

A Prairie Home Companion ends despite high popularity

Garrison Keillor is abandoning Lake Wobegon, "the tiny town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve," leaving about 4 million people homeless after Saturday night.

"A Prairie Home Companion" ends at the peak of its popularity. For a confessed shy person, who in recent years has been on the cover of Time, at the top of the best-seller list and courted by Hollywood producers, it had become far too popular.

"In order for you to gather this material and to have some sense of the life of this imaginary town, you have to be an ordinary person," the 44-year-old humorist told reporters in March, a month after he surprised his audience and the American Public Radio network by announcing his retirement.

"You have to have some semblance of anonymity, and I don't have that anymore in St. Paul. And so I really can't do the show here except as a caricature of myself. And I really don't think I could do it elsewhere, so I choose to step out."

"A Prairie Home Companion" ends with two performances — a \$150 a ticket benefit for the World Theater in St. Paul tonight and the regular show Saturday night — finishing a 13-year run on radio and 13 weeks on cable television's Disney Channel.

There will be reruns of "A Prairie Home Companion," but no more new tales from the Chatterbox Cafe, the Sidetrack Tap or the rectory of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility; no more secrets from the marriages of the Krebsbachs and the Bunsens or the aging, love-struck Senator K. Thorvaldson.

Keillor's characters were nourished on tuna hotdish and bound together by forbearance, forgiveness and the certainty that — in a town of 942 people — there was no place to hide.

But Lake Wobegon wasn't like where most listeners lived. The big audiences were in the big cities, and so was Keillor. Though he grew up in Anoka, a town of 15,000 north of Minneapolis, he made his home in St. Paul.

Lake Wobegon people stayed put. There was a touch of smugness in a town where "all the women are strong, the men are good-looking and the children are above average."

Among the few big farewell parties planned were a bash in Charlotte, N.C., tonight and a Prairie Home Social on the campus of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles that included a mock-up of Lake Wobegon on the athletic field.