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## Night falls on Lake Wobegon, but Keillor leaves a legacy

**By Kim Ode**  
Staff Writer

Writer Howard Mohr has known Garrison Keillor for years, yet there never was a more revealing moment in their relationship than one Saturday evening about seven years ago.

"We were sitting around his kitchen table talking, and we were drinking a little whiskey, too," Mohr said. "We were talking and talking and the main subject was religion, which was a common subject.

**Keillor was a throwback to time before TV. Page 1C.**

"Well, it must have been 1:30, 2 in the morning when he told me that Powdermilk Biscuits were the grace of God. And I tell you what, I believed it. . . . Then I could see why he often started the show with a Powdermilk Biscuits Spot — 'Nice to know something so plain can be so good. 'Heavenly they're tasty.' 'Has your family tried 'em?' — It all fit. I really believe he thought he had a

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**Writer Howard Mohr**

kind of mission there."

The mission changed, of course, as the Powdermilk Biscuit logo started appearing on T-shirts and coffee mugs, as the cast started traveling in jets instead of buses, as it finally appeared on TV. At 5 p.m. today, the mission as people have come to know it will end when "A Prairie Home Companion" is broadcast for the last time.

The Saturday-evening institution grew out of a free-wheeling morning show Keillor hosted in the early 1970s, but it owes allegiance to the Grand Ole Opry, which Keillor once wrote about for the New Yorker magazine. In 13 years, the audience for "A Prairie Home Companion" has grown to 4 million people who tune in on 279 stations of the American

Public Radio network. Based on the characters and settings of his radio monologues, Keillor's first novel, "Lake Wobegon Days," sold 1.2 million copies in hardcover, and 2.3 million paperback copies have been printed.

Ironically, the show that celebrated the worth of shy people turned Keillor into a celebrity, and led to some disquieting weeks in Lake Wobegon.

Keillor continued on page 9A

### Keillor

*Continued from page 1A*

"He did change in the last year," said Mohr, who wrote almost 200 scripts for the show. "I think that to put it mildly, any number of things did start getting to him. You could sum it up as 'too much, too fast.'"

In February, Keillor announced he was ending the show, saying, "It simply is time to go." In later interviews, he said that his fans had destroyed his ability to gather material. "Suddenly people don't talk to you about all these interesting things. They talk about 'he's this interesting what's happening to you?'" That, and his belief that Twin Cities newspapers had invaded his privacy, forced him to leave, he said.

Perhaps the show's most enduring legacy was not only that it changed how the rest of the world viewed the Midwest, but it changed the way Midwesterners viewed themselves.

"He was able to comment on the human condition with his sense of humor and wit and empathy that never really pokes fun at people, but does it with people because you know that he's included in it," said award and organist Philip Brunelle, who frequently performed on the show. "There's not an enormous number of people who have combined humor with this special commentary. One looks at Mark Twain, at Will Rogers, and I think, one looks at Garrison Keillor."

Brunelle launched into a tale of the time soprano Janis Harty of the Minnesota Opera brought her manager, Fredrick, onto the show to do a duet of "Indian Love Call." "She started 'When I'm calling you-oo-oo-oo' and the dog roared his head back with his mouth facing straight up and howled. It was one of the rare times I saw Garrison lose control on the show. Garrison, the audience, everybody just roared. It was up for grabs."

One hallmark of the show was its far-reaching variety. "Indian Love Call" could be heard one week, the soulful, jazzy harmonies of the Penasolas the next, and country guitar-picker Char Atkins the next. Pointe Rich Dworkin said the show will be remembered for its willingness to champion bluegrass and country music. "There is so much of the musical community that sort of approaches the traditional music—reggae-in-check, that it's cheap nostalgia," he said. "Garrison approaches it with passion and love."

The show always reflected what Keillor loved. "He is the guiding light," Brunelle said. "He is the first word about what is going to be on the show, who is going to be on it and what is going to be heard. Sometimes, it's at the last second, but that's creativity."

Said Vern Sutton, an operatic tenor who was on the first show: "He makes the final artistic decisions: what songs he wants and who will sing them. People will make arrangements, but if he doesn't like it, it doesn't go. In other words, it's a kind of overriding taste that flavors the thing."

The show's spontaneity could be breathtaking. "I've had to be willing to go out there and be vulnerable," Sutton said. "You're never sure what he'll say to you and if you can't go with it, you won't be asked back."

Sutton married Keillor's own spontaneity. One of the show's Thanksgiving traditions was taking suggestions from the audience about what to be thankful for, and turning them into an amusing oration.

"Din Penasola had just sung a very moving but also very brilliant song about a battered woman, and here we were backstage going to come out and be silly," Sutton said. "We couldn't do that, so Garrison said he'd go out to do a commercial to break things up and he went out and did the funniest one I've ever heard, about Minnesota who has never moved away but would like to visit home. The personal lines did on somebody's hide-a-bod and at least two milkies in a church basement. It was really choice—and it was something he made up on the spot."

Cyprian Susan Voss, who did some writing for the show, remembers the perfectionist Keillor expected. "Sometimes when push comes to shove, I'm willing to go for the B-pill instead of the A. But he never gives up his line in that look that he has and says, 'This isn't good enough. Can you fix it?'"

She found Keillor to be "a very eccentric man and a very wonderful man. He tries to be as friendly as he can in the framework of his shyness. Sometimes, there's that sense of tipping on an eggshell; you don't know what you're dealing with. But the last time I was on the show, which was a week before he announced he was leaving, I don't know if he already made up his mind or if it was his new wife, but he seemed to be more happy and relaxed than I had ever seen him."

The strain had taken its toll. Mohr volunteered that he and Keillor "don't see eye to eye on some things now," although he would not elaborate. But that doesn't change his

memories of the show, especially the one from St. Lucas Church west of Cottonwood, the southern Minnesota town where Mohr lives.

That show made Mohr more nervous than he'd ever been. "I mean, I stood next to (singer) Emmy Lou Harris and I thought I'd never stand that, but there were the two mechanics who worked on my car and there was my carpenter pal from north of town. I did not want to screw up."

After the troupe had done shows in Los Angeles, Hawaii and Chicago, the intimate setting of St. Lucas also made Keillor nervous, Mohr said. It was almost as if the show had come full-circle. He recalled "this big picture in back of the altar with Jesus healing someone." Keillor was standing in front of it, talking about Powerline's Biscuits, urging families to try them. "If I ever write a book about the show, that's where I'd begin," he said.

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