

The Salt Lake Tribune Friday, October 7, 1983 M3

Garrison Keillor brings the news from Lake Wobegon

By John Gutman
Tribune Staff Writer

At dinner time on Saturdays a vestige of regional American culture is recreated over the airwaves.

"A Prairie Home Companion," broadcast on KUER (90 FM) from 6 to 7 p.m., could be described as old-time folk radio, although to host and creator Garrison Keillor, the combination of story-telling, comedy and music is still as popular as ever.

Keillor, a freelance writer, began doing the program in front of an audience of 30 to 50 in a 400-seat auditorium in Minneapolis in 1974. Minnesota Public Radio aired it locally. It began as a throwback to the days of live-entertainment, comedy programming. Mr. Keillor found that the demand for that type of broadcast was not nostalgic, but current. The audiences began to grow, and the show had to move to a 1,000-seat hall. In 1980, "A Prairie Home Companion" was offered to other public radio stations, and now is broadcast live to more than 200 nationwide. It's estimated the show pulls in more than two million listeners weekly. (There's a six week wait for tickets to the performances in St. Paul.)

A combination of music — bluegrass, jazz and folk — some standup comedy, and — what many consider to be the heart of the show — Garrison Keillor's stories about fictional Lake Wobegon comprise the hour program. Keillor and other regulars also write and sing original songs, both serious and humorous. In addition, Keillor has invented products and places reminiscent of radio commercials of the '30s and '40s.

Fictional Products

Part of each program is "sponsored" by a fictional product called Powdermilk Biscuits — "available in the big blue box or biscuits already baked in the big brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness." The biscuits are said to "give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

A variety of "local" Lake Wobegon businesses are also "advertised," including The Fearmonger's Shoppe ("serving all your phobia needs since 1954"), Ralph's Prety

Good Grocery ("Remember, if you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it.") and the Chatterbox Cafe ("where the coffee-pot is always on, which is why it tastes that way.")

Keillor created Lake Wobegon and its cast of characters by telling stories of his childhood, dressed up as fiction. He then put the stories and people in the small town setting to "put more distance between them and the innocent persons I was talking about."

Fit Description

"Although I don't know of a town called Lake Wobegon, I suspect there are many such localities around with similar characters," Keillor said in a recent phone interview from his Minnesota office. "I just took a drive outside the city the other day, and came upon several towns that fit the description fairly close. I keep thinking someday I'll drive up over a ridge and there it will be."

The Wobegon stories gave Keillor a chance to display his comic abilities, which were proven in written form, without having to do stand-up monologues. In addition, he writes and acts sketches and reads 70 to 80 greetings and messages sent in by listeners. The messages range from birthday greetings and anniversaries to reminders to individuals to call home or meet a friend at a specific place.

Although the program is professional and entertaining, it is not slickly produced or fast-moving. Much of the monologue and dialogue is impromptu, Keillor said, and allows for creative spontaneity. It also contributes to the implied folksiness and regional, Midwest flavor.

Keillor, though, denies the program is intended to be regional. He

believes the pace and variety of entertainment has a universal appeal, and that, indeed, there are many Lake Wobegons throughout the country.

Long-Standing Interest

Although the idea for "A Prairie Home Companion" came while writing a piece for the *New Yorker* magazine about the Grand Ole Opry, Keillor has had a long-standing interest in entertainment radio. As a child, he listened to the many variety radio programs and local folk broadcasts. Several of his magazine articles are fictional pieces describing a pioneer Minnesota radio station.

Keillor has written one book, "Happy To Be Here," a collection of humorous prose pieces on subjects from softball to punk rock. He is currently writing a novel about Lake Wobegon.

A self-spoken man with an unmissable wit, he is interviewed on page M-8.

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Garrison Keillor (left) and Robin and Linda Williams perform in a live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion."

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Not Nostalgic But Current

Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon: 'The little town that time forgot'

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takable radio voice, Keillor seems genuinely unaware and unconcerned with the growing popularity of "A Prairie Home Companion." He doesn't think airing the show on commercial radio, or television would add anything to the successful formula, and if anything, it would be detrimental.

"I think we have pretty close to an ideal situation on public radio," he said. "We don't have commercial interruptions, and we get to make up our own commercials.

Thousands of Kitchens

"And I think our show would suffer from a jump to television. A lot of people cook while listening to our show, and you can't cook and watch television at the same time and enjoy it. Good television tends to drive out good cooking. Our show is heard in thousands of kitchens amongst fabulous aromas by people dizzy with pleasure at the prospect of dinner, for which we are a lead-in show. I'd hate to replace that happy gang with a bunch of people lined-up fac-

ing one way and eating Kraft or Stauffer's."

A self-proclaimed shy person, Keillor chose to be a radio announcer in college because of the anonymity.

"I liked radio just fine, even though I could hardly bear to be looked at when I was on the air. In time, I learned that the engineers looking at me from the control room didn't really care what I was saying, they only watched out of habit. As for performing in front of an audience, I usually forget the people are there and get caught up in the show. Even a shy person has to make himself do certain things, especially when money is at stake."

Call-To-Arms

Keillor once wrote a call-to-arms for "shy rights," a group which he believes is one of America's most discriminated-against. "Labeled by society as 'wimps,' 'dorks,' 'creeps,' and 'sissies,' stereotyped as Milque-toasts and Walter Mittys, and tagged as potential psychopaths ('He kept pretty much to himself,' every

psychopath's landlady is quoted as saying after the arrest, and for weeks thereafter every shy person is treated like a leper) we shys are de-sparately misunderstood on every hand."

In it, he calls for Shy History classes. "History books are blatantly prejudiced against shyness and shy personhood. They devote chapter after chapter to the accomplishments of famous persons and quote them at great length, and say nothing at all, or very little, about countless others who had very little to say, who never sought fame and whose names are lost to history."

"A Prairie Home Companion" won a Peabody Award for distinguished public service in broadcasting in 1981, in addition to several prestigious awards. The program has gone on several tours to the eastern United States and to other parts of the Midwest. Officials of the Utah Arts Festival are trying to convince Keillor to bring the show to next summer's exhibition, but Keillor said that no tours are scheduled for two years.