



Garrison Keillor is one of a kind, even to the semiformal outfit — including red socks — he wears during performances. His monologues, traditionally beginning with the line, "Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon," are the two-hour program's high point.



# A PRAIRIE HOMECOMING CONCLUSION

By Jim Davidson

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This week's version of "A Prairie Home Companion" will be the last in a series that has continued for 13 seasons. Originating from the modest blue-collar city of St. Paul, Minn., the show is the brainchild of a shy man with unusual tastes in music, a peculiar sense of humor and a gift for storytelling. In seven seasons of national broadcasts via satellite, the show progressed from a cult item to a middle-American hit. Keillor called it quits when he felt his private life was being compromised.

# KEILLOR

**O**N A COOL EVENING in May, just as cowboy singer Glenn Ohrlin strides off the stage of the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn., a tall man walks up to the microphone next to the red "On the Air" sign. He's the picture of small-town, semiformal elegance: suspenders, dark pants and shoes, red socks, a white tuxedo shirt with an open collar and a dark T-shirt underneath. The costume, like the man, is one of a kind. It's a harmony of discordant elements, a blend of urbanity and hick appeal.

The man is Garrison Keillor, writer, performer and star of the weekly two-hour radio variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion." After 80 inimitable minutes of skits, songs, poems, jingles and comedy routines, the stage is set for the show's main attraction. Waving toward Ohrlin, Keillor launches into his weekly monologue:

"... ever since I mentioned on the air back in February that the show was going to end... it's become harder and harder to think of Lake Wobegon for me or to talk about it or to tell you stories. And I started to realize today why this is, why I sit and think so hard and have such a hard time talking about my own home town and my own childhood. The

reason it's so hard is that to come down toward the last few shows, I feel like I have to make something out of this town, as if I have to do some tremendous piece of work and do some tremendous stories that somehow draw in all of these characters I've told you about over the years, and that will somehow make sense out of their lives, and produce some sort of awesome masterwork for you. And of course I can't do it. Not with that town..."

Keillor's monologue, usually 20 to 25 minutes, starts about 35 minutes before the show's end. "It's an awfully hard act to follow," explains producer Margaret Moos, who likes to end the show with what she calls "a little sweet love song." Tonight it's the elegiac "Red River Valley," with its lump-in-the-throat lyric, "from this valley they say you are going."

**N**EXT SATURDAY, starting at 6 p.m. Pittsburgh time on WQED-FM and at least 277 other public radio



During rehearsal with Kate MacKenzie, Keillor soothes his vocal chords with Cold Spring mineral water

stations, Keillor will do one last monologue and conclude his 13th season and seventh since "A Prairie Home Companion" went national. Within earshot of over 2 million weekly listeners, the 44-year-old storyteller will wrinkle his face, drop down into a baritone whisper and deliver the last regular installment of news from his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon, Minn., "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot change."

Like so many American success stories, "A Prairie Home Companion" is an improbable saga. Originating from the modest blue-collar city of St. Paul, it's the story of a shy man with unusual tastes in music, a peculiar sense of humor and a gift for storytelling. After years of paying dues as host of a daily 6-to-9 a.m. musical program, Keillor made the journey from cult figure to best-seller, from host to leading man, from radio scriptwriter to author of a book, "Lake Wobegon Days," that sold over 1 million hardback copies.

He saw his face on magazine covers, his name in personality columns. He reached giddy heights of fame and wealth and then, to the surprise of almost no one in St. Paul, quit the weekly show. He railed against the St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch and said it was impossible to live in St. Paul as one of the

city's only three celebrities: a bearded mayor, a TV weatherman and himself. He announced plans to move to Denmark and join his wife of 18 months, Ulla Skaerved, in their new apartment in Copenhagen. And with a plaintive "I want to be a writer," he promised to write. Books for sure, more short humor pieces for The New Yorker and perhaps a "Prairie Home" movie project that has piqued the interest of the Disney people and director Sydney Pollack.

So next Saturday night a TV crew will produce the first "Prairie Home Companion" videocassette. Radio listeners will make tapes by the tens of thousands. At 9 p.m. Pittsburgh time, Disney Channel subscribers will click on the show's 90-minute tape delay version. At least 30 reporters will be on hand, hoping Keillor will break his recent vow of silence to the press.

And thus will a Saturday night institution fade into the mists of Radio Rerunland alongside Jack Benny and the Lone Ranger. Thus will end two years of "Prairie Home" commotion, a time when the show unofficially became The Garrison Keillor Show and the captain was more visible on deck than ever before, keeping a straight course after losing much of his regular crew. In the end, there

was no way the ship could stay afloat without him.

**O**N THIS COOL May evening in St. Paul, there are signs that Keillor is disengaging from the program he invented in July 1974 and first performed before a live audience of 12. Prominent Lake Wobegon characters — Bunsens and Inqvists and Tolleruds — are missing from the monologue, and Keillor has sharply reduced the time allotted to commercials for such imaginary products as Powdermilk Biscuits and Raw Bits. Gone, too, are musicians Butch Thompson, Greg Brown, Peter Ostroushko, who all left the show last year.

Two hours before airtime, 30 or 40 people are milling around the theater during the sound check. There's a stray photographer, a couple of Keillor's friends from New York, a knot of TV types operating cameras or watching a monitor in the aisle. One of them is Ms. Moos, a friendly woman with dark curly hair and a radiant smile.

For years she and Keillor were a couple, on the show and off. She worked for Minnesota Public Radio from 1972 to 1985, starting as a secretary to network founder Bill Kling and

soon working her way up to producer of the show. Then came the split. Keillor met his current wife at the 25th anniversary of Anoka High School's class of 1960, and in October 1985 Ms. Moos quit her job and moved to a little house in the high desert of Southern California.

She came back in February, officially to produce the 17-week Disney Channel version of "A Prairie Home Companion," but really to step into her old role of organizer, traffic manager, creative force and factotum, a woman who remembers earlier days when she unlocked the theater doors, banked the box-office receipts and spent weeks of her life vacuuming the World Theater with her own sweeper.

She got the first call from Kling in mid-January. "And a week later a call from Garrison, and then I got (another) call from Bill."

She smiles. "It's really a serendipity for me because when I left the show I really mourned for the show. It was so much a part of my life. It's a real gift to be able to come back for the last hurrah, and be a part of it and work with people that I love and people that I've known for a long time... it's a total gift."

The show is still put together in a late flurry of activity: fine-tuning Keillor's skits and lyrics on Friday and five or six hours of sound-checks and run-throughs on Saturday afternoon. Ninety minutes before showtime, Keillor cruises into the World Theater to rehearse a few skits and songs, and only then does he meet and shake hands with legendary radio comedian Ray Goulding, partner of Bob Elliott and physically the larger half of Bob and Ray. Tonight they make their debut on "A Prairie Home Companion."

Goulding is poring over his script as Keillor walks up and says, "I recognize that throat clearing."

"Good to meet you, Garrison," Goulding says, extending a hand. With no further ado, they turn back to their scripts, professionals efficiently at work.

Ms. Moos sways gracefully in the aisle, listening on headphones as Keillor and Kate MacKenzie sing a duet of "Can't Help Falling in Love with You." Afterwards she speaks up: "Try it again. It's real pretty."

Keillor is quiet. After the duet, he delivers his most pointed direction to the sound engineer in the balcony. "Don't be afraid to use a little reverb there, Scott. Do not let good taste hold us back."

**A**S USUAL, tonight's "Prairie Home Companion" has an unusual blend of talent. In counterpoint to the cowboy singer, it has



A May guest, Bobby McFerrin sang and imitated musical instruments

jazz virtuoso Bobby McFerrin. A capella, he sings perfect renditions of drums, bass violin, electric guitar and — without so much as opening his mouth — steel guitar.

Introducing McFerrin, Keillor doesn't mention details like McFerrin's two Grammys; small-town folks aren't impressed by glitz. Instead, Keillor explains McFerrin's talent in the context of the Powdermilk Mouth-Off, an actual "Prairie Home" competition for yodelers and other creators of strange sounds, with winners invited to perform on the show. The audience might as well be in Lake Wobegon's Chatterbox Cafe, listening to Garrison Keillor explain the workings of the larger world.

And indeed, the World Theater has come to look like the shrine of an obscure religion. Tourists bearing cameras pose for pictures next to the Prairie Home Companion marquee, and later they pose for pictures in the

theater's aisles. By night's end, they will buy hundreds of tapes and T-shirts. They will congratulate each other for getting tickets in spite of the 20,000 phone calls to the World Theater box office in the week following Keillor's on-air announcement Feb. 14 that he was tired and it was time to go.

Unquestionably, the "Prairie Home" audience has grown older and more burgherlike since the first summers when Keillor performed outdoors in Minneapolis parks or the sculpture garden behind the St. Paul Science Center. In an April 1986 interview, Keillor acknowledged that the new audience was quieter and more studious, and other performers suspect the \$3.5 million renovation of the World Theater has further subdued the audience. Patrons can buy white wine, but not popcorn. No one props his feet up on the seats.

Tonight Nicole Beauclair, 16, of Bismarck, N.D., is in the audience with her



Veteran comics Bob and Ray, stage center, debuted last month on Keillor's show at the World Theater

parents, older sister and a friend — loyal fans all. During Saturday suppers, the Beauclairs always tune their radio to "A Prairie Home Companion." Nobody talks at the table. "Prayers are very short," says her mother, Mary Beauclair. "The shortest," adds a beaming Nicole, "and silent if there's a monologue going."

Across the lobby, a trim white-haired man says, "Garrison Keillor tells every story that I remember from my childhood." He's Bill Pearce, 62, of Ebenezer, N.Y., in St. Paul with a party of about 30 subscribers of WXXL-FM in Rochester, N.Y. "I find it amazing that college students can identify with the experiences. The Sidetrack Tap, that doesn't exist in most towns today. It just doesn't."

**T**HE SHOW began in 1974 after Keillor wrote a piece for *The New Yorker* about the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. The first "Prairie Home Companions" were informal and unrehearsed, Saturday shindigs featuring local performers who had other gigs lined up after dark. Keillor considered himself a writer, but off and on since 1969 had been hosting a 6-to-9 a.m. morning show on Minne-

sota Public Radio.

Mandolinist Peter Ostroushko has fond memories of the early "Prairie Home Companion" shows. "In the old days, you'd show up and Garrison would say 'You have 10 minutes here' and he didn't care what you did as long as it was good." Now 33, Ostroushko was still a teenager when he joined the house band in the mid-1970s.

"You go back and listen to those shows on tape, and they sound horrible. But on the other hand, there was a freshness about them, and that's what made the show popular — the chances that people were willing to take."

Ostroushko performed on every show for years. Last fall, after giving a few months' notice, he left to pursue a solo career. "I really felt the show was coming to an end, and I'd better start thinking about what to do. The people who had made the show were all gone, and I was the only one left. I just decided it was time to go."

Looking back, Ostroushko says, "About every two years the show would go through some pretty major changes. When things got boring . . . one of the things he did was create chaos."

"As the show changed, (Keillor) was asking us to write stuff," Ostroushko remem-

bers. "After all those years of the show, I'd run every fiddle tune I knew. It got to the point where I was writing fiddle tunes every week just to come up with something new." Ostroushko recalls "more than once" Keillor's taking the position that musicians were lazy people who played the same songs over and over. If he had to write fresh material every week, it followed that musicians should be doing the same.

One innovation was Keillor's monologue itself, which dates back only to the late 1970s. "He talked about Lake Wobegon before then, but it was five minutes here and there," Ms. Moos remembers. "It was more like a cartoon sketch of the town." After the show went national the monologue kept growing, from 10 minutes to 15, from 15 to 20.

"He's out there for almost the whole show, and the monologue is the heart and soul," she says. "It is his show. There's just no question about that, and we all support that, and provide another point of view and another insight. But really, it is his show. He's carrying the ball on it."

In recent years, Nashville guitarist Chet Atkins became a regular. Willie Nelson showed up as a guest and so did cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Philip Brunelle, a regular since the

beginning, defends the choices, saying, "Garrison wants only people who know the show and know why they're there . . . his big goal has been to present the finest in a particular art form — the finest not only in quality, but in honesty — people who really did know and appreciate what they were doing."

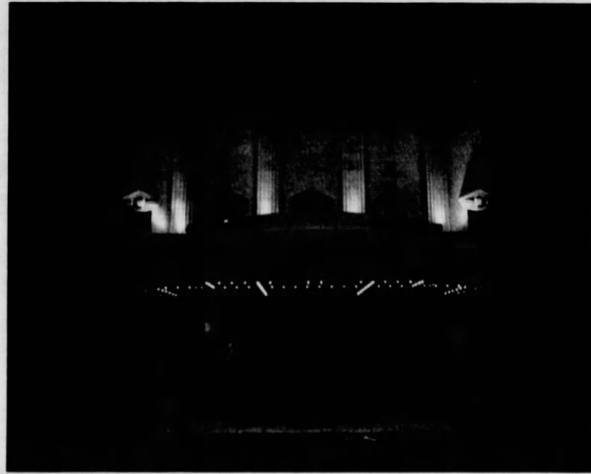
**L**AST YEAR it was an open secret that Keillor might leave the show. He was part of a transatlantic commuter marriage. After publication of "Lake Wobegon Days," he needed time more than money; he requested and got a 10-week vacation that was to start this summer. And there were rumblings on the business front, too. Talking to the city about an outright grant for World Theater renovations, Minnesota Public Radio broached the possibility of taking the show out of town.

The groundwork for his departure, however, was laid in December 1985, four months before the theater reopened. Two days after Christmas while Keillor was in Denmark for his wedding, the St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch printed a photograph and description of Keillor's new four-bedroom, four-fireplace \$300,000 home, along with the street address and size of the tax bill.

Keillor stewed but kept it to himself. Months later he charged the newspaper with invading his privacy and making it impossible for him to remain in Minnesota. This spring, following publication of a gracious let's-bury-the-hatchet column by executive editor Deborah Howell, Keillor wrote a letter to the editor calling the newspaper "malevolent, like a 400-pound man sitting at the next table, glowering, breathing heavily, staring, rubbing his hands. I choose to stand up, pay the check, and get out."

On Feb. 14, news of Keillor's departure resounded like a thunderclap from coast to coast, but St. Paul took it in stride. Mayor George Latimer was in the audience that night, but he says he had tickets anyway and didn't hear the news until a day earlier. Brunelle and Tom Keith, who replaced Keillor as co-host of the old morning show, confirmed that Keillor approached them individually in January to say he was leaving. There were no news leaks. "We all felt it was his announcement to make, and it should be made to his most important audience first," explains publicist Chris Langer.

"There's no doubt that Garrison brought a distinct kind of identity to St. Paul," says Latimer, the city's five-term mayor, acknowledging that he once said St. Paul had no image of its own. That was before downtown St. Paul sprouted a shiny new skyline that includes a World Trade Center and the sparkling new Ordway Music Theater, home



Keillor feels World Theater renovation affected audience composure

of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Minnesota Opera.

Latimer remembers going back to his Columbia Law School reunion and talking to classmates who "knew only that I was a mayor somewhere out west," but they made the connection between the mayor and a radio program that reflects the same kind of down-home, family oriented, modest image reflected by the city itself.

"Most people feel as I do, more a pleasant feeling of gratitude that we shared a long time together. I feel a lot more happy about the experience than regretful that it's ending."

"'Prairie Home Companion' has served to create a very positive identity for St. Paul. To many people you say 'St. Paul' and nothing really pops out," says Eileen McMahon, associate director of the St. Paul Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The show, however, evoked what she calls "a real positive down-home, soft impression of our city." It gives the impression "that it has strong values, that it's not a cosmopolitan place, that it's a family place that has some depth to it." Convention business was up 10 percent last year, and her "familiarization tours" for convention planners attracted about 20 serious patrons. The show, of course, was among the landmarks on the tour.

**N**EW LISTENERS ASIDE, it's difficult to find anyone who believes the current

"Prairie Home" season is the best. Ms. Moos says there were "peaks and valleys." Ostroushko feels the heyday fell between 1981 and 1985, and some of the old Sculpture Garden fans now prefer the humor and good spirits of the new morning show; over 600 listeners flocked to the World Theater in April for its 6-to-9 a.m. celebration of Shakespeare's birthday. "Prairie Home" reruns will continue at least another year, and next January at the earliest Noah Adams will unveil a new Saturday night variety show with a little music, a little poetry — and without the six years of preparation that Keillor had before his show's national debut.

Within the "Prairie Home" community there are the inevitable traces of nostalgia. "We've done incredible tours," Ms. Moos says. "There was one we called 'The Death March to the Prairie' where we were doing one-night stands, unfolding this giant apparatus, doing a show and then getting it in the truck and going on."

She remembers a live broadcast in the late '70s, "At Ames, Iowa, in a hall that seated two, three thousand people on a Saturday night. Full house. We pack it up and the next night we're playing to 20 people in Sioux Center, Iowa, 200 miles away. I mean, from the sublime to the minute."

Maybe someday Garrison Keillor will write a monologue about that tour and that era of "A Prairie Home Companion" lore. He could bill it as the show that time forgot and the decades cannot improve.

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