

'Home companion' on the prairie

Staff Photos by Richard Olsenius

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Mantorville, Minn.

Actually, the traveling radio show is an anachronism. And yet here was the anachronism loading up for traveling in a fancy \$1.50-a-mile leased Jefferson Lines executive-luxury bus complete with soft golden lounge chairs, electric curtains, stand-up shower.

Polished, its silver shell glistening, it bounced down the highway out of St. Paul with its unlikely cargo — a radio cast collectively called "A Prairie Home Companion." Destination: the prairie town of Mantorville, just west of Rochester.

"Who's the leader?" asked the rented driver. "We can't go until the leader says we go."

The leader is a tall, slightly stooped young man in his 30s with a rich black beard, thin-rimmed eyeglasses, red suspenders, an off-white linen suit and what

appears to be a Panama hat. ("Looks like it was stomped out of a grass mat," a friend said.)

The name is Garrison Keillor. He turned to the troupe and announced, "O.K., children of the theater . . ."

Keillor is an ex-English major at the University of Minnesota who has carved a career for himself out of sheer whimsy. Among his audience tonight would be fans of the variety show he does at 5 p.m. Saturdays on the Minnesota public radio network.

The show's songs, poems and idle diversions usually are performed live before his cultists at Variety Hall Theater in St. Paul, which is upstairs from KSJN-FM, the command post for the network. But, as in the case of the Mantorville visit, Keillor also takes monthly journeys to meet and greet the folks Out There.

Keillor is a man of diverse talents, the most substantial of which is his way with words. He writes occasional pieces for the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, did a column in the late Twin Cities Express ▶



Garrison Keillor.



Keillor faced his audience in the Mantorville Opera House.

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Radio



Mantorville, a town deeply interested in its history.

and runs frequent, tasteful little ridicules in the New Yorker.

He also likes sports. Once he coached (as "executive secretary") a station softball team called the Lake Wobegone Leeches, which rehearsed instead of practicing. His notice for tryouts (auditions) insisted that aspirants live up to the highest standards of decency, personal cleanliness and sincerity.

He is a poet of note. At least he rhymes. He asked the folk at the Mantorville Opera House, rhetorically, "Why do we love thee, O Lake Wobegone?" (a mythical Keillor town of dubious distinctions):

**Why do we live here?
Because it's here.
We wouldn't if it were a few miles away.
But it's not, it's where we're.**

He is a musician, as he suggested in the quickie rehearsal as the Wakefield Coach rumbled along its way. He embraced his autoharp with paternal fondness and picked at it softly, as if he wanted to stay in proximity to the song but not intrude.

The actual musicians love this kind of tripping. They play for people who dig it. They like Garrison. They would do it for nothing. (They get a miniscule salary that sometimes runs higher than Keillor's personal fee of \$50 a show, Keillor explaining, "Well, music is hard to play.")

They are country-bluegrass guitarist-singers Judy Larson and Bill Hinkley, Dobro guitarist Cal Hand and fiddler Rudy Darling, whose bow kept bouncing off its strings on the ride down.

Also tripping to Mantorville were Ken Mason, acting as an engineer, and two unpaid friends of the show, "production assistants" Dave McKay and Ray Martin, the latter an old-time electrician for the Burlington Northern who struck up a friendship with Keillor when Keillor had an early-morning show at KSJN.

"I would just stop in the studio, and we'd talk baseball and music during the records," Martin said. "It can get pretty lonely for him in the morning like that. I like his style. He doesn't talk to you as an 8-year-old. He makes you think.

"I just do some things that have to be done around the show," Martin said. "I just take the time off. There are more important things than railroads, you know."

The company rode into Mantorville under the 6 p.m. cover of the midwinter darkness, the show having been plotted (vaguely) and some sandwiches and chilled beer consumed on the way down.

By that time, Dennis Rooney and a trainee-assistant, Mike Boom, had driven ahead to assemble the radio gear. Rooney, in his usual suit, tie and galoshes, is fastidious about his music, too, as play-by-play announcer for KSJN's Minnesota Orchestra coverage. He was cast here as engineer.

The Opera House — circa 1918 — isn't what it might seem. It is basically a chilly old hall. One tiny corner is walled off as headquarters for the town council, the police chief and voting. There are some meeting rooms in the basement for VFW ▶

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Radio

Post 230 and other groups.

The building also is used for amateur melodramas like "A Thief in the House" and, as on the previous night, bingo for 60 for the benefit of the Mantorville Restoration Association.

The town — barely 500 people — is heavily into history. Ron Hunt, an artist who describes himself as "president of the chamber, chairman of the restoration committee and tour guide," figures 200,000 people will stop in old Mantorville this year at some time or other.

The radio crew and friends pitched in to rearrange the wooden pews into rows, and by 8 p.m. a surprisingly large crowd of 125 had filed in and was waiting with eagerness for Keillor and Co.

There were some locals. But many were like Franklin Till, a 65-year-old farmer who said he didn't know Keillor from Arthur Godfrey and just put on his suit and drove over on a whim.

Dr. S. A. Lovestedt and his wife love the Saturday operas and Keillor on public radio and wanted to see Keillor in person. ("I thought he was older because of his judgment and maturity," the doctor said.)

Rick Gentling, 23, and Nancy Postier, 20, came in from Rochester because, well, there's nothing to do in Rochester, "if you've ever been there," they said.

"I want to thank you for coming out on a cold night to see a radio show," Keillor began. "It's not something everybody will do."

He explained the audience rules: "You'll find it easier to hear when I talk if you don't laugh at the jokes. Some people say that's not too hard."

He charmed them with his kindly asides: "You all look so healthy and prime after that blizzard."

He told some Twin Cities put-down jokes and marveled at Mantorville "because it took a long time, but you finally became historic."

He said Mantorville was unlike some oth- ▶



The audience.

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Radio



On stage, Bill Hinkley, Judy Larson, Rudy Darling and Cal Hand.

er historic places like Lake Wobegone which is "preserving our heritage from the 1950s."

Bill and Judy played "The Columbus Stockade Blues" and other songs. Al Maves, the mayor of nearby Hayfield, had brought along his Swingin' Laendler Band and skipped through "Blue Skirt Waltz," "Ping Pong Polka" and more.

Keillor did his requisite commercial for Jack's Auto Repair, a sort of all-purpose "outlet" that sprang from the Keillor mind a few years ago. This time, Jack's was promoting Sunday tourism in Lake Wobegone, where there are "no tall buildings or waterfalls." You can just sit in the living room of somebody's house and drink coffee and have a real good time.

Like, he said, you can meet the Bunsen family, which just completed a trip to the Black Hills and made a documentary film out of it. Or the Bunyan family with its

first-edition collection of the Minneapolis Star.

The show rambled on, loose and happy. In time, the 90 minutes were done and all wrapped up in audio tape. The audience bundled up and departed. Keillor, who had found a flag and stand in the basement, put it back.

On the bus, the prairie home companions had a taste of Jack Daniels No. 7 and relaxed, glowing from the evening.

Keillor kidded them. "You know we're going right on to Moorhead now to do a show. Then Bemidji tomorrow..."

The group was loving it: Trips like this, with nice folk, live music — this was it.

"Wouldn't it be nice to build a fantasy world like this?" Cal Hand wondered.

Bill Hinkley gestured toward Keillor: "He does about as good as anybody." ■

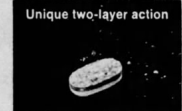


Keillor in the bus: Taking the prairie home companion home again.

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