

LOCAL/STATE

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'Prairie Home Companion' visits Vermont

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and
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MIDDLEBURY — It is prom night in Lake Wobegon.

In the high school gymnasium, a watering trough at center court is a fountain. It is night in the gardens of Spain.

The prom "is put on by the juniors for the seniors — kinda like Social Security. Thirty to 40 couples in rented outfits are making their first bold venture into elegance and grace, which is never easy in Lake Wobegon."

"We've been waiting all evening. At last, Garrison Keillor is giving the news from Lake Wobegon, Minn., "the little town that time forgot, that decades cannot improve," and he's giving it live, from the altar in Mead Chapel at Middlebury College.

The voice that has glided so effortlessly out of radios each Saturday night and taken listeners to that mythical town has horn-rimmed glasses, a linen suit and scarlet socks that match his scarlet tie.

This weekend, Keillor, who started "Prairie Home Companion" on Minnesota Public Radio in 1974, packed up his Powdermilk Biscuits and brought them to Vermont to give shy folks here "the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

Since 1980 the show has gone out every Saturday evening at 6 to over 200 public radio stations around the country and built up a large following.

Keillor and his crew rarely stray from the World Theatre in St. Paul, Minn. But after months of pleading

from college fans and a breakthrough that permitted the show to be broadcast live from the Champlain Valley, they found themselves treated to daffodils and tunafish sandwiches and more attention than they got at a high-priced Chicago hotel.

"We've been treated so royally as to make a shy person cringe," said Keillor — long pause — "from embarrassment."

Embarrassment and shyness are a big part of every show. But as regular listeners know, those Powdermilk Biscuits, one of the show's mythical sponsors, contain whole-wheat courage.

The college's kindness reminds Keillor of the "Lutheran church women who take Christmas baskets up to the Norwegian bachelor farmers."

"Kindness is never lost. It carries on."

He stands, swaying, one hand on the microphone, the other cupped, straight-faced. He raises his eyebrows above the glasses as he spins his stories, or grimaces as he recounts a particularly embarrassing moment.

The highlight of every show is the news of the week from Lake Wobegon. Saturday night, prom night, he takes the audience back to his own prom.

"I had read more romantic novels than were good for a person," Keillor says. His favorite, "perhaps you remember it," was "Last Dance at the Old Plantation."

But prom night didn't quite compare to his romantic notions.

He stood by the bleachers, alone, watching the dancers, wearing a suit, "not even daring to touch it for fear of leaving great 'sweat marks...sending tragic and meaningless glances toward Marilyn, who tragically was in the arms of Ron Birney."

He weaves the story of the Old South and his prom night.

The Confederate soldier wants to hold his sweetheart, knowing that he may soon die on some distant battlefield. Keillor wants to hold his sweetheart, knowing that he may soon flunk out of some distant college. But he ends up clutching his stomach between two parked cars beside the school incinerator, losing the three glasses of Hawaiian Punch spiked with liquor.

"Elegance does not bear a lot of scrutiny," said Keillor. "When you want to be graceful and stylish, you don't want to look too hard."

But as Prairie Home Companion's listeners know, the show is not all talk.

Saturday night at 6 also means the Butch Thompson Trio and assorted musical guests whose styles range from bluegrass and Bourbon Street jazz to Renaissance chorales.

In Middlebury, Burlington's Famille Beaudoin, dressed in red shirts, sashes and black pants, sang French Canadian songs, accompanied by clanging kitchen spoons. Keillor invited those at home to play along on their own spoons.

The members of the Stoney Lonesome Bluegrass Band had 800 fans clapping hands and stomping the wooden chapel floor. The Word of

Mouth Chorus from Plainfield held forth with unaccompanied gospel music.

Saturday night also means commercials by the show's imaginary sponsors — Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Jack's Auto Repair, the Chatterbox Cafe and Bertha's Kitty Boutique, for people who care about cats.

Bertha is offering pets for lonely cats this week. She recommends a box of ants. "Cat's will get hours and hours of pleasure out of those little black ants."

But it wouldn't be fair to mention sponsors and leave out the show's major sponsor and the town's only industry — the Powdermilk Biscuit factory. "Heaven's they're tasty. And expeditious. Powdermilk Biscuits in the big blue box."

Keillor sends birthday, Mother's Day and other greetings from fans in the audience to their friends across the land. He also reads greetings which come in the mail, including one from a former Middlebury student to the professor who "taught me more than he or I realized."

"Don't delay your visit, because of all the rain" writes one. "We have a boat now."

"Happy birthday to Jan from her friends in Vermont."

"Hello to Peter Stitt in Texas..."

At 8 p.m., it all evaporates until next week when Keillor will bring more music, more greetings and more news from Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average."