

Keillor has been a familiar companion for 30 years

By BETTY LEWIS

Checking off an item on our bucket list, my husband and I flew to St. Paul, Minn., to attend a taping of "Prairie Home Companion," a radio show hosted by Garrison Keillor. Except for a six-year break in the late 1980s, he has produced the show for over 30 years.

Reportedly, he got the idea for "Prairie Home Companion" while doing an article for The New Yorker on the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn. The format is similar, with a mixture of singers, down-home humor, parodies, birthday greetings and a special segment called "The News From Lake Wobegon." That fictional town is based in part on Keillor's hometown of Anoka, Minn.

He orchestrates the live, two-hour show with the finesse of a symphony conductor, watching a round, oversized clock to get his timing right. There is a schedule of acts on a music stand in front of him, but he only occasionally checks it. Behind him are six musicians and his longtime pianist at a baby grand. A man and woman play oddball characters in his stories, altering their voices and making convincing sounds for the radio audience. Keillor's name is not used in the credits;

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instead the show's writing is attributed to Sarah Bellum, a reference to himself.

Before the show started, a woman in her 60s sitting next to me spoke of her days as a student at the University of Minnesota, recalling Keillor hanging around the campus, interviewing students and asking questions. Nobody knew exactly what he was up to. After a moment, she said: "He was really strange then, and he's still really strange."

Keillor is a big man, standing 6-foot-3. He is hulking, like a



Ann Heisenfeld Associated Press file

Garrison Keillor, the host of "A Prairie Home Companion," comes to Gallo Center for the Arts in Modesto on Wednesday.

Minnesota Yeti with long arms and big, expressive hands that move in sync with his words. His thinning, sandy hair goes every which way, with tufts hanging over his face. He is not handsome and often makes self-deprecating jibes about his looks, perhaps beating others to the punch.

But onstage he shines. After 30 years, his timing is right on target. He sprinkles his comments as needed between the acts, making the show seamless yet spontaneous. We were 12 feet in front of him in the third row, but he's oblivious to the audience. It seems this is what he is meant to do, as he does it better than anyone else. But there is no arrogance; his confidence is earned.

When it's time for "The News From Lake Wobegon," the lights dim and everyone else leaves the stage. Keillor is alone to tell you about the characters of his youth. They are Lutherans, victims of their own prejudices and small-town isolation. He spins tales of these vivid characters interacting in church or at the Chatterbox Cafe or on a deer-hunting trip. As Keillor narrates, he closes his eyes, wandering to the back, then the front of the stage, as if in a Shakespearean soliloquy. No notes. The audience is invited into this intensely private, poignant world "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

When Keillor travels without

AT THE GALLO CENTER

WHAT: Garrison Keillor
WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday
WHERE: Gallo Center for the Arts, Mary Stuart Rogers Theater, 1000 I St., Modesto
TICKETS: \$39-\$99
CALL: (209) 338-5000
ONLINE: www.galloarts.org

For more on Keillor, see Friday's **Scene** section.

the "Prairie Home Companion" cast, he frequently goes solo, sitting on a stool and offering you his reflections. His intent is not to convince you of anything, but to make you notice what's going on around you. It's like a tiny yellow flower nestled down in an expanse of grass. You could have walked by without noticing. But Keillor makes you notice and makes you think.

Keillor will be 73 this year. He has talked of retirement but dismisses the notion. He planned to retire in 2013, but the date came and went. So he continues doing what he does best, giving us "Prairie Home Companion" every weekend and taking his solo act around the country.

Like so many of us working past retirement age, producing the show and doing his solo act gives him discipline. He has to write regularly; the next show is only a week away. What a gift, to know what you are good at and to continue doing it.

Betty Lewis is a former visiting editor. Email: columns@modbee.com