

Saluting A Prairie Home Companion

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Knight-Ridder Newspapers

ST. PAUL, Minn. — At first it was a joke: a ragtag assembly of long-haired, wire-spectacled, good-natured misfits who a decade earlier could have passed as hippies. They made up stories, recited poetry, clacked spoons, plucked mouth harps, played every stringed instrument imaginable and called it a radio show.

It was *A Prairie Home Companion*, born July 6, 1974, and due to pass away tonight (WVPS 107.9 FM at 6 p.m.), having made its creator, Garrison Keillor, rich, a bit jaded and certainly nobody's idea of a joke.

A Prairie Home Companion, which will continue in reruns, snuck into Minnesota through a cartographer's error that omitted a little town called Lake Wobegon (subject of Keillor's best-seller *Lake Wobegon Days*) from the state map. Having no official status or locus, the lost town became protected territory in the hearts of Minnesotans everywhere, who adopted its sweet souls — the good-looking men, strong women and above-average children — as their uncles, aunts and cousins.

The strength

The case might be made that Keillor's flannel-voiced magic wrapped us closer in a shared wistfulness for a more innocent, more neighborly world. But let the case instead be made that he served not merely to unify but to reveal our differences, our quirks, the fundamental strangeness of

everyone. Along with those expeditious Powdermilk Biscuits, he gave us the strength to cast aside our shyness and go boldly into the world, not minding the peculiarities we wear on our sleeves.

Broadcast over Minnesota Public Radio, and later nationally over American Public Radio, *A Prairie Home Companion* has given Saturday nights the old-fashioned, communal spirit of a barn dance. Somehow, though, everyone's a wallflower.

Alone in thoughts

Like the taciturn Norwegian bachelor farmers, even Lake Wobegon's more conventional citizens are solitary and mysterious. Though they gossip at the Chatterbox Cafe and share meals and prayers with their families, they are alone in their thoughts. Observing and aware that they too are observed, preoccupied with their disappointments and failures, they fulfil their obligations and find small, comforting pleasures in the pattern of their days.

We often hear that *A Prairie Home Companion* put Minnesota on the map, and, even if that isn't quite true, the show has cleared up some misconceptions about the state. Before it brought New Yorkers and North Carolinians and Californians to St. Paul to take a look, Minnesota had a reputation as essential Middle America.

Then along came the truth — the news from Lake Wobegon — with hapless Father Emil, stoic Clarence Bunson, buxom Dorothy of the Sidetrack Tap, the opportu-

nistic Jack and ever so many more nice folks, all of them lovable, all of them weird in their ordinary ways. Yet it's their idiosyncracies that make them so real and endearing; it's truth, not fiction, that's wonderful.

As Keillor once said, "If I were to come downstairs with two big string beans sticking out of my nose, and not know that they were there, and ask you, 'How do I look?' — it might be painful at first, but I would rather you wouldn't just say, 'Oh, gee, you look pretty good.' I'd rather you said, 'You got beans in your nose.'"

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. It is unique, an oddball piece of theatre 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.

Shy person

He hasn't easily shouldered the success. He has spoken up in anger sometimes at gawkers and reporters and other invaders of his life as a self-proclaimed shy person.

But the success isn't solely his, nor that of the various producers and performers who seemed to come and go more abruptly as the show grew bigger. The success also belongs to his audience — misfits, too, at least in their hearts — without whom Lake Wobegon would have blown away like

chaff.

They came to the World Theatre and tuned in their radios in droves, not just to hear Keillor but to commune with one another, to send greetings across the country and simply to find solace in knowing that other people out there understood what it was like to be a little bit different, not to fit in, not to live up to your own or your parents' expectations, to feel sad a lot and to wonder a lot at the brevity and bitterness of life.

They heard the tales of Lake Wobegon and took home their lessons: that it's OK to be yourself, that tenderness is possible, that we're all shy — and strange — together.

First appearance

The passing of *A Prairie Home Companion* will leave an emptiness in our Saturdays, a silence akin to that of the show's namesake, the Prairie Home Cemetery in Moorhead, Minn., across the street from Concordia College, where the little radio troupe made its first roadshow appearance in 1974. But there will be memories, and radio history, which *A Prairie Home Companion* certainly has made.

For beyond his homespun music and wit as dry as the prairie, Keillor has taught us to accept ourselves. Lake Wobegon has revealed us as eccentric and vulnerable people, in need of understanding, in need of forgiveness, and capable of giving both.

So thanks, G.K. Happy you were here.