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Listeners Across The Land To Salute Lake Wobegon

By DAN BONWELL

"A Prairie Home Companion," the creation of Garrison Keillor, celebrates 10 years of "homespun humor and eclectic musical performances" from 5 to 7 tonight on WIAN-FM (90.1) in an anniversary program from its home at the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn.

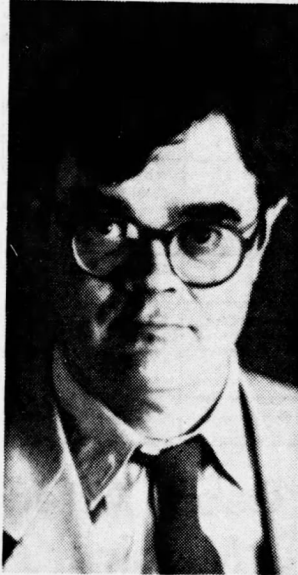
Listeners of 235 radio stations across America will celebrate with potluck suppers, ice cream socials, barbecues and special broadcasts at their local public radio stations.

Accordingly, WIAN-FM, which has broadcast the show in Indianapolis since 1981, has its own activities planned. "We have two local hosts (Andy Zehner and Jim Walsh) for the hour before and the hour after the normal 5 to 7 p.m. broadcast," said Karen Bower, WIAN's community relations director. "We will broadcast excerpts from taped programs over the past 10 years and discuss how listeners may obtain souvenirs from Lake Wobegon," she explained.

Lake Wobegon (pronounced woe-begone) is the mythical Minnesota town that is the setting for "A Prairie Home Companion." The anniversary show will include songs of Lake Wobegon and pay tribute to memorable moments in broadcasts between 1974 and 1984.

From its premiere on July 6, 1974, at Macalester College in Minnesota, the program has incorporated a live audience and, by demand, has frequently toured the country in special shows away from the Minnesota shores.

Weekly fans, estimated at more than 2 million, are more than familiar with Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot, and the decades cannot improve." They know Bob's Bank, the Chatterbox Cafe, Skoglund's Five and Dime and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery.



Garrison Keillor

Like the radio show, the town stems from the imagination of 42-year-old Keillor. A native of Minnesota, he began his radio career at the University of Minnesota, from which he graduated in 1966. He also has written articles for the New Yorker; a book, "Happy to Be Here," and has appeared on "The David Letterman Show" and ABC's "Nightline."

His latest project is a book about Lake Wobegon. He describes it as "a collection of pieces trying to make itself into a novel."

"I'm supposed to turn in the manuscript in August," he said by phone from St. Paul, "and by then I think it will be a whole book. The book will contain much on the early history of the town."

Due to the large number of in-

quiries, the American Automobile Association (AAA) lists Lake Wobegon in its Travelers Guide to the Midwest. The listing is not on the map itself, but in a detailed paragraph about the mythical town.

"The people of Lake Wobegon do not rate strangers very highly," Garrison relates, "probably because it is difficult to find and if you see a stranger in town, you can safely assume they are probably lost."

A wide repertoire of music — anything from jazz to Russian folk — and Keillor's down-home, creative storytelling highlight every two-hour show. Listener's ideas also are incorporated as Garrison often reads the program's mail on the air.

The Butch Thompson Trio, the Companion's house band since 1981, plays the music, and other entertainers include folk musicians Robin and Linda Williams and the bluegrass tunes of Stoney Lonesome.

"The variety of the show has much appeal," Keillor said. "There is jazz and old jazz, bluegrass, Scandinavian dance bands and more."

Though Keillor's storytelling breathes life into Lake Wobegon, he ironically declares: "I don't think I know how to tell stories yet. My problem is that I have to tell a different one every week and I really don't think you learn to tell a story well until you have told it 10 to 12 times.

"Most of my elderly relations I would listen to as a kid would tell stories over and over again. Most of them would have 3 or 4 good tales in their repertoire. Eventually, they would get them polished like a professional."

Keillor's imagination and humor is the key to the success of "A Prairie Home Companion." How real is Lake Wobegon? "I once dreamed that I drove over a hill in central Minnesota and found it," he said.