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Lake Wobegon: a decade of fun

'Little town that time forgot' gearing up for anniversary celebration

By TED QUANRUD
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LAKE WOBEGON, Minn. — Walking down the street of this sleepy Minnesota community, the casual visitor will find such establishments as the Chatterbox Cafe, Skoglund's Five and Dime, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, Ralph's Good Grocery and the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibilities.

He may encounter notable residents like Hjalmer Ingqvist, president of the Powdermilk Biscuit Co., Dr. Newt and Mrs. Marva Newt, editor Harold Starr of the Lake Wobegon Herald Star, Senator Knute Thorvaldson.

AND GARRISON Keillor.

In truth, Keillor is Lake Wobegon. Not the mayor or the most influential citizen, but the town itself — "the little town that time forgot, that for decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, the men good-looking, and all the children are above average."

Everything about Lake Wobegon comes from Keillor's overactive imagination, or say he says.

Actually, Keillor says, "There is no town in Minnesota named Lake Wobegon that I could show you, at least I'm not aware of one. But I would also have a hard time showing you the Ninth Federal Reserve District, the Archdiocese of St. Paul, the Big Ten or the upper middle class."

But anyone can visit Lake Wobegon, by turning to "A Prairie Home Companion," heard nationwide on public radio. The show is live, and can be heard from 5 p.m.-8:30 p.m. Saturday on Prairie Public Radio, 90.5 FM in Bismarck and 89.5 in Dickinson.

This Saturday, the program promises to be extra special. "A Prairie Home Companion" is 10 years old, and Minnesota Public Radio, producers of the show, report the show's regulars, a number of special guests and "lots of celebrating" is being programmed.

The "regulars" include The Butch Thompson Trio, a jazz ensemble specializing in "old-time" jazz; Stevie Beck, "the Queen of the Autoharp," and the bluegrass band "Stoney Lonesome."

GUESTS RANGE from world-famous performers like guitarist Chet Atkins and folksinger John Hartford to obscure balalaika ensembles and balladeers.

Interspersed between the musical selections are Keillor's monologues about life in Lake Wobegon. Some are his own words. Sometimes they're people the strength to get up and do what needs doing," and occasional satires and skits.

A noted journalist and freelance writer, Keillor got the idea for Prairie Home Companion while researching a story on Nashville's Grand Ole Opry for "The New Yorker" magazine. Returning to Minnesota Public Radio, where he hosted a morning show, Keillor bounced the idea off the powers that be, and two months later, "A Prairie Home Companion" was born.

Things were slow at first, and the performers often outnumbered the audience. But the word spread, and 10 years later, tickets to the live presentations are harder to get than tickets to a Minnesota Twins game, although that's not saying much. The radio show draws an estimated 2 million listeners nationwide.

THE SHOW has had several homes in its 10-year tenure, but the most famous is the dilapidated, decrepit World Theater in downtown St. Paul. Unfortunately, the theater has been declared a hazard, as falling plaster was a constant peril for the audience. Backers are hoping money raised from the anniversary festivities will restore the theater.

Keillor since has given up his morning program, and is devoting more time to writing, including a forthcoming book about Lake Wobegon. His first book — "Happy to be Here" was a bestseller in hardbound, and is soon to be released in paperback.

Garrison Keillor, the creator and host of A Prairie Home Companion, ponders more adventures in beautiful Lake Woebegon.

Folksingers Robin and Linda Williams strum another song on A Prairie Home Companion.

A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION 10th ANNIVERSARY

Photographs courtesy of Minnesota Public Radio

Joining Garrison Keillor, left, are Prairie Home Companion regulars Greg Brown, Peter Ostoushko and Vern Sutton for The Department of Folksong.

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