

**WEEKENDER**

**Daily Press**  
Friday, July 6, 1984 — Page 27

# Garrison Keillor

*Celebrating his 10th anniversary with 'A Prairie Home Companion'*

By JORY FARR  
Staff Writer

If you're tired of the hurly-burly of the metropolis but fear that your mind would turn to cream cheese in the quietude of small-town U.S.A., then Lake Wobegon, Minn., may be just the place for you.

No doubt you've heard something about the town "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average," if you've been tuning into National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion."

This Saturday, the show, heard locally at 6 p.m. on WHRO-FM (88.5), will celebrate its 10th anniversary.

Lake Wobegon sounds like your everyday, run-of-the-mill small town, until you learn about places like Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it") and Bob's Bank, an eccentric institution whose motto is "Neither a borrower or a lender be."

Even the show's prime sponsors are a little strange — such as Powdermilk Biscuits ("The biscuits that give a shy person the nerve to get up and do what has to be done") and Bertha's Kitty Boutique, just one step short of cat heaven.

But don't be fooled; there's plenty of culture in Lake Wobegon, too. At Jack's School of Thought (originally Jack's Auto Repair but now a multi-million dollar conglomerate), citizens can enroll in a course specially designed for "the rehabilitation of the over-educated."

And when things get slow, there's always the Mist County Historical Society Museum, where the controversial Wobegon Runestone is on display. "Eight of us stopped & stayed awhile to visit & have coffee & short nap. Sorry you weren't there. Well, that's about it for now," the inscription reads. The ruin is widely accepted as genuine; still, many town residents have wondered just how interesting this monument really is.

While countless fans have sought out the comfort of Lake Wobegon, such searches always meet with disappointment. There are no coordinates in space and time for this little kingdom. Such fabled characters as Father Emil, priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, and Bertha, owner of Bertha's Kitty Boutique, may live and breathe — but only for two hours at a time, in the fertile mind of Garrison Keillor, the show's creator and master of ceremonies.

Fashioning illusions and making people laugh is nothing new for the tall, bearded Minnesotan, who wrote humorous essays for New Yorker and a place called Lake Wobegon as far back as the 1960s.

But "A Prairie Home Companion," a lazy, old-time show that splices droll, folk humor and whimsical stories with live music ranging from bluegrass fiddling to New Orleans jazz, is Keillor's masterpiece. And though the show tends to meander at times, leaving listeners groping for punch



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Garrison Keillor  
... creator of "Prairie Home"

Keillor dreamed up Lake Wobegon, the town showcased on his public radio show.

AP photo

# Keillor

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lines, the program has grown steadily more popular.

Since its beginning, the show hasn't changed much, except that Lake Wobegon has become more real in the minds of listeners, and the show has added more musical entertainment. Keillor still delivers the news from Lake Wobegon for up to 30 minutes, working only with a sketchy script. "If I read it and made a mistake, people would know instantly," he says.

His voice is still a cozy, molasses-smooth instrument that has been described as "sexy" by more than a few female listeners.

But nowadays, "A Prairie Home Companion" goes out over 235 stations to an estimated 3 million listeners — a far cry from the times when the show was broadcast live from a 440-seat theater in St. Paul where 20 to 30 people showed up.

What's more, the program — now broadcast from the old World Theater in downtown St. Paul — has brought Minnesota much fame and turned the Minnesota Public Radio into something of a direct competitor with National Public Radio. In short, Keillor's show has become a huge cult success.

All the notoriety has left Keillor, who says he is painfully shy (he founded the Shy Liberation Movement) a bit befuddled, albeit delighted. The recipient of more than 100 letters a day, he knows that boatloads of folks listen to his campy, twisting stories. But he is quick to point out that people often misinterpret the meaning of the program.

So recently he and a few members of his crew held a radio press conference for the benefit of member stations who might want to know more about the show and its creator. What follows are some facts and bits of trivia that Lake Wobegon admirers should know. A warning, however: Like all information about the strange town that time forgot, this should be taken with a grain of salt.

**Q: Why don't they sell dogs at Bertha's Kitty Boutique?**

GK: Well, dogs are common, nothing you'd have to charge for. You only need to go to the lower end of town to know that. But the kinds of cats Bertha sells are rare. Even Bertha's cemetery only allows cats."

**Q: Any thoughts about how**



Keillor (center) clowns onstage with some of his guests on "A Prairie Home Companion."

the show might evolve in the coming years?

GK: No, I don't have any idea.

**Q: What do you normally eat for breakfast?**

GK: A little whole wheat toast holds me most of the time.

**Q: What is the secret ingredient of Powdermilk Biscuits?**

GK: Mostly the whole wheat grown by Norwegian bachelor farmers. There's also some of the wheat stalk in the recipe, and a little dirt, too.

**Q: What's the role of religion in your life?**

GK: I go every Sunday.

**Q: What's the status of the Shy Liberation Movement?**

GK: Well, the Shy Liberation movement is about where it's always been: In a state of waiting quietly in the back shadows for someone to step forward and take charge. Which probably isn't going to be any one of us here. So if you are volunteering to be a national executive director, someone who is willing to be contacted by the press, then you should speak up and say so now.

**Q: What do you think has contributed most to the show's success and longevity?**

GK: Well, we do the show

with lots of extra extension cords on hand and a good number of male and female adaptors.

**Q: What kind of beer do they serve at the Sidetrack Tap in Lake Wobegon?**

GK: They serve all the Minnesota beers. There's Iron Range beer, which is made from the copper-colored waters up there in the iron country. One bottle would be the minimum annual adult requirement for iron, practically. There's also a new beer they've gotten in — although I don't so much care for it. It's called Greenwald Mentholated Light. It's greenish, and some people have had it there because the light is dim.

But I don't like it much.

**Q: What do you have planned for the 10th Anniversary Show?**

GK: I'm still working on it downstairs. But early this morning I did write what I consider to be — and I say this with all modesty — the world's greatest song about fishing. So that'll be in the show. There'll be a medley of great tunes, and somehow we'll be able to move and dance a bit onstage with the Night Arrest Motel Orchestra and Dancers. It's going to be a great show. I think it's safe to say that this will be the greatest show in the history of radio."

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