

Entertainment

'Prairie Home Companion' Visits

By GREG WORDEN

MIDDLEBURY — As rain clouds from the prairie states rolled threateningly overhead, people gathered in a line that pointed upwards toward Mead Chapel Sunday afternoon.

The stone chapel sits atop a sprawling, green hill at Middlebury College. And in the serene setting, it was as if people were lining up to get into heaven.

For many, it was the next best thing. Garrison Keillor had brought the wisdom of his mostly mythical town of Lake Wobegon, Minn., (there really is a Wobegon cemetery in Moorhead, Minn.), and "A Prairie Home Companion" to the Middlebury campus for a performance.

As Olin Robinson, president of the college, wrote in his introduction to the program: "A popular gospel song of the late 30s carried the refrain, 'Turn your radio on.' It suggested that salvation was in the airwaves and the spirit could be felt through the big radio around which the family gathered in the parlor.

"In recent years, however, the spirit has all but disappeared from the medium. Television has robbed us of the visual mystery, and radio, when not pounding out 'golden oldies,' has lapsed into easy listening unconsciousness.

"But a few years ago, a new spirit emerged from the farms and homes of the upper Midwest in the form of 'A Prairie Home Companion.' This was no romp down memory lane or imitation of the past but rather an original radio program.

"Like the great radio philosophers of the plains that preceded him, Garrison Keillor has provided us with universal truths to consider, moral questions to ponder, and classic characters that we can find in each of our families and communities. With his multiple talents and gentle humor, Mr. Keillor has subtly helped us to discover the best in our neighbors.

At a time when the media can turn to advanced telecommunications equipment to carry us live to the most remote corners of this planet and beyond, 'A Prairie Home Companion' has used that same technology to bring us home."

Robinson's introduction said. And home they were. As the 750 fans who were able to get tickets for the Sunday show filed into the chapel for the third and final show in three days, the air was electric like that of a family reunion.

Keillor's radio program was first aired on Minnesota Public Radio in 1974, and then linked to the rest of the nation by satellite in 1980. More than 2 million people listen to the two-hour show every Saturday night beginning at 6 p.m. on WPTV and other area public radio stations. Last Saturday's nationwide broadcast was live from Middlebury.

Lake Wobegon, which Keillor describes as "the little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above-average," has captured the nation's fancy.

Even the mythical sponsors have become "ask-for" items in and around the country. They include Bob's Bank ("The friendly bank in the green mobile home right on Main Street where your money is safe and the door is always open, where every check you write has a picture of Bob on it and the inscription, 'Cash this.



SALES PITCH — Garrison Keillor, glasses in hand, makes a pitch for one of the mythical sponsors of "A Prairie Home Companion" Sunday at Middlebury College.

They're friends of mine," and whose motto is "Neither a borrower nor a lender be. 'Save at the sign of the sock.") and Powdermilk Biscuits ("Made from whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers in the rich bottomlands of the Wobegon valley, so you know they're not only good, they're also pure mostly, the biscuit with that whole-wheat goodness that gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done; biscuit mix in the big blue box or biscuits already baked in the big brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness. Heavens, they're tasty and expeditious!")

Keillor, a tall, sturdy-looking man with horn-rimmed reading glasses, a vacant look, square jaw and lower-than-tense mellifluous voice, is now on stage. He has introduced an eclectic group of musicians who are traveling with him on this three-week tour to the East Coast. They include the Birch Thompson Trio, a jazz group; Peter Ostroushko, an guitar, fiddle and mandolin; and the Stony Lonesome bluegrass band.

In addition, on Friday Marlboro's Margaret MacArthur and her musical family were invited to perform; on Saturday, the Word of Mouth Chorus, including Michael McKernan from Westminster West provided extra entertainment; and on Sunday, Windham County's Applejack contra dance band with McKernan, Andy Toepfer and Laurie Idenbaum of Saxtons River and Jill Newton of Jamaica were guests.

"I guess Garrison has heard our record, but we sent another copy

former as he is a writer, having recently published a book, 'Happy To Be Here,' a collection of essays most of which appeared in The New Yorker," the columnist said.

"Imagine writers like Mark Twain, James Thurber, Robert Benchley or E.B. White suddenly available to deliver soliloquies on radio and you have a sense of 'A Prairie Home Companion,'" he said.

Keillor, who claims a shyfess that is almost believable, tells the audience that he comes from a poor part of Minnesota, mostly inhabited by folks of Norwegian stock.

"They passed up the rich loam of the lower midwestern states and didn't stop until they got to Minnesota, whose rocky soil reminded them of home, forgetting, of course, why they left Norway in the first place."

After a string of anecdotes, Keillor has woven his spell on the audience completely and he closes his eyes as he ventures into the depths of his imaginary Lake Wobegon.

He tells the stories of being in Miss Falconer's seventh grade chorus class; of his mother's penchant for giving him oatmeal, "the vital substance of life," for every breakfast; of school lunches that bring back vivid memories of "yellowish gray on white bread they called chicken a-la-king, followed by lime Jell-O" with a dollop of mayonnaise.

Keillor enjoyed his visit to Middlebury; one can tell by his easy relaxed manner. And Middlebury enjoyed having him.

"It couldn't have gone smoother," said Ron Nief, the college's public affairs director, who helped line up the visit.

And it was good publicity for the college, as well.

"You can't buy this kind of exposure for the college. We don't ordinarily have five or six minutes over a two-hour period on a national radio broadcast to several million people," Nief said, smiling.

In the final few minutes of the program, Keillor reads short messages from fans to other fans as Birch Thompson plays piano in the background.

One is a message to "Miss Harwood High. She's here in person," Keillor reads. And then he adds, "There's no other way to be here. Remember that. Always be wherever you are in person."

After a brief encore, Keillor says goodbye. But, the audience is not sad. They know Keillor and their Prairie Home Companion will be back on the air this Saturday at 6 p.m.



ON STAGE — Garrison Keillor introduces the Windham County contra dance band, Applejack, at Sunday's "Prairie Home Companion" performance in Middlebury.