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LIVING



Garrison Kellor, left, of National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," watches as banjost Kevin Barnes performs at Middlebury College show.

Public radio's companion to millions

JACK THOMAS

The place: Lake Wobegone. Minn., a mythical town that time forgot and that the decades cannot improve, where the women are strong, the men are good-looking and the children are well above average, every single one of 'em.

The time: within our memory.

The setting: Lake Wobegone High School, which is up the road from Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery Store (if you can't find it at Ralph's, you probably can get by without it), and around the corner from the Chatterbox Cafe (which is just like home, assuming you were brought up the right way), and a block or two from Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, where the flock is tended by Fr. Emil, the ultratraditional pastor who is likely to stand up in the midst of confession and say, "You didn't!" and his hip counterpart, Fr. Bill, whose sermon last Easter included a picture of Jesus on water skis with the inscription, "He's Up."

The narrator: Reminiscing from the stage at Mead Chapel on the campus of Middlebury College last weekend is Garrison Kellor, a tall, middle-aged man with horn rim glasses and a jaw that makes him look like a fat Dick Tracy.

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"Lake Wobegone had three churches, the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, and my church, the Brethren Church, which was the true church," he says.

"We believed in the absolutely pure literal interpretation of the Scriptures, and as a result, the Lake Wobegone Brethren Church was a very tiny church. It tended to get smaller as the years went by, as the congregation became splintered with an ever-growing number of absolutely pure literal interpretations of the Scriptures, so that in the end, the Brethren Church — the really true church — had only eight members."

In a voice deep and gentle, he weaves a tale about bygone days in rural America, about church suppers of meat loaf and mashed potatoes; about school lunches made up of yellowish gravy on white bread they called chicken-a-la-king, followed by lime-green Jell-O; about children who try to talk their mothers into letting them eat cold cereal for breakfast when everybody knows that mothers think oatmeal is the vital sustenance of life, and especially about the high school choral teacher, Miss Falconer, who wore glasses with precious gems, and who yelled about rhythm as she drilled the choir for the All-District Choral Concert every spring.

"But rhythm was not the problem in the tenor section," Kellor says softly. "The problem was that each boy was singing a little slower than the boy next to him in hopes of getting the right note, and every boy also sang a little softer than the boy next to him so that in the end, the music sounded like wind blowing in the rigging, a faint moaning sound."

Besides, the boys were flustered. They were singing a madrigal by Thomas Morley, "April Is In My Mistress' Face," and no one could sing the word "bosom" without thinking of Miss Falconer in her underwear.

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Mead Chapel is jammed, standing room only.

They're leaning over the balconies, faculty, students, senior citizens, boys and girls and middle-aged hippies. Some waited in line four hours. Others drove five hours from the seacoast of Maine. Before the night is over, Garrison Kellor and his musicians will have them joining reverently in "America, the Beautiful," and then even the staid superintendent of schools in Burlington and the internationally renowned president of Middlebury, Olin Robison, will be among those clapping and stamping their feet in a way Mead Chapel has not heard since the rock concerts of the 70s.

Kellor, on the first stop of a spring tour that will bring him to New York this weekend and to Boston next, will remind them of their childhood and make them laugh and cheer and sing and whistle and ponder traditional American values so that when they file out of Mead Chapel and down the sloping lawn past the dogwood and magnolia, their heads will be filled with his music, their hearts with his musings.

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Well, who is Garrison Kellor, anyway, this Truman Capote look-alike from the Midwest who's achieved something on public radio that has eluded American parents for a generation — the ability to make young people turn off their television sets and listen to radio.

Since 1974, Kellor has been hosting "A Prairie Home Companion," a two-hour program of music and humor from St. Paul, Minn., broadcast live every Saturday night at 6 on more than 200 public radio stations, including WGBH-FM in Boston.

At a time when Hollywood has made a desert out of much of television, the Midwest, ironically, manages to produce the most popular radio show in America.

Across the nation, scenes reminiscent of America in the '40s and '50s are re-created at dusk Saturday nights when two million people tune their radios to "A Prairie Home Companion," and while they cook dinner or read the newspaper or dress for a Saturday night on the town, they listen.

Kellor's music is, to say the least, eclectic, ranging from jazz and bluegrass and Country and Western to Norwegian folksinging, Irish reels and Scottish dances. On the same program, a classical

Wit, wisdom from the prairie

Gleanings from the Public Radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

"This portion of our show is brought to you by the Chatterbox Cafe, where steamed-up windows testify to the good cooking that goes on inside even if it may not be one of your fanciest restaurants and not dark and dim inside with menus in foreign languages and mind-bending prices."

"I see a lot of my friends sitting in those expensive restaurants in the dim and dark looking at the menus over the candle trying to pretend they have taste as good as what this place is supposed to have. They ask, 'Is the sole fresh today?' 'Do you have house dressing?' and I feel like going up and shaking 'em, and saying, 'Wayne! What's wrong with you? What's wrong with the meat-leaf?' Well, eventually, they want to come back to the Chatterbox, and have good home cooking. There's no food so good that it makes up for eating a meal with people you don't care for."

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"This country pays a high cost for shy persons. Millions of hours are wasted every year by shy persons standing around and saying, 'You decide. It's up to you. Either way is fine with me. I'll be happy with whatever you want to do. It's just fine with me.'"

"People point to the millions of gallons of water wasted every year by shy persons who always run wa-

COMPANION, Page 65

Public radio's companion to millions

■ PRAIRIE

Continued from Page 61

violinist might be followed by a spoon player.

Most of the musicians are not well-known and sometimes they make mistakes.

But what makes "A Prairie Home Companion" a jewel is that it's live, that it's not as slick as television, and that it's music and fables from the soul of America.

Last weekend, on mandolins they had made themselves, the MacArthur Family of Marlboro, Vt., sang a song they had written themselves about apple paring near the hills of Dover, where the winter land is hard and life is boney.

And the Dissipated Eight, who are students at Middlebury, sang barbershop style, and if their predecessors in the '60s were in beards and blue jeans to sing antiwar songs, well, these young men were dressed more like their grandfathers, in pleated trousers, bow ties and vests, to sing a favorite from the '20s. "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby."

The songs are sometimes serious about wildflowers or mothers in rocking chairs and sometimes tongue-in-cheek, like the week in April that Minnesota was hit by a foot of snow, and Keillor composed a song entitled, "Past a Certain Point, It's Just Ridiculous."

The key to the show is Keillor, whose Norman Rockwell monologues are allegorical, modest, witty, whimsical and poignant stories about a time not so long ago that is gone now forever.

Keillor is not so much a performer 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*.

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."

The fictitious sponsor of the program is Powdermilk Biscuits, made, as Keillor says, from the whole wheat grown by bachelor Norwegian farmers that gives shy persons the strength to get up in the morning and do what has to be done.

Stores in St. Paul report that tourists sometimes ask for Powdermilk Biscuits in the big blue box with the picture on the cover or else in the brown bag with the dark stain that indicates freshness.

Other fictitious sponsors are the merchants from Lake Wobegone, like the Home Defense Hardware, where you can buy a table lamp that fits the odd floor in homes where all the lines are not perpendicular, where the doors are shaped liked trapezoids, and where people are afraid to take down the wallpaper because that's what's holding up the wall.

"Part of his appeal is his lack of pretension," said Robison at a party following the show. "He takes ordinary experiences, mostly drawn on childhood memories set in the rural class, and it's not the cutting humor you hear so much on television. It's gentle. It doesn't attack. There's not a hint of cruelty, and it's mixed with a moral homily that reminds us of when we were chil-



GARRISON KEILLOR
TV's not in his plans

dren. Why, I remember being terrified of a choral teacher just like Miss Falconer."

"A Prairie Home Companion" has a family feel in the messages Keillor reads each week. With jazz pianist Butch Thompson playing something soft like "Pennies from Heaven," Keillor delivers news about births, graduations, anniversaries or secret loves.

- "Hello to Bruce and Ellen and Allegra. It was hard to put the high chair away. We're really looking forward to your next visit, signed, Grampa and Grandma and Aunt Toni.

- "Here's a note from Allyson with love from Nicholas, who just says, 'Wait.'"

- "And hello to Tom, 'the artichoke' in Tacoma from someone who says the jasmine is in blossom, and the limes are ripening, waiting for you and the margarita-filled days. Love from Edna.

- "And Jane would like Dr. John in Seattle to know he'd be nice to come home to."

DR. NEIL SOLOMON

Dear Dr. Solomon:

Suppose a woman examines her breasts regularly and finds a lump, isn't it too late to do anything about it? I don't see how this guarantees against dying from breast cancer.

— C.G., Chicago.

I suggest you not look for guarantees because there aren't any.

A breast mass can begin to be felt when it is about one centimeter (a centimeter is 0.39 inches). At that time, there is a 50 percent likelihood that the cancer has already spread. Nevertheless, the American College of Surgeons estimates that almost one-quarter of deaths from

- "And a note to Dick from Melody. Honey, Thursday's your last chance. Meet you at the Pasadena Courthouse, and don't forget the ring this time."

- "Happy 16th anniversary from Robert to his wife Donna in Bloomington, Ind.

- "And from Unker in Washington, whose niece will shortly be escorted to a school dance by a bearded friend. Unk hopes she has an enjoyable evening with her hairy prom companion."

Asked about the appeal of "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor thinks a long time.

"I think people enjoy the unlikeliness of it," he said. "Public radio gives you some freedom to do things you can't do elsewhere. Commercial television, the main arena for comedy, is run by a lot of very nervous people, very skittish people who have a hard time believing in one thing long enough to stick with it. They're always changing things."

Because of his popularity, network television has been making overtures to Keillor.

"The networks would love to get their hands on him," says Cathy de Moll, press representative for "A Prairie Home Companion."

"And they talk about a movie with Dennis Weaver playing Garrison, but people in Minnesota resented it when he went to national radio, and people who listen to him on radio would be resentful if he went to television. He won't, though, because he knows where his strength is. He knows that radio is his medium."

The idea seems silly to Keillor.

"It would be too hard on us," he said. "We have a hard enough time dealing with a national radio show. It's become complicated enough without having to bring in a whole other technology and all of the superstructure that goes along with television."

This weekend, he heads for New York and then to Boston, just a prairie boy in the big, high-powered cities, where the ethics, goals and ideals are as different as Davenport's crowning of the Iowa Pork Queen is from the Boston Ballet.

But Keillor seems unruffled.

"The audience that comes to hear us in New York is not the big problem," he says softly. "The big problem is the public radio audience, and if the audience in New York doesn't laugh, well, that's not the end of the world."

breast cancer could be eliminated if the mass was detected at one centimeter.

Dear Dr. Solomon:

What would cause a person to get dizzy?

— Fran, Jersey City

I wish I could answer your question as simply as you ask it, but there are so many answers to your question that this is not possible. To name just a few, dizziness can be the result of a heart abnormality, anemia, a metabolic problem such as diabetes, drugs and alcohol, and neurologic disorders, among many others. Sometimes the cause of the problem is obvious, while at other times it is not uncovered until there has been extensive exploration.

Wit, wisdom from the prairie

■ COMPANION

Continued from Page 61

ter in the sink whenever they go to the bathroom. People point to the millions of gallons of gasoline wasted every year by people who are giving shy persons a ride home and they go past the shy person's home, but the shy person doesn't say anything about it until long after, when the shy person says, 'This will be all right, right here.' And you say, 'Is this where you live?' And the shy person says, 'No, I live way back there,' and then you've got to drive him back, wasting even more precious gas.

"But shy persons contribute something to this country, even though it may be hard to put your finger on it, and to put a value on it.

"We contribute quiet for one thing.

"You know, if everybody were dynamic, and had vibrant personalities and tried to get everything out of life every moment, this country would be a madhouse. This country wouldn't be worth living in if all of us were like that."

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"I can't think of any big celebrations in Lake Wobegone.

"There was a Flag Day celebration back about 1958, when Yalmer Ingfes organized a living flag. They got 400 people to wear red, white or blue caps, and they lined them up on Main street in the form of a flag.

"I think the idea came from a traveling cap salesman. Once they lined up the stars and stripes and everything, there were not many people left to appreciate it.

"There were a couple of guys on top of the

Central Building who said it looked great, so somebody got out from the living flag who had a red cap on - he was part of the stripe - and ran up to the top of the Central Building, and then everybody had to do it.

Yalmer said, 'Let's go in groups,' but that would destroy the very thing you were looking at, so one by one, into the Central Building everybody went, climbing four flights of stairs, and then leaning over the parapet, and there's the flag. 'Awright, now it's your turn, Carl.'

"Finally, the living flag became kind of a sitting flag when they got down to the last person, who was Mrs. Olsrn. She was the last one. She had a white cap on because she was part of a star, and she said, 'No, that's all right. I don't need to see it,' and they said, 'GO.'

"And somebody wanted to go home and get a camera, but they had been there for so many hours that nobody wanted to hear anything more about Flag Day for years."

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"The gardens in Lake Wobegone are coming along now. People sit in their gardens and watch sets of onions coming up. The porches are open. Everybody's on their porch in the evening, and that's nice.

"They don't believe in air conditioning in Lake Wobegone. They believe it's a sign of ill health and extravagance and corruption and decadence such as brought down the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire had air conditioning, as you know, which is why they didn't hear the barbarians coming. Their windows were all closed."

- JACK THOMAS

Bringing up Buffy and Biff