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Prairie Home Companion is scheduled to continue in repeats until January when a new satirical program will air with host Noah Adams of the American Public Radio news show All Things Considered.

## Wobegon will be gone

**By Michael Dougan**  
**San Francisco Examiner**

**ST. PAUL, Minn.** — This is a story of how American lost Prairie Home Companion, but got to see it first.

It's a twisted tale, with irony at every turn. The story begins on a St. Paul Sunday morning as the self-described Boy Scout, author and American Public Radio star, Garrison Keillor, strolls across the lawn of a mansion near his own swimming pool, looking at a newspaper and an observer from a second-story window puts it, "like he's going to the dentist."

Keillor, who does not like to meet the press, is here to have breakfast with a handful of reporters gathered to mark the debut of his immensely popular radio show, *Prairie Home Companion*, on the Disney Channel, which is not radio, but television.

Tonight at 6 p.m. on WDET-FM (101.3) Keillor will broadcast his final PHC episode, to be repeated Sunday at 1 p.m. The show marks the end of a 13-year run and the demise of the top-rated public radio program in America. Meanwhile, fans who've long listened to the show can now see it on the U.S. pay-cable Disney Channel the same day. It is not a television show, but rather a radio show that's televised. The difference is significant.

**KEILLOR IS HERE** to tell why he's leaving out just PHC, or St. Paul or Minnesota, but the whole country. Two days after his final show Keillor and his wife, Ulla Skerfved, will move into their new apartment in Copenhagen, her home town. He's going to Denmark, Keillor says, to find the privacy that St. Paul denies him. Keillor is angry at this city, and particularly at its newspapers. As he tells it, local journalism is driving him to the far side of the Atlantic.

"I live in a town with a lousy newspaper," he says of the St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch. "It's a newspaper which, as far as I'm concerned, is wicked."

Keillor first started complaining about his prominence in the local press in 1984, soon after his picture appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. He threatened to leave town and move to Denmark then. Instead, he bought an expensive home, flew to Copenhagen to marry Skerfved, and returned. Because the purchase of this house struck editors at the St. Paul newspaper as ironic in its own right, in light of his public proclamations of displeasure with the town, they ran a picture of it. That, it seems, was the final straw.

"I come home from Denmark and walk in and there's a copy of the paper and it's got a picture of my house and the address on it," Keillor recalled. "This is awfully strange for St. Paul."

**KEILLOR NEVER** identifies *Time*, his appearances on the David Letterman Show, or broadcasts of his radio program on public television and, now, the Disney Channel as possible sources of his celebrityhood. He sees the phenomenon as strictly a local issue.

The point, says Keillor, is that a writer requires anonymity. Each week on PHC, Keillor delivers delicious little monologues about life in his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon. These slice-of-life pieces, he says, require careful observation of people around him, and that's not possible when fame drops your every footstep.

"I used to get a lot of wonderful ideas for stories and characters from people who I knew casually, who come in and empty your wastebasket, who come in and fix the lights, people you run into in a cafe and have a casual conversation with. In order for me to gather this material, and to have some sense of life in this imaginary town, you have to be an ordinary person, you have to have some semblance of anonymity, and I don't have that anymore in St. Paul. So I can't really do the show here except as a caricature of itself."

**KEILLOR SAYS** he doesn't mind when people recognize him on the streets. "I love to have an audience and I love to meet them. . . . But the strangeness comes when you become well-known to people as somebody who is well-known. They are afraid to make your acquaintance without quite knowing what it is that you do."

(Several nights earlier, a reporter took an informal survey in a St. Paul disco to ascertain the extent of Keillor's local fame. The respondents were asked whether they had ever heard of Garrison Keillor, *Prairie Home Companion* or Lake Wobegon. None, save one gay couple, knew of Keillor or his show. All were familiar with the name Lake Wobegon, though they couldn't say why. One young man swore he'd been there.)

Later, watching Keillor rehearse his show, one sees his producer, Margaret Moon. It was Moon's earlier departure from the program — and Keillor's life — that launched the publicity that compelled him to turn his back on St. Paul.

**MOON WAS** Keillor's romantic partner; they lived together for years. It's probable that they would still be sharing quarters — and *Prairie Home Companion* would not be destined for a quick conclusion — had not Keillor attended the 25th reunion of his class at Anoka High School in the suburbs of Minneapolis in August 1985. There, in his astonishment, he saw Skerfved, a former exchange student from Denmark whom he'd briefly dated as a teenager. "We had kept in touch until we were married and then we lost touch, we gave up touch," he recalled. Now both were divorced, Keillor was keeping house with Moon and love blossomed anew between the Boy Scout and the Copenhagen Lady.

Moon moved out, a development carefully reported to Twin Cities readers by Nick Coleman, media columnist for the *Minneapolis Star* and *Tribune* (now employed at the St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch). Moon went to California to work as a free-lance radio producer.

**KEILLOR WAS** infuriated at Coleman's coverage of his personal life. In his monologues and his book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, he told how Lake Wobegon was left off the map because Minnesota was surveyed by "a drunken Irishman named Coleman." He recalled listeners with tales of a dog called Nick that roamed around in garbage, then cried in his sad sink on the shore.

Coleman remained unfazed. "For the most part I think those gags have been mis-quipped, but they're pretty much of an in-joke," he said in a recent phone conversation. "It's part of the game; it hasn't bothered me."

Now Moon is back on the show, her friendship with Keillor reinvigorated and he says things between them are "fine."

The folks from Disney insist it's coincidence that the 13 PHC shows they agreed to air are the last Keillor will ever do. He says otherwise. Keillor sees the broadcasts as a farewell splash, an opportunity to obliterate the radio mirage.

"I know when I read letters from listeners complaining about the show going to television, complaining about their illusions being destroyed, that this is something personal between them and me," he says.

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't have an end date, because the fear of failure is so great. Having done this show on radio for 13 years, the thought of cancellation (on TV) after 13 weeks would be almost unbearable."

**THOUGH HE'S SENDING** *Prairie Home Companion* into broadcast history, Keillor says he's not abandoning his beloved Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, the men are good-looking and the children above average."

He wants to write a genuine novel about the place (*Lake Wobegon Days* did not have the narrative thread of a novel). He says it will be the first time Lake Wobegon will be in "a story."

He also wants to see his beloved Lake Wobegon residents come to life in a feature film "with actors and a director; it's a way of giving over a story to other people." Keillor adds that those who object to the concept of a Lake Wobegon movie as illusion-shattering "are wrong."

Meanwhile, he must prepare for tonight's final show. The Boy Scout admits that "I'm completely in the dark" about what form it will take.

"I want to do something that's graceful and that's funny," he says. "I've thought of doing a parody of *Madame Bovary*; show-business farce; one of those self-tributes that people in my business put on from time to time. But I don't know if people would appreciate the joke."