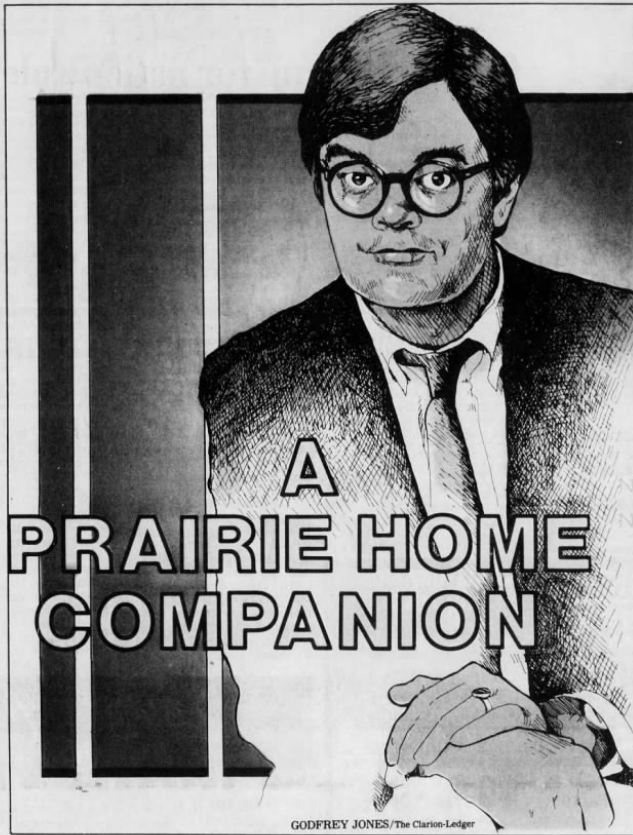


Goodbye, Garrison



GODFREY JONES/The Clarion-Ledger

Genial, giant gent giving up ghost of Lake Wobegon

Gannett News Service

ST. PAUL, MINN. — The news from Lake Wobegon is not good. Garrison Keillor is leaving. He's shutting down *A Prairie Home Companion*, and moving to Denmark.

On Feb. 14, speaking before a packed house inside the World Theater here where the show originates, he turned in his resignation to four million listeners. He said he was calling it quits so he could "resume the life of a shy person."

Keillor's resignation was not effective immediately. Shy people don't work that way. That's rash and impolite. Shy people take their time and mind their manners. So, he gave his listeners four months' notice. The *Prairie Home* finale is 5 to 7:30 p.m. Saturday on PRM.

Nearly a month after posting his going out of business sign, Keillor was working in his office at Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), which produces *Prairie Home*.

His clear, soft, resonant voice filled the room. Going at a measured, pause-filled pace, he talked about leaving the show.

"I'm not sure how well I can explain it," he says. "But since I'm the one going down the hall and out the door, it's probably of greater interest to me than it would be to any reader of yours."

Hogwash. Four million people listen to the show.

They'll miss the droll commercials Keillor writes for the show's made-up sponsors. Jack's Pretty Good Grocery, Bob's Bank, Bertha's Kitty Boutiques, the Side-Track Tap, the Fearmonger's Shoppe. "Serving all your phobia needs since 1954," and last but not least, "the biscuits that give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done — Powdermilk Biscuits. Heavens! They're tasty and expeditious!"

They'll also miss the guest list that over the years has included singers such as Emmylou Harris, Jean Redpath and Robin and Linda Williams, pickers like Leo Kottke, Jethro Burns and Chet Atkins, players like pianist Butch Thompson and the Queen City Brass, writers like Studs Terkel and assorted hog callers and wood carvers.

What they'll miss the most is the show's heart and soul, Keillor's monologue. After Saturday, there won't be any more news from his mythical hometown of 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."

A Prairie Home Companion ... going ... going ... gone. "I treasure the people in my audience," Keillor says. "They're the reason I do the show. I love to sit and write, but it would be much less of a pleasure to me if I weren't able to imagine an audience somewhere at the end of the writing process."

So why is he leaving them? "I went into radio out of extreme personal shyness," he says. "It was a way to talk to people without them looking at me. Radio is immensely private and intimate."

"Later on, I went up on a stage. It didn't seem all that much more public, because the audiences that have come to see the show have been so friendly."

"In the course of doing the show, I have had the contact — with lovely, funny, admirable people — that I craved as a child and a teenager."

"So, I value this audience. It has been a big part of my life for 13 years."

Somewhere there was a "but" coming. Keillor lowered his voice and whispered:

"But I've come to a point where I can go ahead with the show as an imitation of itself or I can stop."

Keillor took the latter option because he is a man of principle — and he's tired.

"It's very tiring doing a one-man show and that's what this has come down to. I book the acts. I construct the show. I

'Prairie Home' keeps local address

By LESLIE R. MYERS
Clarion-Ledger Staff Writer

The American Public Radio network will roll up the streets of Lake Wobegon, Minn., as *A Prairie Home Companion* airs its final live episode Saturday. But the hit show's homespun humor still will have a home in Mississippi.

For at least a year, until June 30, 1988, the state's eight PRM (Public Radio in Mississippi) stations will rebroadcast reruns of *Prairie Home* on Saturdays.

Fictitious Lake Wobegon is becoming a ghost town because the show's star and creator, Garrison Keillor, is moving to Denmark.

For 13 years, the live *Prairie Home* has originated at the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn. The award-winning variety show — which has an audience of four million — is produced by Minnesota Public Radio for 275 stations nationwide.

The Minnesota station is marketing a *Prairie Home* replacement to begin in January. The yet-untitled new show will star Noah Adams, commentator for National Public Radio's evening news show, *All Things Considered*.

Two national previews of Adams' show will be offered on Saturday, Oct. 24, and again on some Saturday in November — pre-empting *Prairie Home* reruns on the national network.

But the Mississippi network initially will keep its eggs in Keillor's basket, said Mike Morgan, PRM director of radio.

"It's tough to make a decision on something that doesn't exist," Morgan said. "We're in the dark." Few details on Adams' show have been released. The program has no name, no guest list, no cast and no plot.

"We assume it's going to be in the same flavor as *Prairie Home Companion*," Morgan said. "There are going to be some similar elements, we are told. But we're told it's not going to be (called) *Prairie Home Companion*."

"There will be essays, some poetry and a bit more contemporary style of music. But that's all they've said. We don't know what that means," Morgan said.

See PRM, 4D

See Keillor, 4D

Keillor

Genial, from 1D
write all of the Lake Wobegon material and almost all of everything else. It's exhausting."

William Kling, MPR's president, says Keillor left the show "on two other occasions. Each time he took a year off. Each time he came back recharged with a better idea."

"But," he hastened to add, "this is not to suggest he'll come back this time."

This time Keillor wants to get on with his life as a writer.

"I'm going back to what I always wanted to do before I got sidetracked with this show," he said. "This show jumped to mind one spring day in 1974. I was supporting myself as a free-lance writer, sitting and writing fiction for *The New Yorker* and doing fairly well at it, I was supporting my family. But I was looking for something to do to get out of the house and to do it with some musicians who were friends of mine."

As Margaret Moos, producer of *Prairie Home* from day one, puts it, "the show started as a hobby. It was just something to do on Saturday afternoons."

Ray Marklund, the show's photographer and original electrician ("They needed somebody to plug things in,"

members the first broadcast. It was July 6, 1974 "and there were 30 people in the audience."

The crowds increased, and, as Moos noted, "people took it more seriously as time went on."

That's putting it mildly. A *Prairie Home Companion* won a Peabody Award in 1982. Keillor won the Edward R. Murrow Award in 1985.

Then, big-name talent clamored to get on the show.

A photo from the night country songbird Emmylou Harris appeared on the show occupies a place of honor in Keillor's office.

"That's a picture of Miss Emmylou and an elderly gentleman," he says. "Abhh, singing with her was so wonderful. As we say in Minnesota, it was better than sex and almost as good as sweet corn."

Keillor likes to poke fun at his age. He's 44, but he makes like he's 144. He moves slowly and walks stiffly. He may not be as he says, "an elderly gentleman," but he's not spry either.

He walks like a man with a bad back. Or someone who has the weight of the world on his shoulders.

The past two years have been hectic as this card-carrying shy person became a national celebrity. His book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, shot to the top of

the best-seller lists. His face landed on the cover of *Time* magazine on Nov. 5, 1985.

"I'm very sensitive to being recognized by people. I don't mind it, but I'm always aware when they're doing it," he said.

"After a couple of years of it, you know it at a distance of 30 feet. You can just feel it. You can see the head turn, then the turn-away, the double-take, then the people lean toward each other and start whispering."

Shortly after making the cover of *Time*, Keillor landed on the gossip pages, announcing the end of his long-time love affair with his producer Moos.

In a scenario right out of one of his Lake Wobegon monologues, he said he was going to marry Ulla Skarvered, a woman he met at his high school reunion. They were schoolmates in the Minnesota town of Anoka when she was an exchange student from Denmark.

"The coverage was too much," Keillor says. "When we got back from the wedding, the St. Paul paper printed a picture of our new house, the address of the house and the purchase price, \$300,000. They also printed a story in which they had interviewed the neighbors on how they felt about having this famous person move in."

The whole thing made me angry, and I'm still angry. I have been living in this town for 17 years. People see me in the grocery store. It's not like I ride around in a limo. I walk to work."

They went far beyond what is established practice by a newspaper. Prince has lived in Minneapolis for many years and they have never done that to him."

"So, when that story appeared, it meant there was a limited time I could live in St. Paul. So, yeah, those stories have had some bearing in shutting down the show."

Keillor is leaving *Prairie Home* and

St. Paul for Denmark, "because I can go back to being a shy person there. All Americans are anonymous there. Johnny Carson is one of the most famous people in America, but nobody would recognize him in Denmark."

Once *Prairie Home* goes off the air and Keillor has his Saturday nights to himself, he plans to be one busy shy person. He has an album, a book and a movie to occupy his time.

Keillor cut an album of love songs with Chet Atkins "in Nashville in May of '88. Ever since then, they've been bagging with the record companies about who's going to release it."

Keillor also has a yen "to write a movie" based on *Lake Wobegon Days*.

"I've never described that town much on radio. It's in central Minnesota. It's on a lake and surrounded by farm country. But beyond that, I haven't said much about it."

"A movie would give you that landscape. Television would not. Television would make everything tiny."

Well, not everything. There's a certain lanky radio host, who looks very, very tall on the Disney Channel's broadcasts of the closing episodes of *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Putting this show on TV seems like a contradiction in terms. *Prairie Home* is radio. Great radio. It's music and words and images, mental images, not ones on a picture tube.

Television the show spoils the magic. It's like that scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Toto pulls the curtain aside and shows that the Wizard is not the omnipotent Oz, but just a regular guy with a big voice.

"I thought the show had come to the point where we should pull back the curtain," Keillor said.

"That might be good for the Wizard. Then, maybe instead of liking him as the Wizard, you could just like him for who he is."

PRM

Prairie, from 1D

He added that he liked Adams' reporting, interviewing and personal style on *All Things Considered*.

Like *Prairie Home*, Adams' show will be broadcast live for two hours from World Theater by Minnesota Public Radio for the American Public Radio network.

Morgan said PRM officials won't decide on whether to carry Adams' show regularly until "a couple of months after we hear a show or two. We hope there will be some audience programs before those national previews so we can make some decisions."

He said PRM probably will carry the two fall previews to gauge Mississippi audience reaction. He said *Prairie Home* seems to be one of PRM's most popular shows.

"I'm sorry to see it go as a live show,

"*Prairie Home Companion* seems to be very popular (in Mississippi) from all indications — letters, cards, phone calls... It's probably one of our most listened-to programs."

— Mike Morgan

although I think it has some longevity for us in archive repeats," Morgan said. "Quite frankly, *A Prairie Home Companion* is good radio. It works for us."

"The elements (in reruns) will still be there: The music, the humor, the wit of Garrison Keillor."

As Mississippi goes, so goes the nation. *Prairie Home Companion* seems to be very popular (in Mississippi) from all indications — letters, cards, phone calls," Morgan added. "It's probably one of our most listened-to programs."

Although *Prairie Home* broadcasts

won't be allowed to air *Prairie Home* at that time, even if it chooses not to subscribe to Adams' show, Morgan said.

Then, *Prairie Home* tentatively is set to air on PRM stations from 10 a.m. to noon Saturdays and in the same repeat slot on Sundays.

Morgan said, like live shows, reruns are fed to stations through the national network. Therefore, PRM only will have the option to offer reruns past June 1988 if the national network offers them.

Mississippi's eight PRM-FM stations are: WMAA in Jackson at 91.3 on the dial; WMAA in Mississippi State at 89.9; WMAE in Booneville at 89.5; WMAH in Biloxi at 89.3; WMAI in Greenwood at 90.9; WMAU in Bude at 89.9; WMAV in Oxford at 90.3; and WMAW in Meridian at 88.1. All PRM broadcasts originate from the Jackson station.

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