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Times photo by Greg Beckel

Garrison Keillor, host of "A Prairie Home Companion," talked into his microphone for the last time Saturday evening. Keillor, who started his public radio career in Collegeville, ended the long-running show, broadcast from St. Paul's World Theater, to move with his wife to Denmark.

Woe is here for Keillor's fans

By DEBORAH HUDSON
Times Staff Writer

ST. PAUL — A headline in today's Lake Wobegon Herald Star would have to read: Local Boy Makes Good.

Of course, there is no Herald Star and there is no Lake Wobegon. But there might as well be for as much as people will miss the weekly show that Garrison Keillor has hosted for 13 years.

During Saturday night's final broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion," fans everywhere laughed, cried, cheered and sighed as their longtime friend bade them farewell.

Keillor's deady accurate descriptions of small-town life have put the mythical Lake Wobegon and the real Central Minnesota on the map for an estimated 4 million public radio listeners.

Keillor opened the broadcast at the World Theater in St. Paul by singing his theme song, "Hello, Love."

He closed the two hour-plus show by singing three additional sentimental songs during four encores.

During the final encore, he asked St. Cloud native Margaret Moos, the show's producer, to come on stage and take a bow.

"I've never believed in brave, cheerful farewells," Keillor said early in the show.

'Prairie Home' replacements: 9A

"I want people to throw themselves prostrate and weeping onto the floor or the dirt ... I want people to throw their arms around my ankles and beg me to stay," he said.

It's unlikely that forlorn expressions would have changed Keillor's decision to leave the show and move to Denmark, the native country of his wife, Ulla. He plans to continue writing and work on a possible screenplay for his best-selling book, "Lake Wobegon Days."

"I'm going to miss you an awful lot," Keillor said. "More than you'll miss me."

Keillor/9A

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Keillor — 'Wobegons' line up to fill Keillor slot

Keillor's weekly variety show began broadcasting on July 6, 1974. The show always has been sponsored by Powder-milk Biscuits and always has included a monologue of the news from the fictional town of Lake Wobegon.

Keillor began spinning Wobegon vignettes when he worked at Minnesota Public Radio station KSJR in Collegeville in the summer of 1968.

Saturday's program didn't resolve any storylines: Buster the Show Dog and his friends — Father Finnian, Sheila and Timmy — all hopped a southbound freighter.

Keillor's monologue barely alluded to his own departure. He left his listeners sitting in the booth at the Chatter-box Cafe while several friends and relatives sat eating toasted cheese sandwiches and cream of mushroom soup on a rainy Minnesota day.

The show's entertainment recalled the early broadcast years. Tenor Vern Sutton, who appeared on the first show, sang several numbers including a whimsical view of his departure, "Sweet Songs of Parting With Overture," by Handel.

The lyrics dealt with saying goodbye, packing up chicken salad for the road and taking a bag of rhubarb along.

Humorist Roy Blount Jr. read a poem he wrote for Keillor, which included the line "It's better for something to be good and be over, than rotten and still going on."

Also appearing were singers Jean Redpath; Kate MacKenzie; guitarist Chet Atkins; Leo Kottke, who attended St. Cloud State University; Queen of the Autoharp Stevie Beck; the Kamehameha Schools Concert Glee Club, a high school choir from Hawaii; musician Philip Brunelle and pianist Richard Dworsky.

Providing amazing sound effects several times was audience favorite Tom Keith, better known as Jim Ed Poole, host of the morning program. Keith provided sound effects for Buster the Show Dog. The audience broke into wild applause when he produced accurate sounds of fireworks and duds during a rousing rendition of "Stars and Stripes Forever."

Keillor appeared on the stage wearing his trademark red suspenders, white shirt, black trousers and red socks. He showed no extraordinary emotion during the broadcast, but seemed especially pleased when the audience filled in loon calls during an song about Lake Wobegon.

"Aw, thank you, thank you so very much," he said simply.

Minnesota Public Radio plans to launch a weekly variety show next January to be hosted by former National Public Radio broadcaster Noah Adams. Until then, reruns will have to suffice. Disney Channel subscribers can view the final broadcast at 10:30 p.m. Wednesday.

And, as Keillor would say, "That's the news from Lake Wobegon."

Report says

'Wobegons' line up to fill Keillor slot

CHARLESTON, W. Va. (AP) — Garrison Keillor's departure from mythical Lake Wobegon creates a void in public broadcasting, but producers and distributors hope his 4 million listeners will leave on their radios.

A half-dozen programs, including four already in production, are targeting the audiences that have been listening to "A Prairie Home Companion," the Saturday evening show Keillor began on Minnesota Public Radio show in 1974.

"Some people won't listen to radio anymore, but some will listen to the other shows and discover that radio is wonderful," said Dean Boal of National Public Radio, which distributes "Mountain Stage," "Our Front Porch," "Flea Market" and "Whad'ya Know?"

"I mean no ill will toward Minnesota Public Radio, but Garrison's leaving does open new opportunities for everyone in broadcasting," Boal said.

Keillor, who became public radio's most celebrated personality after publishing a best-selling book about his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon, decided to leave "Prairie Home Companion" after 13 years. His last original broadcast was Saturday.

Boal and other radio executives say they are not trying to replace Keillor.

"If you confront people with something in the place of something they love, they may stay away from it," said Stuart Rosenberg, producer and host of "Flea Market."

"Mountain Stage," which National Public Radio began distributing last June, is the closest of the NPR offerings to "Prairie Home Companion," which is distributed by rival American Public Radio. Both are two-hour shows performed before live audiences.

Andy Ridenour, who produces "Mountain Stage" here, played down any similarities and said, "Radio variety shows did not begin with 'Prairie Home Companion.'" But he said some of his program's 87 stations are moving the show to better times in an apparent attempt to get some of the audience.

WCPN in Cleveland, for example, will begin carrying "Mountain Stage" at 6 p.m. Saturday — "Prairie Home's" slot for the past 2½ years.

Minnesota Public Radio has a new show in the works that features Noah Adams, a former host of NPR's "All Things Considered." The still-untitled show is scheduled to begin in January in the same spot "Prairie Home Companion" occupies.

American Public Radio then will move distribution of "Prairie Home" reruns to the time slot NPR offers "Mountain Stage."

Yet another entry may come from WNYC radio in New York, which has kicked around ideas of starting a new show, said Tina Nayer, a programming assistant.

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