



"A Prairie Home Companion" host Garrison Keillor performs at the Iowa State Fair in 2008. He will speak as part of the Martin Bucksbaum Distinguished Lecture series Tuesday at Drake University. MARY CHIND/REGISTER FILE PHOTO

Keillor: Familiar like an Iowa uncle

By **MIKE KILEN**
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Garrison Keillor could just as well be your Iowa uncle, so familiar are his cracker barrel philosophies. He wears a porch-dog face, like you'd see over the mashed potatoes at Thanksgiving, and tells stories in a whispering timbre hinting at a deeper, more playful layer.

Appearing at Drake University's Knapp Center Tuesday as part of the Martin Bucksbaum Distinguished Lecture series, Keillor rode around the country roads of central Minnesota as a young writer, stopping in cafes just to listen to the conversations.

It served him well. His "A Prairie Home Companion," heard on Iowa Public Radio and 600 other radio stations by 4.3 million people, has been the benefi-

ciary of his common-man's ear for nearly 28 years. But so have his novels on Lake Wobegon and his silky-smooth essays, such as one from 2007, "Why Iowa Matters."

He described his male role models, men in his family who talked of manly things, looking out across the fields, leaning against a 1947 Ford.

"So what's going on in your neck of the woods? ... Oh, not so much. Keeping busy. ... How's that car of yours running? ... Got us to Idaho and back. ... So how was that? ... Well, she burned a little oil but she was getting almost 20 miles to the gallon."

And so he writes of gas mileage bragging, an accepted lie from Christians, and the art of raising strawberries, and all that

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is common and good and familiar in what he calls "uncle talk." Until he comes to a point.

"What they say is that life is made up of richness of small things and you need to keep them all in perspective," he writes. "Don't get carried away."

Iowa is a place where people could be labeled numbingly indifferent, by sharper pens. But Keillor writes that we can look at a presidential candidate "and get an intuitive sense of who is real and who isn't," and "appreciate a good apple." And that's why Iowa is important.

Iowans such as Neil Hamilton have been listening to and reading the Minnesotan for years. His stories are familiar. The professor in Drake's law school and chairman of the Bucksbaum lecture committee grew up in tiny Adams County and doesn't take offense to Keillor's gentle humor directed at the country life.

"He's not the sophisticated Easterner saying, 'Look at the rubes; let's make fun of them.' It's more a recognition of our groundedness and common sense and, certainly, some idiosyncrasies among us."

Keillor, the recipient of Grammy, ACE and George Foster Peabody awards and an inductee into the American Academy of Arts and Letters and Radio Hall of Fame, has authored a vast variety of books.

His radio work and writing, which started to appear to wider audiences in *The New Yorker* in the 1970s, have "cross-pollinated," wrote Peter Scholl, the Luther College English professor who wrote the 1993 biography "Garrison

DRAKE UNIVERSITY'S BUCKSBAUM LECTURE

Garrison Keillor, host of "A Prairie Home Companion" and best-selling author, will speak at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Drake University's Knapp Center as part of the free Martin Bucksbaum Distinguished Lecture series.

Keillor." Keillor admired magazine writers such as S.J. Perelman and E.B. White, who "affected the nuance of his oral tales," and the darker side of his humor by writers such as Donald Barthelme.

One can capture his devotion to words daily in Keillor's feature called "Writer's Almanac," a podcast on publicradio.org.

This lanky, red-socked yarn spinner isn't like Bill Bryson, the Des Moines native who has packed the house in the Bucksbaum lecture in past years. Keillor is even more wry, and certainly more shy and an unlikely interview. So there's no telling what he will talk about.

"That is part of the attraction," Hamilton said. "It's not like you're going to see a performance. He's a brilliant social commentator on American life and life in the Midwest."

At times, he has fled the public spotlight, leaving "A Prairie Home Companion" in the late 1980s to focus on his writing. But he returned. And that's part of the Midwest experience Iowans can understand.

"There's some levels of humanity people connect to and that they can relate to their own," Hamilton said. "The craft is being able to crystallize an idea. Mark Twain and H.L. Mencken played that role and that's a role a lot of people in the country have assigned to him."



Neil Hamilton, who helped arrange the lecture, says Keillor is a "brilliant social commentator on American life and life in the Midwest."

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