

'Prairie Home' listeners lose a Saturday night companion

By Keith Graham
Staff Writer

Sometime between 6 and 8 p.m. Saturday, Garrison Keillor will step up to a microphone and say in his hushed baritone, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my hometown."

But if last week in the imaginary hamlet of 942 souls was quiet, the weeks ahead will be even quieter. After this live broadcast, Garrison Keillor and his 13-year-old "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show are calling it quits.

"What am I going to do on Saturday nights now?" moaned Atlanta's Karen

Wolfson, 45, who three years ago won a "Prairie Home" trivia contest for a free trip to the 10th anniversary performance in St. Paul, Minn.

"It's like losing another piece of my youth," agreed Newnan's David Boyd, 48, who felt he was reliving "those good old growing-up days in an era that's passed" whenever he listened.

Maybe you'd have to be one of the more than 3 million regular listeners on nearly 280 public radio stations each week to understand those sentiments. But the anything-but-slick, two-hour variety

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program named for a cemetery in Moorhead, Minn., never was intended for everyone.

"It's not the kind of thing you'd come up with if you did market research," explained Georgia-born humorist Roy Blount Jr., who plans to travel from his Manhattan home to make "some kind of token appearance" on the last program.

It is the kind of thing you'd come up with, however, if you were Keillor. A droll 44-year-old storyteller and writer often compared to Mark Twain, Keillor developed the concept for "A Prairie Home Companion" after visiting Nashville's Grand Ole Opry and has since described his creation as a throwback to the "tin-foil age."

Harking back to a time when radios had tubes and Jack Benny and Fred Allen were the biggest names in broadcast, "Prairie Home" regularly has offered a smorgasbord of music from Celtic to Cajun, blues to bluegrass. One week, Jean Redpath would sing Scottish ballads. Another week, Emmylou Harris would wail lonesome country tunes. And almost always, there were selections by the old-time jazzy Butch Thompson Trio.

In between the melodies came fake commercials for Bertha's Kitty Boutique and Powdermilk Biscuits, made from wheat grown by Norwegian bachelor farmers, and the quirky on-the-air greetings sent in by listeners. "Happy birthday to Laurie, but it's time you found a real job. . . . Happy anniversary to George in Hot Springs. It's been a wonderful, delightful six months, says Angie."

And, of course, always, there were those slow-paced, soothing Keillor monologues, "News from Lake Wobegon."

Keillor has turned down interviews of late, but he said on the May 30 show that one of life's great gifts is the ability "to notice other people."

Certainly, he had the ability to make others notice the folks in Lake Wobegon, a community in the best sense of the word. As regular Saturday night visitors came to



Garrison Keillor (left) rehearses for a taping of 'A Prairie Home Companion' with singers Linda and Robin Williams.

realize through Keillor's word pictures, the village is one where neighbors share sorrows and joys, know each other's foibles and frailties and still somehow manage to care about one another.

Keillor's strength was his knack for blessing the ordinary, taking common place occurrences and making them somehow seem more special, said Pat Royalty, who made pepper jelly and muscadine preserves for cast members when the show was broadcast from Atlanta last year.

He also "takes things that maybe we would be a little ashamed of and he makes them all right," she said. "They're just normal."

Making the mundane seem to matter, Keillor might talk about the tribulations of the almost always slumping Lake Wobegon Whippets baseball team or a farmer needing a new septic tank; the eagerness of small-town kids making their first trip to a

big city; the quiet, friendliness of the regulars sampling the tuna hotdish at the Chatterbox Cafe or shopping at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery. "Remember," he'd say, "if you can't get it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it."

As Blount put it, Keillor was "sort of out there in the ether musing," and other people were out there with him. "It's kind of an intimate thing," he said. "It's not somebody yelling in your face. It's somebody trying to sort things out and sorting things out in a graceful way."

A national phenomenon broadcast by satellite in the '80s from St. Paul's World Theater, "A Prairie Home Companion" evolved from a morning show Keillor was the host of on a Collegeville, Minn., station just after his 1968 graduation from the University of Minnesota.

It has played to sellout audiences since debuting in its present form in 1974. And,

in addition to the radio audience, viewers of pay-cable's Disney Channel have been able to see it weekly since March. Audience support, especially in recent years, has approached fanaticism.

Demands for tickets to the final show were so overwhelming that they had to be assigned by lottery.

With the show's success came fortune and fame for Keillor himself, who has in recent years authored two best-selling books ("Happy to Be Here" and "Lake Wobegon Days") and contributed stories to the New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly.

Tourists started showing up in Minnesota grocery stores asking to buy Powdermilk Biscuits and searching on their maps for Lake Wobegon. The closest they could come was Keillor's real-life hometown of Anoka, a Minneapolis suburb of 17,000. That's not very close, according to Peter Turok, executive director of the Anoka Area Chamber

of Commerce. About the only similarity between Keillor's fictional hometown and the real one is that both have Main streets, the chamber official said. Then, after a bit of reflection, he added, there is one other shared trait. In Anoka, too, "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

Keillor, who abruptly ended a long relationship to marry Ulla Skaerfeldt late in 1985, talked about leaving the show last year. Finally announcing his decision on the air, he said he was moving with his wife and her three children to her native Denmark. "I want to resume the life of a shy person and enjoy with my affectionate family a more peaceful life, a life in which there are Saturdays," he said. Denmark seemed "somewhat as I remember Lake Wobegon," and he wanted to devote his time to writing there.

In addition to humorist Blount, two other former Georgians — guitarists Chet Atkins and Leo Kottke — are slated to perform on the final show along with Hawaii's Kanehameha Glee Club and organist Philip Brunelle.

A replacement show, to be hosted by Noah Adams, formerly of "All Things Considered," is still in the early stages of development. It's not scheduled to be available for national airing until Jan. 9.

Atlanta's WABE-FM, which has been broadcasting "Prairie Home" locally, will consider picking up the new show, Station Manager Reva Eneff said. Remus of "Prairie Home" will be broadcast the next two weeks. July 4, the station will air science-fiction writer Orson Scott Card's tongue-in-cheek "Great Secular Humanist Revival." And in future weeks, the time slot will be filled with new-age music programs.

But, for many, life just won't be the same without visits to "the little town that time forgot and that the decades cannot improve."

"I think a lot of fans will suffer withdrawal symptoms," said Philip Brown, assistant director of education at Atlanta's Music Business Institute. "We'll have to talk to somebody."

The final live performance of "A Prairie Home Companion" airs at 6 p.m. Saturday on WABE-FM 90 radio and 9 p.m. on cable television's The Disney Channel.