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Final Keillor show is an NPR milestone

Say "goodby" to Father Emil. "Farewell" to Clarence Bunson. "So long" to Dorothy of the Sidetrack Tap. "Later" to Jack.

Tonight, "A Prairie Home Companion" goes home for good.

Four months ago, Garrison Keillor, who created the celebrated public radio show 14 years ago, announced that he would leave the show, moving to Denmark with his new wife to concentrate on his writing and "resume the life of a shy person."

The last "Prairie Home Companion," an extended version of the show, airs at 6 tonight on NPR stations around the country — including WDET-FM (101.9) and Ypsilanti's WEMU-FM (89.1). (It also will be telecast on tape at 9 p.m. on the Disney cable channel.)



Keillor

Anyone who thinks it'll have less impact on listeners than the final episodes of "M*A*S*H" or "Hill Street Blues" had on viewers is mistaken. "I liken our loss of 'A Prairie Home Companion' to Bill Cosby walking away from NBC," said John Stark, program director at Las Vegas' KNPR-FM.

INDEED, KEILLOR'S show — which started in Minnesota and went national in 1980 — is often described as NPR's tent pole. It's easily the public network's most popular show, though not its best — that honor goes to "Morning Edition" or "All Things Considered."

Yet, some estimates say that 'Prairie' — which is distributed to 323 stations by the American Public Radio network at a cost of roughly \$17,000



Gary Graff
radio

per year — has been responsible for doubling NPR's listenership.

"It has shown the greatest numbers and the greatest fund-raising potential throughout the week," admitted WEMU program director Linda Yohn.

Added John Perry of WKSU-FM in Kent, Ohio: "The loss . . . is going to weaken us. I think that it's very similar to when Ford introduced the Edsel; it wasn't something that Ford couldn't survive, but it left them in a weakened state."

NOW NPR faces the challenge of replacing it and holding on to those listeners. At first it shouldn't be too difficult; 'Prairie' reruns begin next week with what Yohn called "the cream of the crop," including some shows that were taped but never aired.

Those will be broadcast in 'Prairie's' regular time slot. Early next year, however, they'll move to Sundays when former "All Things Considered" anchorman Noah Adams begins a new variety show based on — but not identical to — the 'Prairie' concept.

NPR stations, however, aren't necessarily going to accept the new show *carte blanche*.

"We hope to take it," said WEMU's Yohn. "We have to see how it compares to 'Our Front Porch' (a folk and traditional music program) and to 'A Prairie Home Companion.' There is a real challenge to find other things that will be equally attractive as 'A Prairie Home Companion' to keep listeners with us."