

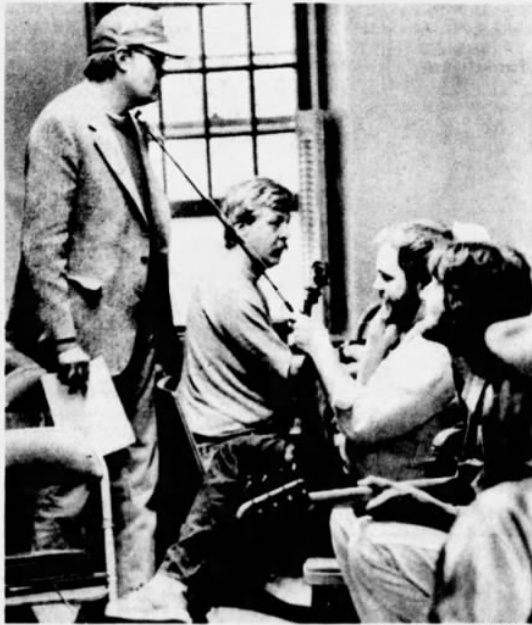
Friday, May 6, 1983 Four News Sections • 25 Cents



The Stage Is Set
Mead Chapel at Middlebury College takes on the air of a studio as a crew from Lake Wobegon, the town that time forgot, sets up for "A Prairie Home Companion." The

National Public Radio show — billed as the nation's funniest — will be broadcast live Saturday night via a satellite dish set up outside. **Story on Page 1D.**

Free Press Photo by STU PERRY



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Garrison Keillor, left, practices with members of the Stoney Lonesome Bluegrass Band in the Gamut Room of Gifford Hall. He writes about 99 percent of the show, according to producer Margaret Moos.

Town Outdoes Itself For Public Radio Comics

By MAGGIE MAURICE

Free Press Lifestyles Editor

Garrison Keillor told the cast of "A Prairie Home Companion," the nation's funniest radio show, that when they came East on tour, they wouldn't be staying at fancy places. They'll stay at the Hotel Minnesota, he said, a real old-fashioned place, with 7-year-old bellhops and rooms like anybody's guest room, "with winter clothes in the closet, a sewing machine in the corner, and a pile of National Geographics under the bed."

Well, the crew from Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, the town that time forgot, is spending the weekend at Middlebury College. A Prairie Home Companion will be broadcast on National Public Radio live from Mead Memorial Chapel, sponsored by Middlebury College and Minnesota Public Ra-



MOOS

PEOPLE EITHER love "A Prairie Home Companion" or never heard of it. There is no half-way reaction **Page 8D**

dio.

In addition to the Saturday night broadcast, they will perform tonight and Sunday. All the performances are sold out.

In welcome, Middlebury has turned itself inside out like a glove. Preparations began more than a year ago. The group has rooms to live in, rooms to practice in. Every other item on the itinerary involves food. And there are no Geographics under the beds.

The Minnesotans are doing OK.

Thursday afternoon, Mead Chapel looked far from woe-begone, though Wobegon had taken over.

A dish antenna, 16 feet in diameter, stood on the grass outside, a great white thing turned up to the heavens, ready to direct the broadcast signal to the Westar IV satellite. You could look from the dish to the spire of the chapel and **Turn to MIDDLEBURY, Page 3D**

Middlebury Outdoes Itself in Welcoming Radio Show

From Page 1D
transcend the centuries. Inside the chapel, a technical crew had erected a special stage containing a forest of microphones and a grand piano. Two

new banners had been added to the Middlebury College colors on the organ pipes at the back; Powdermill Biscuits and A Prairie Home Companion.

The show originated at Minnesota Public Radio eight years ago and has had national distribution since 1980.

"The satellite is what made it possible," explained producer Margaret Moos who has been with A Prairie Home Companion since 1974.

"This is the first time we've used the portable dish. Burlington only has the downlink and this is the uplink, used in metropolitan areas like Washington, New York and Chicago. If we find it works, we'll be able to do more rural broadcasts."

The audio uplink is owned by Satellite Systems Corp. of Virginia, which usually works with television sports ("radio, what's that?"). "They say our crew is low-key. TV sports people get pretty hyper," said technical director Lynne Cruise.

And low-key they seem to be. Producer and director were on the stage floor, removing tables from a crate, while other crew members checked wires, opened windows, lit consoles and incidentally, took the chapel lectern apart.

Keillor has said that he's a terrible interviewer, so he doesn't give any these days. "He's hard working, a shy person," Moos said. "He's amazingly prolific, writes 99 percent of the show. He spends a lot of time at the typewriter. To meet strangers and talk about himself is not easy for him to do."

"He's respectful of the crew, very good to work with. He doesn't drive us crazy with last minute changes," she said.

The man himself was rehearsing in the Gamut Room in Gifford Hall next to the chapel. Wearing one of his ever-present hats, he was bent over a clipboard, both lighter-haired and less bug-eyed than in his pictures.

"He's not a big gladder," someone had said of him. "A quiet man with a commitment to this show."

He does 46 live performances and two tours a year. The group left St. Paul May 4 and will return May 25, with 12 shows scheduled.

"This is a big production for us, a costly venture," Moos said. "We have 20 people, have to truck in equipment. The college is a very gracious host."

Mead Chapel, which holds 800, is just the right size, she believes.

"It's better to do three shows in a hall like this than one show in an enormous auditorium," she said.

"Saturday night we'll add Margaret MacArthur from Vermont, who appeared with us a year ago, and Word of Mouth Chorus from Plainfield (Garrison played their record on his morning show). We searched out the Familie Beaudoin because it does music we don't normally have access to," she said.

The press has been good to A Prairie Home Companion, starting with a front page article in The Wall Street Journal in 1981. Since then the program has been written about in such magazines as Life, Esquire, Time and People.

Yet the fame hasn't gone to their heads. "It's wonderful to get out on the road and see these audiences," Moos said. "You feel a greater responsibility to do well. There's more pressure because more is expected."

"We still keep some time for ourselves. After the show, we eat, have a beer.

In Gifford Hall, Keillor was tapping his foot to the music. Butch Thompson was at the pi-



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BONANZA'S PARADE OF VALUES

ano, Peter Ostroushko on mandolin, Red Maddock on drums. As if on cue, he stood up and sang the Lake Wobegon Anthem. The writer has a good voice.

In the chapel, Lynne Cruise was still working on the equipment, the modern technology to take the audience back home again. After this weekend, they go to New York, to the razzle dazzle. "Not the red carpet treatment we've had here," Moos said.

New York hotel rooms won't have a sewing machine in the corner either. But Garrison Keillor, who has made a success of pretending, can always make believe.

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