



Free Press Photo by STEPHEN MEASE

Garrison Keillor, host of 'A Prairie Home Companion,' will end his live radio show Saturday after 13 years.

A Fond Farewell, From Us to Him

By STEPHEN MEASE
Free Press Features Editor

The decision to close is mine — the sort of simple, painful decision that our parents taught us to make cheerfully. It simply is time to go. 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. We want to live for a while in my wife's country of Denmark. I want to be a writer again. And it is time to stop.

Garrison Keillor, host and originator of "A Prairie Home Companion," stunned his audience on Valentine's Day with the message that his live weekly radio show, heard by millions, would end June 13.

I've been a fan of Keillor for about six years — well before his best-selling books and videos turned the media spotlight his way. Long before he made the cover of *Time* and became the rage of cocktail parties.

Most Saturdays, I'd just settle down on the couch to listen to the show. I liked the music, the ads for Bertha's Kitty Boutique and especially the news from the mythical town of Lake Wobegon.

Garrison Keillor had become a friend through his weekly visits to my house. I felt like I knew him. There was always an underlying strength and humor in his words about his neighbors and his personal struggles to overcome shyness.

Many times I felt like he was speaking directly to me, or about someone I knew. I've often wished for a Powdermilk Biscuit in order to have the strength to do what needed to be done in my life.

Keillor's accessibility on the radio was his great charm. And ultimately, I think, it was the factor that forced him to end the show and seek the anonymity of Denmark. Keillor's openness gave us the strength

three years ago to head backstage at the Orpheum Theater in St. Paul to meet him and ask for an autograph.

Seeing him perform live brought forth the same mood he evoked weekly over the radio. And here was the bonus getting to see him, dressed in his characteristic white suit and red tie, take hold of the silver microphone stand, lean forward just a bit, close his eyes and begin. "Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town."

Like the gracious host of his radio show, the offstage Keillor was equally friendly to those who sought him out after the show. Instead of a celebrity smile and brisk autograph, he reached out his hand and asked who we were and how we had come to Minnesota. Our brief conversation even revealed a mutual acquaintance.

Then he signed our Powdermilk Biscuit

Wobegon Sign-Off

By OLIN ROBISON

It was 3 a.m. in a cab in Washington, D.C., when the idea of bringing "A Prairie Home Companion" to Middlebury College first came up. It was the spring of 1982. I had just appeared on a late-night talk and was chatting with the college's public affairs officer about radio's ability to stimulate the imagination. We were soon talking of a program that had recently become available on Vermont Public Radio. It struck us both that the people described on the program were very much like our neighbors in Vermont and that the events and the setting were strangely familiar.

The call went out the next week. It arrived at Minnesota Public Radio during lunch, and Garrison Keillor picked up the phone. We invited him to come. He said that Middlebury was a nice place and that he would love to come.

A few months later, Lynne Cruise and Margaret Moos came to look over the setting and agreed that with some help from a computer, an acoustical engineer, and a truckload of equipment, they could probably do the show in Mead Chapel and get the signal out to the rest of the world.

Prairie Home had a devoted coterie of listeners, ranging from Supreme Court justices and country fiddlers to college professors and farmers. But locally there were still people who looked at you strangely when you explained that you didn't go out early on Saturday evenings because of a two-hour radio variety show set in an imaginary village in Minnesota.

The announcement was made: A Prairie Home Companion was coming to Middlebury College. There were a few hours of doubt, as there ought to be in such undertakings. What if our expectations were all wrong? We weren't worried for long. Within a

post card with these words:
To Steve and Cheri, With every good wish for a long and happy life, Garrison Keillor.

I didn't realize until later, as we talked about the power of his message to us and what it means now that he is leaving, that the essence of what he wanted for his own life was contained in those words to us.

All the requests, whether simply for an autograph or an elaborate television show, were ultimately too much to ask of this talented, shy man.

It would take a lot of nerve to selfishly deny him the peaceful life of a shy person just to satisfy our own needs to live in a simpler place and time.

So reluctantly we will listen as he says his farewell Saturday and bid him every good wish for a long and happy life.

Catch the Ending

When to listen or watch: "A Prairie Home Companion," heard by 4 million people weekly on 275 public radio stations, is aired Saturdays from 6 to 8 p.m. on Vermont Public Radio (WVPS 107.9 FM in Burlington and WVPR 89.5 FM in Windsor).

After Saturday's show, reruns from Garrison Keillor's early shows previously heard only in Minnesota will be aired through January.

On cable TV, the show can be seen Saturday on the Disney Channel from 9 to 10:30 p.m.

Souvenir program: "Minnesota Monthly," a regional magazine published by Minnesota Public Radio, is offering a

special "Farewell to 'A Prairie Home Companion'" issue which includes an interview with Keillor by Roy Blount Jr.; interviews with the show's guest stars; a sampler of skits, commentary and advertisements from the show; and essays of appreciation from fans. To order a copy, call 1-800-328-5252 (extension 243) or send a check or money order for \$5.95 per copy plus \$1.50 for postage and handling to: Farewell, P.O. Box 78870, Dept. 243, St. Paul, Minn. 55179.

Tapes available: Audio and video tapes of the last show will be available from Minnesota Public Radio. Audio cassettes will cost \$12.95 and videotapes from Walt Disney Home Video will be \$29.95.

This article by Olin Robison, president of Middlebury College, is reprinted from a special edition of "Minnesota Monthly's Farewell to 'A Prairie Home Companion.'" Others who wrote about their remembrances of the show included U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun, NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw and former Vice President Walter Mondale.

day, we needed extra phones to handle inquiries.

Tickets went on sale one day in March, and at 7 a.m. campus security called to ask if they could let into the building folks who had been waiting in line for hours. Some had slept in cars, and it was starting to snow. By 11 a.m., 2,500 tickets were gone.

Even with the tickets sold out, the calls continued. A minister threatened us with the wrath of God for denying him tickets by mail, and parents called to thank us for the tickets their children had bought for them.

The first week of May 1983, the crew and cast arrived quietly — or at least as quietly as 21 people, a load of telecommunications equipment, and a satellite uplink on a 30-foot flatbed can arrive.

We picked them up at the airport and took the "back way" to let them see the beauty of Vermont. By the time we got to Hadley House, the college's guest house, they were feeling at home. The college's chefs had grills filled with barbecued chicken and teriyaki steak, which would soon be celebrated in song and story.

For three days — as crews worked in the Chapel, as Stoney Lonesome worked in one apartment and the Butch Thompson Trio in another — Garrison's typewriter clicked away at the guest house. Margaret McArthur and her family began to arrive, as did the Famille Beaucodin, Applejack, and the Shape Note Choir.

It will be hard to forget Garrison's appearance on stage for the first show, a non-broadcast program on Friday. The applause from the 750 people in the Chapel was the explosion of anticipation realized — as though this were a reward for living properly and being patient.

There was a big party on Saturday after broadcast, and we got to sing with Garrison and Kate MacKenzie and Stoney Lonesome. But it was Sunday, following the third and final performance, that stays with us. We got a call from Margaret (Moos) that morning saying, "Come to our house for supper." Being well-mannered people, we offered to bring a hot dish — but they said that we had had them to dinner last time, and now it was their turn.

We arrived to find pizzas and coolers full of drinks. We stood in the kitchen, eating. The Stoney brought out their instruments and we began to sing and soon it was late; we had sung all evening, and a lot of us had held hands and realized what a special moment the past week had been.

We stood in the doorway, not wanting those magic days to end, and we sang one more song about seeing each other again.

*When you come to the end of an evening,
and it's time to call it a day,
everyone stand by the front door,
there's always one more thing to say*

The next morning, the trucks left, and we went back to being normal... but not quite. It was weeks before the spirit and the warmth of Garrison, Margaret, Lynne, Kate, Tom, Keith, Marge and Peter Ostrosouko, and a dozen more people from a not-so-imaginary place in the Upper Midwest left town. They had entertained us and stretched our imaginations and made us laugh. They had used technology of the 20th century that carries us beyond our planet to take us home again.