

ANNUSTOCK

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'Prairie Home Companion' celebrates 10th anniversary

ST. PAUL, Minn. (UPI) — On Saturday evenings a lanky cracker-barrel philosopher stands in an old theater, telling 3 million listeners about folks in his mythical home town of Lake Wobegon.

The philosopher and raconteur is Garrison Keillor, host of "A Prairie Home Companion," which began a decade ago on KSJN-FM before 12 people in an auditorium. The 10th anniversary show Saturday goes to 225 public radio stations, a theater audience of 1,000 and a crowd on the state capitol mall.

The show will be something special.

"We're going to have the Night-O-Rest Motel orchestra and chorus on the stage of the Orpheum," Keillor said. "It's going to be packed with people and yet somehow we're going to move around and dance a little bit."

Keillor said he's also written for the occasion what he considers, in all modesty, "the world's greatest song about fishing."

In the midst of the television era, Keillor, 42, has become one of the hot-

test broadcast items around.

At 5 p.m. CST each Saturday, Keillor opens his two-hour variety show of humor, witty poetry and music — from bluegrass to jazz to light opera — and make-believe ads like the one for Powdermilk biscuits, which "give shy people the power to get up and do what needs to be done."

His thoughts drift to Lake Wobegon, "the little town time forgot and the decades cannot improve... where the women are strong, the men good looking and the children above average."

Keillor, who is shy, soft-spoken and 6-foot-4, never mentions his own name on the show, but his fans send him 1,000 letters a week and they planned anniversary parties across the country Saturday.

In Bethel, Alaska, there's a potluck party and square dance. In Toledo, Ohio, people are invited to bring their musical instruments for a post-show jam session. A Seattle station plans a call-in party. A Montgomery, Ala., station will celebrate with a variety show

VFW to meet this weekend in Millinocket

The Department of Maine Veterans of Foreign Wars will hold its first meeting of the new administrative year Saturday and Sunday, July 7 and 8, in Millinocket. VFW and Auxiliary members representing 11 districts and 60 posts will come to Millinocket.

A series of meetings will be held over two days. Committee meetings will be held Saturday afternoon and evening.

in a shopping mall.

Some compare Keillor and Prairie Home to old-time live radio like Will Rogers and Fred Allen, but Keillor is an original. His mythical Lake Wobegon isn't on the map but it's famous. And the show has won the prestigious Peabody Award.

Prairie Home settled down in an old 1,000-seat vaudeville theater, "The World Theater, in beautiful downtown St. Paul," until plaster began falling this year. Now the show is using the nearby Orpheum until its home is renovated in a "Save the World" campaign.

Keillor opens each show singing softly:

"Well, look who's coming through the door,

"I think we've met somewhere before.

"Hello, love... ah... hello, love..."

He introduces poets and humorists and musicians of all persuasions. One guest even tapped out the William Tell Overture on his teeth.

In his monologue, Keillor talks for up to half an hour without script about news from Lake Wobegon — its laws, good points, disappointments, frustrations, happy times and humor, which are really our own.

"It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon," he starts.

He tells about the high school seniors drinking beer, smoking and talking about life in the spring class party at the gravel pit. Lutheran Pastor Jaggvist got stuck in his bathroom but was too concerned about his dignity to call for help.

The make-believe commercials are a seamless part of the show. Bertha's Kitty Boutique encourages cat ranching, the Fearmonger Shop serves paranoias and offers a safety toilet seat a yard high to keep them out of the reach of snakes, the Chatterbox Cafe serves "a strawberry cream pie that makes grown men cry and lose all ambition in life."

There's Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("if you can't find it at Ralph's, you probably can get along without it"), and Bob's Bank, which says, "Never a borrower or lender be — Save at the sign of the sock."

Keillor was born in Anoka, Minn., into a fundamentalist churchgoing family.

He wanted to be a writer so he went to the University of Minnesota, where he worked for the school radio station. He joined Minnesota Public Radio in 1968 and in 1970 he also began writing pieces for New Yorker magazine.

He went to Nashville, Tenn., in 1974 to write about the Grand Ole Opry, was

fascinated by the "liveness," and proposed a variety show on KSJN-FM in St. Paul. The boss said, "Do it."

Keillor went on the air live July 6, 1974. The first guests included jazz pianist Bulch Thompson and tenor Vern Sutton, still regulars.

"You could hear lots of footsteps then," Keillor said. There was so little applause, "you could hear people retreating offstage."

The show began catching on in the late 1970s. In 1979, the show was carried on National Public Radio's Folk Festival USA. Two months later Minnesota Public Radio began distributing the show to 30 public radio stations. Within a month it was 60. By year's end it was 192.

Minnesota Public Radio and stations in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cincinnati and New York formed American

Public Radio to distribute national programs, including Prairie Home.

The show today is broadcast from Alaska to Florida, New York to Los Angeles — with an audience counted in the millions waiting for the news from Lake Wobegon.

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