hammer, aehammer@stcloudtimes.com

AVON — Garrison Keillor let the real voices of Lake Wobegon be heard Saturday during his special 35th anniversary, Fourth of July broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" live from Avon.

"At five o'clock, they're all going to find out about Avon," Keillor told the audience before the show, preparing them for the more than 4 million listeners who would be tuning in. "I

just hope they don't all come at once."

An estimated 10,000 people came from across the state and beyond to the small Central Minnesota town that welcomed

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the show — and the overflow of traffic — with street musicians,

food (including Beebop-A-Reebop Rhubarb Pie and Powder-milk Biscuit-Strawberry Shortcake from Fisher's Club where

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10,000 fans swarm small city for show

By Jamie Hughes
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AVON — Nearly 10,000 people gathered Saturday in the two city blocks that comprise Lake Wobegon Park to celebrate 233 years of the United States and

35 years of "A Prairie Home Companion."

Avon, a town of about 1,200 people, was the July Fourth destination for Garrison Keillor and "A Prairie Home Companion" fans everywhere.

But despite the town's 833 percent population increase for Independence Day, crowds were tame and law enforcement officials encountered few minor problems.

"Traffic's been our main con-

cern and considering the amount of people, we did what we could for this amount of people coming into this size of a town," Avon Police Chief Corey Nellis said.

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Keillor

Keillor is a co-owner) and art vendors.

The attendance was a stark contrast to the first broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" on July 6, 1974, in St. Paul that had about a dozen people in attendance.

Keillor's star-studded show June 27 with Martin Sheen and Steve Martin in Tanglewood, N.Y., was originally scheduled to be the final performance of the season.

Instead of rolling into reruns Saturday, Keillor decided not to leave well enough alone and had a humble encore that was a homecoming for the show.

Local flavor

Keillor dreamed up the idea for his Saturday evening variety show while starting his broadcast career at KSJR, St. John's University, Collegeville, and living in the Freeport area, just a few miles from Avon.

He maintains many of his old acquaintances and brought some of them on stage for the show including former owner of Charlie's Café in Freeport and retired legislator Bud Heidgerken.

Heidgerken said during the show that he might get back into politics now that he's sold the restaurant.

"Somebody has to represent Lake Wobegon," he said.

The show also featured stories from Clarence Fischbach of Sauk Centre and Ralph Lauer of Albany, two World War II veterans who spoke German well into their childhoods.

The veterans drew standing ovations that went on like rolling waves through the crowd of an estimated 10,000 people that covered



Garrison Keillor laughs Saturday in Avon after hearing a portion of Albany native and World War II veteran Ralph Lauer's experiences during the war.



A couple dances to "The Beer Barrel Polka" on Saturday during the 35th anniversary Fourth of July show of "A Prairie Home Companion" in Avon.

Lake Wobegon Park and the grass lot next to Lumber One across the street.

Although Keillor depicts the fictional town of Lake Wobegon as being predominantly Lutheran Norwegians, the real Lake Wobegon area is predominantly German Catholics.

He invited the Rev. Steve Brinsfeld of Waite Park on stage to represent the Catholics and the Rev. Steve Hilde of Osakis to represent the Lutherans.

Brinsfeld's observation about Lutherans: "Generally, I think they really like Jell-O," he said, especially green Jell-O more so than red Jell-O.



An estimated 10,000 people crowded into and around Lake Wobegon Park on Saturday.

Times photos by Kim Anderson, kanderan@stcloudtimes.com

attended the live broadcast. "It's nice for everybody to hear about the area around the country."

He said he didn't think Keillor's depictions of small-town living shed a bad light on real small-town people.

"It's all in good fun," said Artner, who began listening to the show in the early 1980s.

Artner and his wife, Lori Stanton-Artner, used to live in Michigan and said listening to the show there helped them feel comfortable.

"It was a little bit of home away from home," Artner said.

This was the first time Artner and his wife had seen the show live.

Patriotism, politics

Keillor said he didn't want the broadcast to focus on the anniversary, but to focus on the Fourth of July.

He wanted people to celebrate the place "where everyone knows who Kirby Backett was and they all know the rules of baseball," he said.

Although Keillor is a vocal DFL supporter, he only let

his political stance show by having Minnesota State Sen. Terry Clark and U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar as guests.

Clark read the poem "Barbara Freitchie" by John Greenleaf Whittier while Klobuchar gave a report on Fourth of July parades.

Klobuchar was in five parades during the weekend and flew in from Ely for the broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion."

"I didn't want to miss this," she said. "I've been a fan of his show for a long time."

She told stories in her segment with strange, small-town flavor, like the synchronized lawn chair team. She also gave advice for politicians about who to distance yourself from in parades.

"You mostly don't want the naked men in barrels," she said. "That actually happened to me."

Lake Wobegon

Parades were also the talk of Keillor's "News from Lake Wobegon" segment where he took a brief moment to reflect on his show's anniversary.

Since announcing the

show just three weeks ago, Keillor has maintained that he wasn't even going to do an anniversary show. He doesn't enjoy self-battery, he said.

Besides, he said, making it this long was ultimately a big mistake.

"We were unable to do what we were set out to do and then we forgot what it was we were supposed to be doing," he said.

Opera singer Vern Sutton and sound effects engineer Tim Keith were both on that first broadcast helping Keillor forget what it was he was supposed to be doing and they were there to bring the show home on Saturday.

After the show went off the air, the cars filed back to Interstate Highway 94 and the little town of Avon went back to being a place where people could ride a bike down the middle of the main drag at 9 p.m.

"It's so nice to be here close to Lake Wobegon," Keillor said. "Maybe next year we'll actually get to Lake Wobegon. For now, Avon is close enough."

Residents describe affinity for Keillor, show

By Jamie Hughes
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Garrison Keillor has brought national attention to Central Minnesota through his public radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion," but residents of the area don't seem to mind.

"As far as he's portrayed Lake Wobegon and the area, you know, it's all really sweet stuff, interesting stuff, funny things," said John Petters, a co-owner of Fisher's Club in Avon. "His portrayal ... is very innocent."

Petters said he also thinks the medium Keillor's show is presented in fits well.

"I think it's great to have a show that you have to sit and listen to in something that's not a visual thing," he said. "It's rare ... it's the kind of thing that (we) used to have before television."

Keillor is another co-owner of the restaurant. Petters said he has known Keillor for

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about 40 years, but his mother, Rosemary, has known him longer.

She said she and her husband really enjoy listening to "A Prairie Home Companion" and wouldn't miss a show in its early days. And the couple likes Keillor as much as his show, she said.

"I think he's wonderful and I think most people really enjoy it ... he's so good," Rosemary said. "We like him very much. We like what he does and what he says."

Bud Heidgerken, a former state representative and

school teacher and resident of Freeport, said he owns many of Keillor's cassette tapes and listens to the show quite frequently. He even taught his students about Keillor.

"It's like Garrison is the modern-day Mark Twain," he said. "Garrison has the ability to ... tell a story. He's like a modern-day Will Rogers. He's probably the best at it in our present society."

Heidgerken said he thinks most residents of the area share his feelings about Keillor.

"He's done a nice job and hasn't made many enemies," he said. "He's very respected around here."

Heidgerken said a lot of people in the area treat the show like a can't-miss sitcom. "Saturday night is often the part that a lot of people can't wait to come on," he said.

Edward Atkinson, owner of Ackie's Pioneer Inn in

Freeport, said Keillor's portrayal of the area is like holding a mirror for Central Minnesota.

"I think it's almost ... it's really like anybody looking into their own backyard," he said. "Keillor has the gift to look at people and pull out their stereotypes rather than just talking to them. I think that's what his gift is."

Atkinson said the characters aren't much different from those found across the nation but Keillor's gift makes them come to life.

"I honestly think every neighborhood has the same characters but it's just the way he wrote about them," he said.

But, to those in Central Minnesota and those who know him well, there isn't much more to say about Keillor and his show.

"I think it's all pretty much been said already," Atkinson said.

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Avon

Traffic was backed up for about two miles on Interstate Highway 94 at one point before the show but cleared as the show began, Nellis said.

He said there were no traffic accidents.

"Traffic was so backed up (that) people were driving slow enough," Nellis said.

Cathy Johnston of Minnetonka said she and her husband expected the large crowd and took a different course of action.

"(We) parked at Exit 156 and hopped down the (Lake Wobegon Regional) trail," she said.

The trail wasn't too busy, Johnston said. She said she saw about 20 groups of bicyclists pass her while she was getting her bike from her car.

to stay, and I was pleasantly surprised."

Johnston said she left home around 1:30 p.m. and rode into Lake Wobegon Park around 3 p.m., just in time to get prime seats. She said although she didn't drive directly into Avon, Johnston was pleased with the way law enforcement directed traffic.

"I was impressed with all the assistance getting people in town," she said. "It seems like a small town made a big effort to welcome everybody."

Anders Persson, who lives in Fergus Falls but is originally from Sweden, said he arrived at the park around 4 p.m. and didn't get a prime seat but was able to hear everything.

But even though he wasn't able to see much of Keillor's performance, Persson said he enjoyed the atmosphere.

"It's like a retirement Woodstock," he said. "It's like Woodstock without the drugs ... a folksy Woodstock. Midwest Burlesque at its best."