

# Sunday Travel

section **E**

The Sunday Star-Bulletin & Advertiser

© by Honolulu Advertiser, Inc. All rights reserved.

Prepared by the staff of the Honolulu Advertiser

October 7, 1984

## You can watch 'A Prairie Home Companion'

By Carla K. Johnson  
Special to the Advertiser

**ST. PAUL, Minn.** — It's difficult enough trying to explain why you plan each Saturday evening around a two-hour radio show. But tell someone who lives here that you traveled hundreds of miles to watch "A Prairie Home Companion" and they may laugh in disbelief.

The show, produced here by Minnesota Public Radio, is performed before a live audience of 1,600 fans, mostly from Minnesota. But there are usually several hundred from faraway places like Boston, L.A. and Honolulu, according to Nina Thorsen, the show's box office manager. That number is growing, and St. Paul is still awed by its newest tourist attraction.

For the special 10th anniversary show this past summer, the faithful included a group of doctors who drove from Georgia in a motorhome and a couple of magicians from Dallas who spent the day making "balloon animals" for children.

Why do they come? For the same reason they wouldn't miss the show each week. For some, it brings back memories of the good old days before television. Others simply find the mix of humor, folk music, subversion and nostalgia irresistible. To me, it's the spiritual equivalent of going to church.

Creator-host Garrison Keillor writes funny commercials for the show's fanciful sponsors, including Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Bertha's Kitty Biscuits and Powdermilk Biscuits with that whole-wheat goodness that gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done.

Keillor also reads the news from fictional Lake Wobegon, Minn., "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above-average." If "Prairie Home Companion" is a church service, the cozy wisdom from Lake Wobegon is the sermon.

Each week "A Prairie Home Companion" travels on the public airwaves from St. Paul's Orpheum Theater to the ears of 2 million listeners, making



Garrison Keillor (center) creator — host of Minnesota Public Radio's popular show, "A Prairie Home Companion," glances at his notes as he listens to Butch Thompson, a PHC regular, play the piano.

it one of the most popular public radio programs. Honolulu listeners can hear "Prairie Home" each Saturday between 6 and 8 p.m. on public radio station KHPR-FM 88.1.

For me, the question "Do I want to see 'A Prairie Home Companion'" had important implications. I had a clear picture of the show in my mind. What would happen to that picture once I had really seen the show? Could I go back to the way I imagined it while I cooked dinner in my kitchen? Did I want to know if Garrison Keillor uses notes when he does the news? Did I want to see what the Butch Thompson Trio looks like?

On the other hand, if "Prairie Home" becomes so popular that it is spirited away by network television, the art of really listening may vanish forever and fans will have to go to Burbank, Calif., to be in the audience. I decided to come to St. Paul while I could.

Since a love of "Prairie Home" runs in my family, I organized a reunion. We ordered 12 tickets from Minnesota Public Radio (allow six

weeks) and got a family discount at downtown St. Paul's Radisson Hotel (ask for the half-price "Metroland Family Special").

There is plenty to do here. We created our own "Prairie Home" tour starting with a visit to Minnesota Public Radio, which sets an example for public radio stations across the country by actually making money. Its offices include a recording studio, a state news service, and record library. Minnesota's Norwegian influence was evident on a bumper sticker we saw in the "Prairie Home" office: "When lutefisk is outlawed only outlaws will have lutefisk." Powdermilk Biscuit T-shirts are sold in the lobby.

Our tour was complete with a walk past the Orpheum Theater and the World Theater. "Prairie Home's" permanent residence now under renovation.

On Saturday, we arrived at the theater a half hour early to watch the crowd. A young man selling "Outlines" bagels at a stand outside the theater had a radio with him so he

could hear the show. There were people looking for tickets. One fan carried a sign. "Just in from Chicago. 2-4 tickets needed." She found someone with extra tickets and paid face value, \$5. Then she passed her sign to someone else who needed tickets.

He found tickets and passed the sign again. We went inside.

In the lobby was a table with cards on it where people scrawled messages to be read during the show. Of the hundreds of messages about 70 would be chosen at random.

### WHILE YOU'RE IN TOWN

- Also to see and do in St. Paul-Minneapolis:
    - Science Museum of Minnesota, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul. Hands-on science exhibits and Omnitheater showing films on a huge domed screen.
    - Minnesota Zoo, (35W south to Highway 13, follow the signs). Year-round, all-weather monorail rides, and cross-country skiing in winter.
    - Guthrie Theater, Vine-land Place, Minneapolis. Tony-Award-winning regional theater. (Advance tickets recommended. Call 612-377-2224.)
    - Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2400 Third Ave. S., Minneapolis. Permanent collection and touring exhibits.
    - State Capitol Building, St. Paul. Free 45-minute tours daily.
    - Minneapolis parks. Rent roller skates and "skate the lakes." Seven of the city's lakes are connected by separate paths for walkers and skaters.
- For more information on touring Minnesota write the Minnesota Office of Tourism, 240 Bremer Building, 419 N. Robert, St. Paul, Minn. 55101. Or call 1-800-328-1461.

although Garrison Keillor gives preference to "funny messages, to Happy Birthdays to very old people, and to serious messages such as 'I'll be on flight 79 at 5:20 p.m. Sunday — not flight 151 as I told you in the letter.'" He has said, "That's the sort of message public radio has an obligation to carry."

As Keillor warmed up the audience minutes before the show (dressed as usual in a white suit and red tie), he apologized that the air conditioning had broken down and would not be fixed. "It's on the National Register of Historic Air Conditioners so it can't be touched," he said. "If you do get too uncomfortable see Nina out in the lobby for a refund."

With 30 seconds to air time, Keillor asked if there was time for a sound check on the audience. We applauded. "That's OK. We can always crank up the volume." Then the familiar Minnesota Public Radio theme, then Butch Thompson played the intro to "Hello Love," then well, you probably heard the rest yourself.

It was a good show. We enjoyed being there. It was interesting to watch the silent signals that make the program run smoothly. Keillor uses a script propped on a music stand, but he only glances at it occasionally. When he says, "Why don't you come on up here and do a song for us?" the performers are already at their places before the microphones. I could go on, but I don't want to ruin it for you. When I get home and listen to the show in my kitchen, I'm going to go back to the way I first imagined it.

One footnote: If you do decide to come to St. Paul to see the show, and if you should go to a Mexican restaurant called Boca Chica afterward, and if Garrison Keillor should walk in and sit down for dinner, just remember as you gather strength to get up and do what needs to be done that he is a shy person. You be kind to him as you ask him for his autograph.

To order tickets to "A Prairie Home Companion," write Minnesota Public Radio, 45 East Eighth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55101. Or call (612) 221-1500. Order at least six weeks in advance.