

The final broadcast is a memory, and its creator is Denmark-bound

So long, Lake Wobegon

By GRAHAM SNYDER
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For 13 years of Saturday nights, Garrison Keillor has been the faceless, flannel-voiced singer and myth-maker on public radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Last night, Keillor and his cast of musicians and characters — both real and imaginary — performed their last show and said "so long" to the millions of dedicated fans.

The Norwegian bachelor farmers, Buttermilk Biscuit sellers and others from Keillor's imaginary Lake Wobegon will return to northern Minnesota.

Keillor, on the other hand, will leave in a couple of days and move to Denmark, his wife's native country, where he hopes to resume a normal life far from the limelight accompanying the success of his radio program.

His farewell show last night was a humorous, bittersweet tribute to everything that has made *Prairie Home* so special.

"Tonight is our last broadcast," Keillor said in beginning the show, which ran 28 minutes overtime and continued for several more minutes after leaving the air.

"It's amazing that it turns out to be the easiest. We had so much fun this week."

He told the 1,000 people who filled the World Theater in St. Paul, and millions of listeners nationwide: "I'm going to miss you a lot more than you're going to miss me. That's just the fact of it."

Throughout the evening, there was something triumphant, something life-affirming in all the sentimentality and leave-taking.

The lineup for Saturday's final show included guitarists Chet Atkins and Leo Kottke, "queen of the autoharp" Stevie Beck, Scottish singer Jean Redpath and the Kamehameha Schools Glee Club from Honolulu. Most of the tunes during the 2½-hour program were sad, sentimental songs that managed a trembling-chin optimism about life's possibilities.

In a three-part song set to the music of Handel, Keillor elaborated on the Minnesota method of farewells: Stand at the back door and say goodbye, then stand around the car and say goodbye, and finally get in the car, roll down the windows and say goodbye.

His farewell was like that.

He started closing the show with a duet with Atkins on an upbeat version of *Fool Such As I*.

After many minutes of enthusias-



Garrison Keillor performs during the final broadcast from the World Theater

Associated Press

tic applause, he sang *One More Time*. "We'll do this dance together/Just you and I/Don't be shy..."

After more cheering, he sang *Till We Meet Again*, punctuated with the audience's sad-happy cries of the loon, Minnesota's state bird.

"I cried three times," said St. Paul Mayor George Latimer. "It was sweet, it was sad, and we will all remember it forever."

The mayor launched 10,000 balloons in the Powdermilk Biscuit colors of blue, orange and yellow at a brief ceremony across the street from the theater.

Listeners nationwide tuned in, and many joined in goodbye parties.

At Forest Hill Presbyterian Church, more than 20 people gathered, and the meal was familiar to Keillor's fans.

"We've got Jell-O salad with marshmallows. There's tuna 'hot dish,' and the special is Saturday Night Dinner — beans and wieners," Nancy Marchant said.

Marchant said the group had erected a sign out front temporarily changing the church's denomina-

tion to Lutheran, the dominant religion in Lake Wobegon.

"Later on, we're going to make a living flag like the one mentioned all the time in the program. Someone will take a picture of it from the second story of the church, and each year we can go back and find ourselves in the photograph."

In Keillor's story, the living flag couldn't be maintained because people in it kept going to the top of a building to see it.

The last live broadcast is over, but Lake Wobegon isn't really gone.

"One thing that is real important and what we're trying to emphasize is that we're not losing *Prairie Home Companion*," said Michael Nitka, program director at the Fort Worth-Dallas area's public radio station, KERA-FM. "Saturday, Garrison did his last live program, but for at least six months, we'll be doing repeats of the best programs. A lot of them have never been heard outside of Minnesota."

KERA was one of the first stations to pick up the program when it went national in the winter of 1980.

Since then, the show has become

the most popular entertainment program on radio, attracting around 4 million listeners, with Keillor's weekly monologue sustaining the regulars each week.

His last news from Lake Wobegon combined humor, truisms and moral lessons into something modern and timeless.

He talked about what the recent rain — "the Long Rain of June 1987" — meant to the area. The monologue flowed with the theme of renewal, growth and spiritual awakening.

He lamented about what science and technology are doing to the quality of life, citing that newfangled sweet corn created by the scientists.

"It will look just like it, taste just like it, but it won't," Keillor said.

There may be copies, attempts at recapturing the lost lake Wobegon mystique.

Any such attempt may look like it and taste like it.

But it won't.

This report includes material from The Associated Press.