

FAREWELLS TO 'PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION'

In Minnesota, Cash Registers Ring a Noisy Goodby to Keillor

By DENNIS McDOUGAL, Times Staff Writer

ST. PAUL, Minn.—It's been a loud week in Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keillor's hometown. The sound of the cash register in the World Theatre gift shop was ringing nonstop Friday morning. Three different editions of Keillor's best-selling "Lake Wobegon Days" and Powdermilk Biscuits sweat shirts, all sizes for \$16 a piece, have been going like hot cakes all week long.

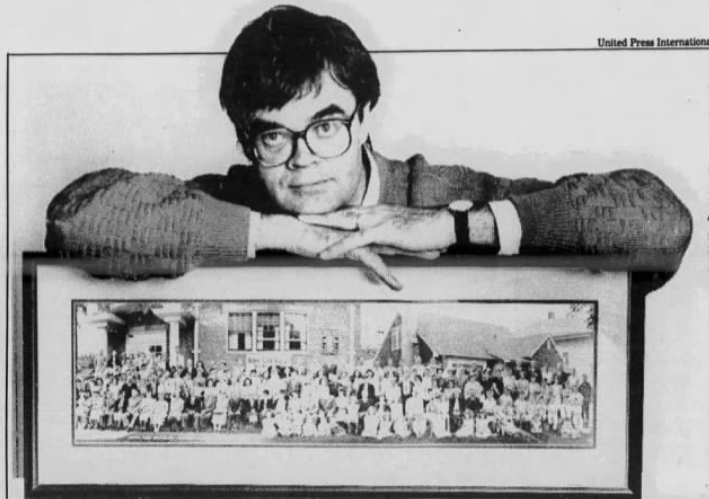
It was nearly as noisy as the box office next door, where the phone was jangling as often as the gift shop cash register. Dozens of fans who either had not heard or refused to believe that tonight's final live performance of "A Prairie Home Companion" was sold out weeks ago began calling as soon as the box office opened Friday morning.

The news from Lake Wobegon was that all 925 World Theatre seats—including the eight box seats down front that went for \$1,000 each—were gone.

After a 13-year run on public radio, Keillor is leaving his show, his home state and even his country. He'll be an American in Copenhagen soon, where he plans to learn Danish, his new wife Ulla Skaerved's native tongue, and to continue writing about his mythical Lake Wobegon in his own native tongue, English.

His first effort will be a New Yorker magazine article on what it's like to be a tall, gangly Midwesterner trying to get along in Scandinavia. There may eventually be a sequel to "Lake Wobegon Days." And there may be a movie.

And Keillor himself may return to Minnesota



Garrison Keillor—"shy person" in the public eye during last days of his "Prairie Home Companion."

someday. But nobody's holding his breath in St. Paul, home of the tiny World Theatre that has become familiar to an estimated 3½ million radio listeners who tune in each week to Keillor's down-home, bluegrass satire of small-town America.

Keillor has been hailed often as the modern-day Mark Twain—a gifted humorist with a genius for gently piercing the foibles of Norwegian bachelor farmers and uptight Midwestern Puritans. But the warm, poignant epitaphs in national magazines and newspapers and on network television this week don't truly reflect the civic ambivalence surrounding the

departure of St. Paul's most famous native son.

Keillor, a self-styled "shy person," has been at war with the local newspapers for more than a year, in part because his home address, salary, property-tax rate and other personal information about his courtship of Skaerved appeared in the St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch.

He has complained often and bitterly that his national notoriety as a best-selling author, radio cult hero and Time magazine cover subject has turned his private life into a public spectacle. The high price of

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Celebrities Reflect on Evenings Spent Listening to the Gentle Humor of Lake Wobegon

By LORI E. PIKE

The show is my Saturday evening," Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky was talking about "A Prairie Home Companion," the two-hour, nationwide radio program that will air its last live broadcast today at 3 p.m. on KPBS-FM (89.5) in San Diego and (tape-delayed) at 6 p.m. on KUSC-FM (91.5). After 13 years of the weekly show,

"Prairie" creator and host Garrison Keillor has decided to leave St. Paul, Minn., for his wife's native Denmark.

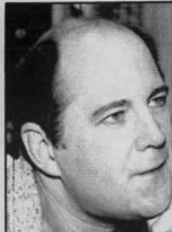
Though Minnesota Public Radio promises to keep the show alive through reruns for an indefinite period, it won't be the same for the estimated 3½ million listeners who, like Yaroslavsky, have strong emotional ties to the folksy program.

What is the attraction of this curiously low-key two hours of entertainment? It's partly "Prairie Home Companion's" eclectic stream of country, jazz and traditional music. But the program's mainstay is Keillor himself, a gentle humorist/essayist who brings his imaginary hometown of Lake Wobegon alive through wistful "news" reports about local staples such as the Norwegian bachelor farmers and Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Catholic Church, interspersed with commercial spots for products such as Powdermilk Biscuits. "The biscuits that give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

What has Keillor meant to his Saturday night listeners? Calendar asked a number of fans to comment:



SYDNEY POLLACK:
'It's like all good writing—it transcends the specifics of its locale.'



DAVID OGDEN STIERS:
'It's refreshing to know that so many people have responded to it.'

STUDS TERKEL
Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, Chicago historian and

radio personality Terkel has been a "Prairie Home Companion" fan "for years." He has also appeared on the show several times.

"People . . . are hungry for stories. It's that 20- or 30-minute segment that they listen to. It's not simply

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STUDS TERKEL:
'It's an anti-technology program, so it's flesh and blood.'



WALTER MONDALE:
'I identified with the humor and loved every minute of it.'

Los Angeles Times

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about Lake Wobegon. It's about all the Lake Wobegons. It's a certain attitude of people toward one another, a certain kind of humor and a gentleness. We don't hear stories today thanks to so many things like TV.

One of the keys to literature—all literature—is a story being told. He [Keillor] does it in the tradition of, say, Twain. And he satisfies a certain need on the part of people for story. We did a take-off on a soap opera, another actor and I [when he guested on the program]. And I was head of a diet squad, finding all the bootleg high-cholesterol foods and arresting people selling chocolate and pastries.

I enjoyed working with him [Keillor] very much. He has an easy quality, you see. His stuff is not just right of this moment. It lasts. It's an anti-technology program, and so it's flesh and blood.

ZEV YAROSLAVSKY

The Los Angeles city councilman has listened to "Prairie Home Companion" since 1982.

"I just tripped over the show by accident. I heard this funny kind of show and at first I didn't know what it was—I thought it was for real.

"I think the whole 'Prairie Home Companion' program is a way of life for a lot of us. Those of us who are 'PHC' listeners are in a subculture to ourselves and compare notes on Garrison's last monologue and that sort of thing.

"In a hustle-and-bustle, urban-environment, high-pressure life that young urban professionals run these days, Lake Wobegon is certainly the antithesis of that. And all of his listeners yearn for, in some measure, the peace, the tranquility and the genuineness of human relationships that, I think, are in his vignettes.

"Even my kids are 'PHC' freaks. It's great. Last Saturday's program started off with 'I've Been Working on the Railroad' and my 9-year-old and 4-year-old are able to participate in that instantly. It sucks them right in.

"I think it's kind of outrageous that he's decided to defect in this

way. I'm going to miss it. There is just no way I do not listen to that show on Saturday evening, wherever I am. It's an institution. I hope he'll come back."

JEFFREY LEWIS

The co-executive producer of "Hill Street Blues" and the upcoming "Beverly Hills Buntz" has listened to Keillor's creation "since I moved to Los Angeles [from New York] and had a radio in my car."

"I think it's a crime it's going off. That's an achievement, that show—first of all, for the massive entertainment it's provided over the years. 'PHC' is the only thing I know that's kept up the imaginative tradition. His monologues are funny. I also love the music. I think it's my favorite part of the show. He has great taste in music. I hate most contemporary music.

"Radio . . . is much more conducive to the imagination than television. You could be in any part of the country and tune in and feel you were transported a great distance to a place that was different in spirit—if you didn't live in the Midwest. I've never lived among Norwegian Americans. It's very refreshing and revitalizing to listen to it.

"Having worked on 'Hill Street' for the last six years, though, I can certainly understand why he wouldn't want to do it anymore. I understand the feeling of wanting to move on to other business."

WALTER MONDALE

The former vice president and his wife, Joan, have listened to Keillor's program since it began. One of his favorite episodes told of "the guy who made the duck decoy that was too big to get out of the basement."

"I'm a shy person from a small town in Southern Minnesota, so I knew what he was talking about. I was born in Ceylon, Minn., which has 400 people. The humor that he uses comes right out of those communities, so I identified with it and loved every minute of it.

"I think that everyone remembers his hometown and his upbringing, and whether they grew up in a small town or a big town, they remember all that inside humor. They like his droll and subtle

humor. "When I was campaigning for president, he was making a swing through the Ivy League colleges and packing them in. The show was sophisticated, so the literature students and the theater students—everyone would show up to see of Garrison. If I could have gotten crowds like that, I would have been president."

BOBBY McFERRIN

Singer McFerrin has performed on "A Prairie Home Companion" three times and sees a connection between Keillor's monologues and his own style of vocally emulating musical instruments to tell tales through song.

"This man has fragments of ideas and he's basically improvising. In a way, that's akin to what I do—telling stories without words and getting the people involved. I've enjoyed the show in that sense because Garrison has created that kind of environment where people become very quiet and listen to stories and . . . lose themselves in time and leave their troubles at the doorstep.

"I listen all that much, because I travel so much. [But] you can become devoted to something just by experiencing it one time, because if it's something really good and special, the feeling lingers."

SYDNEY POLLACK

Film director Sydney Pollack got a rare insight into Keillor's private world on a visit to Minnesota in the fall of 1986 to discuss a possible movie based on the author's best-seller, "Lake Wobegon Days."

"He's a 100% original, that's for sure. From a personal point of view, I had an absolutely fascinating three days with him. We drove up to a kind of monastery that was connected to a Catholic school. That was his idea of the way we should work. We were really, you know, aseptic.

"The show itself was an experience to go through, because it was so laid-back and so little-rehearsed and because he was so damned good."

"That night, we got in a car and drove . . . about an hour or hour-

and-a-half to this school, Saint Paul, Saint Joseph, Saint something—I don't remember. [He laughed.] It was pretty interesting—this little Jewish boy from Indiana driving up to this monastery.

"Keillor has such a very quiet, shy, introverted personality for a man who's a public performer the way he is, that I had a wonderful evening asking him questions and talking about how he began and where he got his ideas and how he worked."

"Then we spent the next two days up there just taking long walks and him showing me the country that Lake Wobegon started from—the main streets and the farmhouses."

"We haven't given up since then—we're still kicking it [the film project] around.

"I think it's a wonderful place and a wonderful group of characters and a wonderful metaphor for a lot of today's problems with all the complexities peeled off of them. It's like all really good writing—it really transcends the specifics of its locale. Most of the people who listen to it aren't from little towns—they're people from all over the place. It's extraordinary stuff."

DAVID OGDEN STIERS

The actor first came across "Prairie Home Companion" on a drive to Oregon five years ago, when he started "weeping with laughter" and had to pull off the road.

"Since I was born in 1942, I grew up as a radio kid. And the pictures you make with your brain, depending on the sound you're hearing, are infinitely better than sets and costumes."

"Normally, I don't like popular music at all. But there's a feeling about this show that must have been prevalent at the turn of the century in this country, when people actually got together in a sort of lower-middle-class saloon environment and played songs that they'd heard, swapped stories, told anecdotes about what happened to them that week and had coffee and German coffecake, and would sit around and do live what Keillor has brought back every Saturday evening. It's something that we're a long way away from, and I think that just the idea of it is an extremely healthy premise. It's refreshing to know that so many people have responded to it."

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celebrity has been as big a factor in the 44-year-old storyteller's decision to leave the United States as his desire to return to the solitary life of a fiction writer.

Keillor's friends and neighbors in St. Paul have mixed feelings about his departure.

"Garrison Keillor is a spoiled brat," Joanne Pingle wrote in the Pioneer Press Dispatch a few weeks back. "I hope he gets the anonymity he so richly deserves in Denmark."

Keillor's house has been picketed, his 17-year-old son has been harassed and his car was egged after he announced to the world four months ago over American Public Radio (broadcast in Los Angeles on KUSC-FM) that he was leaving St. Paul behind. In an interview with a Detroit newspaper, he remarked that his departure from St. Paul would leave only the governor (St. Paul is Minnesota's capital), the mayor and the local TV weatherman as the city's celebrities.

That statement, repeated many times in the local news media,

further widened the breach between Keillor and the people about whom he writes and talks.

Yet the same newspaper that printed his address and the other personal information was editorially lamenting his departing in articles and commentary this week that indicated his like may not appear again soon in as unlikely a location as eastern Minnesota.

"For two hours each week, 'A Prairie Home Companion' has given refuge from a world of franchised food, corporate dress codes, tract houses, copycat TV shows and other efforts to make us all similar and inoffensive," wrote Sylvia Paine, a Pioneer Press Dispatch columnist. "It is unique, an oddball piece of theater if ever there was one, and the only place to hear such stories, such music. So far, at least, no one has tried to imitate Keillor."

After tonight, "A Prairie Home Companion" goes into reruns for at least the next six months and its producer, Minnesota Public Radio, hopes that it will do as well in radio syndication as "MASH" has done on television.

Noah Adams, former co-host of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," is currently developing his own variety program to replace Keillor, but it won't be ready for broadcast nationally until January.

In the meantime, Minnesota Public Radio is making every attempt to cash in as much as possible on the Keillor phenomenon. Company spokesman Alison Circle said Friday that it was too soon to determine exactly how much the final rush for "A Prairie Home Companion" merchandise and tickets might earn for the show's producer, but she added that she expected that it would be well into the thousands of dollars.

Minnesota Public Radio officials have admitted that they don't know if they will ever have as lucrative a program again.

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