

## Keillor understood laughter is like tears

By ANN GRAUVOGL

Argus Leader Staff  
Today won't be a quiet day in Lake Wobegon.

The town that time forgot will lose its most famous child when the final episode of *A Prairie Home Companion* airs at 5 p.m. today. As Garrison Keillor slips back into the quiet life of a shy person, 4 million listeners will be on hand to say goodbye.

From chic Georgetown condominiums to rustic Montana cabins, fans will gather around radios in tribute to Keillor's gentle appreciation of the everyday absurd. From the time he opens with the familiar strains of *Hello Love* on through the day's happenings in Lake Wobegon and finally to goodnight, Keillor will woo and win 8 million ears.

The show can be heard locally on Sioux Falls KRSD-FM at 88.1, Vermillion's KUSD-FM at 88.7, or Brookings' KESD-FM at 88.3. The show will be followed by a retrospective on South Dakota Public Radio.

Those who make a habit of analyzing everything will have one last chance to consider what it is that makes Keillor so successful. After 13 years on the radio, the man who brings Boy Scouts, church and ice caps for cats into the modern living room has been compared to Mark Twain, James Thurber, E.B. White, William Faulkner, Sinclair Lewis, Henry David Thoreau and Will Rogers.

Keillor has a wonderful sense of incongruity, speech rhythm and local color, says Bill Geyer, an English professor at Augustana College. Those are the elements from which American humor always springs.

Geyer compares Keillor to the humorists of the Old Southwest including George Washington Harris and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet. Keillor, like his predecessors, enters the rhythm of the speech and the thoughts of those he talks about, Geyer says. That gives his stories authenticity.

A good humorist can create a world that people enter easily, says Ruth Alexander, chairwoman of the South Dakota State University English department. Keillor created Lake Wobegon as Faulkner did Yoknapatawpha County or Twain the Mississippi River country.

Lake Wobegon becomes real, she says. "You see yourself and people that you know." Keillor's humor works because listeners can laugh with the characters as well as at them.

Alexander has no qualms about calling Keillor a genius. She offers

Keillor/See 7A



## So long, 'Companion'

### Don't touch that dial — other shows ready to fill gap

By KELLY P. KISSEL

The Associated Press  
HARLESTON, W.Va. —

The departure of Garrison Keillor will create a void in public broadcasting, but producers and distributors of other shows hope *Prairie Home Companion's* 4 million listeners will leave their radios on.

A half-dozen programs, four of which already are in production, are looking for the audiences that have been listening to Minnesota Public Radio's *Prairie Home Companion* Saturday evenings since 1980.

"Some people won't listen to radio anymore, but some will listen to the other shows and discover that radio is wonderful," said

Dean Boal of National Public Radio, which distributes *Mountain Stage*, *Our Front Porch*, *Flea Market* and *Whad'ya Know?*

"I mean no ill will toward Minnesota Public Radio, but Garrison's leaving does open new opportunities for everyone in broadcasting," Boal said.

Keillor, who became public radio's one true star after publishing a best-selling book about his fictional Lake Wobegon and appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine, has decided to leave *Prairie Home Companion* after 13 years and move to his wife's native Denmark.

Boal and the producers of programs similar to *Prairie Home Companion* know they will not fill

Keillor's shoes and aren't that willing to try, either.

"Whoever has to be after Garrison Keillor is not necessarily in a happy position," Boal said.

Stuart Rosenberg, the producer and host of *Flea Market*, said "If you confront people with something in the place of something they love, they may stay away from it."

"We don't have a high-falutin' goal of being the top program," said *Mountain Stage* producer Andy Ridenour in Charleston.

"What we're trying to do is provide an opportunity for performers and audience to get together in the medium in which we work."

National Public Radio began distributing *Mountain Stage* last June

and, at two hours and before a live audience, it is the closest of the NPR offerings to *Prairie Home Companion*, which is distributed by the rival American Public Radio network.

Ridenour plays down any similarities — "Radio variety shows did not begin with *Prairie Home Companion* — but he said some of his program's 87 stations are moving the show to better times in an apparent attempt to get some of the audience.

WCPN in Cleveland, for example, will begin carrying *Mountain Stage* at 6 p.m. Saturday — the same time slot in which it carried *Prairie Home Companion* for the

Replacements/See 7A

Ann  
Grauvogl

## We will miss our shy guy

I agree with Wally, the bartender down at the Sidetrack Tap.

Garrison Keillor, host of *A Prairie Home Companion*, is making a big mistake by going away. At least he's leaving a big hole in 4 million Saturday nights.

If that makes me conservative or a little too eager to hang on to what I've got, well I can't help it. After all, I'm a German Catholic, reared well in my own church of perpetual responsibility. As anyone who's listened to Keillor

knows, we don't like to change. **WHAT WILL BECOME** of Saturday nights now? Who will tell the stories about those folk we've all known for years? Who will understand that to be Midwestern might be OK despite, or maybe because of, all the emotional baggage that comes with the territory?

Saturday night without Keillor will be like *Linus* without a blanket: A certain amount of security will be missing. When *Hello Love* began on the radio, we knew everything was right with the world — or at least a piece of it.

Who cared from 5 to 7 on Saturday nights whether this year's hemlines would go up or down? Who needed to worry about a new car or painting the house? The self-imposed intricacies of surviving in modern America seemed less important as we laughed at lessons in talking Minnesota or learned that cats can be paranoid, too.

KEILLOR GAVE my family a quiet place in a busy week. Twenty minutes in Lake Wobegon was an excuse to ignore the supper that needed to be cooked or the walk that needed to be shoveled. Even my husband, who learned well that sitting is akin to sin, sat and listened.

We don't have many of those times in 1987. Father Jim Doyle tries to create that kind of peace during the hour he lures us into St. Michael's Catholic Church every weekend. The difference was that even the kids didn't wiggle during Keillor's sermons.

Who else will recognize the absurd possibilities in everyday life? Who else will let us laugh gently at ourselves?

Who else can we count on to be there every Saturday, every week, every year?

So yes, I agree with Wally. I know Keillor, who's now 44, deserves a break. I know shy people can't be public people forever. I know we can all read his books. I even know Neah Adams, a fine public radio announcer, will do a good job with whatever he decides to create.

BUT I KNOW KEILLOR'S making a mistake. What is he, a regular guy from Minnesota, going to do overseas for heaven's sake?

He could wish he was back at the Sidetrack Tap before the summer is out.

I know if he wants to change his mind, a lot of us will be ready to let him visit again.

**BEST BET** for the weekend: The last *Prairie Home* show airs at 5 tonight on Sioux Falls KRSD-FM at 88.1, Vermillion's KUSD-FM at 88.7, or Brookings' KESD-FM at 88.3. South Dakota Public Radio will air a *Prairie Home* retrospective following the show.

Ann Grauvogl is an Argus Leader columnist.

## Keillor

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his version of the Christmas journey of the Magi as evidence: Anyone who figures out that the names of the sheep at the crib are Surely, Goodness and Mercy is a genius.

Among her favorites was the story of the boy who tries to make out with his girlfriend. He gets no further than putting his arm around her shoulders when they're discovered by her father. With the discovery, the boy knew his reputation was made.

The story, like many of Keillor's, is poignant, Alexander says. It captures the youthful need for love and society's condemnation of the quest. "Laughter is very close to tears," she says. Keillor understands that well.

Alexander doesn't know whether people will still laugh at Keillor's stories in 60 or 70 years, but this generation has responded.

Kate Arneson, an English professor at Augustana College, teaches Keillor in her freshman composition class. Her students can relate to Keillor's intense honesty and his insecurities, she says.

## Replacements

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past 2½ years.

Dave Kanzeg, WCPN program director, said he picked *Mountain Stage* over *Prairie Home* repeats because of its sharper contrasts between segments. Hardcore bluegrass is often followed by jazz, and Robert Fripp of King Crimson once appeared on the show with "The League of Crafty Guitarists" — 18 students from his music school in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle.

Chris Langer, Minnesota Public Radio's promotions director, said an average of 3½ million to 4 million people tune in for *Prairie Home Companion* each week.

Keillor speaks for the people of the Upper Midwest, she says. He's critical of the heritage that often leaves Midwesterners too careful, yet he lets his listeners know that they can count on the German Catholics and Scandinavian Lutherans to do the right thing and be responsible.

For Don Rainbow, director of the Center for Performing Arts at Sioux Falls College, listening to *Prairie Home* seems like a trip back to Anoka, a town of 15,000 near Minneapolis. Keillor was graduated from Anoka High School in 1960, Rainbow in 1961.

What Rainbow has learned along with 4 million others is that the Lake Wobegon and its people are everyone's. Keillor's gift is to play on the little idiosyncrasies — the Catholic statues or the oval relish dishes — to create a world that goes beyond quaint.

Rainbow, like many, hopes the end of radio will give Keillor time to write: "It remains for us to see what his very best work will be."

A new Minnesota Public Radio show is in the works and features Noah Adams, formerly of National Public Radio. The new show, as yet untitled, will begin airing weekly in January.

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