

Garrison Keillor signs off Saturday in last 'Prairie Home Companion'

By Joanne Ostrow
Denver Post Writer

What will Garrison Keillor's listeners miss most when the town of Lake Wobegon, Minn., goes into reruns?

At the top of the list are the more-or-less extemporaneous "News From Lake Wobegon" monologues. Then the commercials for the Powdermill Biscuit Company, Bertha's Kitty Boutique and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery. Also Butch Thompson at the piano, the gentle Scottish folk songs of Jean Redpath and the congratulatory birth and graduation announcements.

"A Prairie Home Companion," the folksy two-hour radio variety show that 4 million listeners enjoy each week live from St. Paul, Minn., will cease production after this weekend. While it lasted, the show revived a radio format that had almost disappeared with Fred Allen, Jack Benny and Bing Crosby's "Kraft Music Hall." The closest surviving relative is The Grand Ole Opry, which inspired Keillor to create his show.

Each weekend for 13 years, Keillor's voice seemed to emanate from a forgotten time and pace. Slowly and innocently, he told homespun stories in a seemingly effortless stream, offering quaintness in a high-tech age.

His preacherlike tones could be lulling, inviting us to join him in a sympathetic look at what it is like to be human. We leaned close to catch his near-whispers, we followed him to his crescendo and we went away with a chuckle. He aimed for chuckles, not belly laughs, and won us over through place names, character names and grand observations on the tiniest of life's absurdities. He spoke for everyone who ever lived in a Lake Wobegon — or ever wished to.

And while the music and the stories were mostly by and about rural folks, the show's appeal reached well beyond the heartland. More than a few urbanites in the media have likened Keillor to Mark Twain.

Saturday's show will be his last. The guests will include Redpath, country legend Chet Atkins, acoustic guitarist Leo Kottke, pianist-organist-conductor Philip Brunelle and Hawaii's Kamehameha Glee Club.

Keillor talked publicly about leaving almost a year ago, but he still took some in his radio audience by surprise when he announced on the air in February that he would leave his Minnesota Public Radio show Saturday to devote full time to writing in his wife's native Denmark.

"I want to resume the life of a shy person," Keillor said, "a life in which there are Saturdays." It was a "simple, painful decision that is cheerfully made," he observed on the show, now heard live on 275 public radio stations.

The Saturday night variety show slated to succeed "A Prairie Home Companion" is "in the earliest stages of development," Minnesota Public Radio spokeswoman Chris Lenger said. It will be hosted by Noah Adams, formerly of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." Two holiday specials have been scheduled for the Adams show, Nov. 21 and Dec. 19, in advance of its national debut Jan. 9.

Last summer, when he announced a 90-minute, tape-delayed version of the radio show on pay-cable's Disney Channel, Keillor, 44, told critics he looked forward to retiring to a place where they do not speak English.

"It relieves you of any responsibility to be intelligent," he said. "You can just be handsome for a change."

He offered advice, too. "Everybody ought to have Denmark as a possibility out there in the future, whenever you might need it."

And what would he take to Denmark?

"Two hundred pounds of books to get me through the first two years, a

popcorn popper, a lot of angel food cake mix . . ."

After Saturday, reruns from Keillor's early shows previously heard only in Minnesota will be offered to public radio stations nationally, mixed with a compilation of "best of" tapes. Additionally, Walt Disney Home Video will release a series of Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" performances on video, beginning with the final show.

For his part, Keillor will welcome the privacy he will find overseas. "I've had sort of a running disagreement with the two newspapers in town over what constitutes private life," he said in a radio interview last March.

The best-selling author of *Happy to Be Here* and *Lake Wobegon Days* has been at odds with the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, particularly after the latter publication printed his home address on its front page.

"There really isn't any way to resolve it. . . . In the end, they are right when they say that a person who chooses to be in the public eye really forfeits any legal claim to privacy. . . . and so it really leaves me no alternative but to go."

"I think that a person who is not shy might be more adventurous in being one of these extravagant public characters that we all love, people who really don't seem to draw any line around themselves and who live flamboyant and colorful lives in public. I'm not that person."

And so he will trade the limelight in St. Paul for obscurity in Copenhagen. Keillor knows Denmark from several vacations there. He told "A Prairie Home Companion" listeners that "I find life over there somewhat as I remember Lake Wobegon."

That must mean all the women are strong, all the men good-looking and all the children above average.