

Garrison Keillor bids farewell to Lake Wobegon

Popular radio program airs its swan song tonight

By PAUL D. COLFORD
Newspaper

IN THE LANGUID heat of a recent Saturday evening, relief breezed in from an unlikely source. It came from a man on the radio, Garrison Keillor by name, as he read Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," long and slowly, to a smooth guitar accompaniment.

"I know I shall not pass into the night," goes an exuberant passage about youth.

Though Keillor aimed Whitman's lyrics at those who are graduating this spring from academe into the world of possibilities, it seemed a fitting swan song for "A Prairie Home Companion," the weekly broadcast from which he is taking his leave.

Today's show will be his last. Rebroadcasts will be available to stations for months afterward, but Keillor — the larking, singing, storytelling host — plans to go live with his Danish wife and family in her country. He's giving up one of the most successful programs in public radio to "resume the life of a shy person." After 13 years, he says he's tired.

Broadcast live before audiences at the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn., "A Prairie Home Companion" has provided singular enchantment to more than 3 million listeners. Interludes of bluegrass music have given a Grand Ole Opry flavor to the proceedings, which are further leavened by episodic skits and silly commercials for "sponges" such as Jack's Auto Repair and Powdermilk Biscuits "made from whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers."

Keillor has kept listeners in touch with one another by reading the greetings they send in. Some messages are so strange that people have disputed their authenticity. For example, "Happy birthday to Betsy, from her Lithuanian Baptist cellist son in Little Rock."

But the heart of the matter has been Keillor's folksy monologue each week about fictitious Lake Wobegon (population 942). It's a town, he says, "where much of the day you could stand in the middle of Main Street and not be in anyone's way."

Keillor has declined requests for interviews in recent weeks. However, in a commemorative "Prairie Home" magazine, he attributed the show's longevity to the sort of audience that finds storytelling appealing.

One of his admirers, Andy Rooney of CBS' "60 Minutes," agreed with the assessment. "People like stories," he said. "I can't get over how popular they are, yet they are so darn difficult to tell. It's a great talent Keillor has, to take the simplest story and lead people along. It's the art of the novelist."

Keillor, who has also parlayed his stories into the best-selling "Lake Wobegon Days" and numerous contributions to The New Yorker, hopes to do more writing after radio. Meantime, unlike those personalities who leave stations without so much as a goodbye to faithful listeners, he has been easing his way toward the door since he announced his departure in February.

"It's awfully hard to leave a town like that, where you've had an attachment to it all your life," he said in a recent report from Lake Wobegon. "I want to enjoy the sweet life that I describe in my stories. I don't leave you when I leave. I rejoin you in that life that we share in that little town."

In towns across America, Keillor will leave amid celebration.

Besides the gatherings that will doubtless take place in living rooms and back yards, the final live broadcast, with guest performers Leo Kottke, Jean Redpath, Chet Atkins and Kate MacKenzie, will be beamed to a few thousand people expected to attend "A Prairie Home Social" planned by Los



Garrison Keillor gestures to his audience at the World Theater.

Angeles station KUSC on the campus of Loyola Marymount University, in Ann Arbor, Mich., the owner of the Detroit Tigers baseball team and Domino's Pizza. Thomas Monaghan, is opening the grounds of his corporate headquarters to those wishing to enjoy the show and picnic at the same time.

Both places are part of Keillor country. The program is carried by more than 273 stations, including outlets in Canada and Australia. Perhaps the biggest achievement has been the show's ability to go beyond its Minnesota origins and appeal to city dwellers and towns-

people alike. For Keillor, a son of Wobegonish Anoka, Minn., it's been a long, winding journey to such renown.

After graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1968, he found work on radio station KSLR, newly begun at St. John's University, a Catholic men's college in the central part of the state. Though hired as a classical-music disc jockey, he also slipped folk songs

and his own small-town musings between the Chopin and Mozart. Fortunately for him, his boss, William Kling, also believed in the power of live radio, and defied his announcer against detractors.

Within the next few years, Kling helped found a network of stations, Minnesota Public Radio, of which he is now president. "A Prairie Home Companion" first went out over the network July 8, 1974. Four years later, Kling offered the show to National Public Radio for nationwide distribution, but was turned down by an NPR administration that dismissed it as being too regional.

So Kling took his case to WNYC and a few other stations. Together they formed American Public Radio, which began to transmit the program nationwide in 1980. The Disney Channel has been televising the radio show since March 7 (and will carry today's finale).

THE PROGRAM took its name from Prairie Home, a cemetery in Moorhead, Minn. Not the most cheerful idea, but one that is offset by the Companion in the title. "A Prairie Home Companion" has been reassurance radio, a mix of the musical and the down-home, the kind of show they don't do much anymore.

Since "A Prairie Home Companion" reached a nationwide audience in 1980, some people have assumed it is an endeavor of National Public Radio, the people who deliver "All

Things Considered" and other distinguished programs.

Not so. Garrison Keillor's program is produced by Minnesota Public Radio and distributed by American Public Radio. Although many outlets, such as WNYC in New York, belong to NPR and APR, the latter network has been diligent in shaping its own identity as an alternative to the larger NPR. Besides Keillor's show, APR offers the National Symphony Orchestra, programs from the British Broadcasting Corp. and more. Kling disputes the idea raised by several observers that the demise of Keillor's show will undermine the network. "One program director [NPR] should not be the gatekeeper for the entire country," he said.

Besides, he added, Keillor's program will live on in rebroadcasts, including those shows that were heard only in Minnesota during the 1970s. A former co-anchor of "All Things Considered," Noah Adams, also is developing a program for Minnesota Public Radio destined for Keillor's Saturday time slot. It will include music, stories and essays, bowing in Minnesota during the fall and nationally on Jan. 8.

WNYC may end up using Adams' program, but it isn't waiting. According to the president of the city-owned station, Mary Perot Nichols, WNYC is creating its own music-and-talk show. "If it's good, and gets on before Noah's show does, then so be it," she said.

GENERAL CINEMA
CHRISTIANA MALL
145-1460
SARGAIN MATINES EVERY DAY
ALL SHOWS BEFORE 8 P.M. \$3.00
EDDIE MURPHY
IN
BEVERLY HILLS 900 H

XXX RATED FILMS XXX
POSITIVELY ADULTS ONLY
GINA CARRERA
SHARON MITCHELL
are back in the saddle again riding high. The trail of lust and kinky sex in a most sensuous and erotic film.
RATED 100%
"SHOWDOWN"
PLUS
A hard core classic of sensual leisure and fulfillment
"SEX WARS"
WATERS DAILY 1:00 P.M. - EVE FROM 9:00 P.M.
SATURDAY & SUNDAY - CONTINUOUS FROM 1:00 P.M.
LAST FEATURE 10:30 P.M.

SCHWARZENEGGER
PREDATOR
THE HUNT HAS BEGUN
R
GENERAL CINEMA
CHRISTIANA MALL
145-1460
CINCINNATI
BRANMAR 2
475-4444
202 DRIVE IN
PREDATOR @ 11 PM
MORNING AFTER
\$1.00 MATS DAILY BEFORE 6PM SAT 2:30 (\$5.00 @ \$2.50)