



(Staff Photos by Vysto Starinakas)

Garrison Keillor, Kate MacKenzie and Linda and Robin Williams, left to right, perform at a rehearsal of A Prairie Home Companion's Second Annual Farewell Performance in the Mead Chapel at Middlebury College Friday.

## Hello Again, Lake Wobegon

Keillor Comes Back To Warm Welcome

By ED BARN  
MIDDLEBURY — A reunion audience of Middlebury College alumni gave Garrison Keillor a hero's welcome Friday as the long-time host of the live radio program "A Prairie Home Companion" began a series of comeback shows he has called "The Second Annual Farewell Performance."

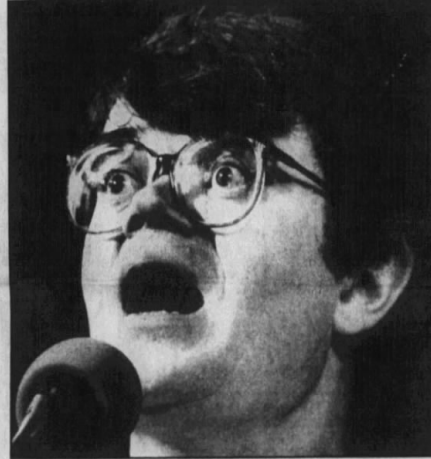
In a partial preview of what audiences will see next weekend in New York City, Keillor intertwined themes of city and country, leaving home and loving home, in a show that had reunions of many kinds in mind.

The audience responded to what some described as a lifetime experience by giving the cast a standing ovation, which did not end until everyone was sure there would be one more number.

Middlebury College President Olin Robison said, "We could fill (Mead Chapel) as many times as Garrison could be persuaded to perform in it. He enjoys extraordinary popularity."

"It's really quite an extraordinary cultural phenomenon," Robison said. "I think it's because it's fresh, imaginative humor that is just quintessential America, and always in good taste," he said.

When Keillor decided last



Garrison Keillor in rehearsal.

June to take the two-hour Saturday night show off the air, giving him more time for writing and family life, an estimated audience of four million American Public Radio listeners went into mourning.

The program's fictional Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon had become a shared past, as well as proof that entertainment could be quiet (or even shy).

gently humorous, wittily profound, free of sex and violence, yet still with popular appeal.

For Prairie Home Companion addicts, it was impossible to imagine no more "news" from "the little town time forgot," "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

(See Page 18: Prairie)

# Prairie

(Continued from Page One)

No more ads for Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"), the Fearmonger Shop ("for all your phobia needs") and Powdermilk Biscuits (that "give shy people the strength to get up and do what has to be done").

No more jazz and ragtime piano from Butch Thompson and his trio. No more folk music from Robin and Linda Williams, or from guests such as Doc Watson and Leo Kottke. No more lessons on how to speak Minnesotan. No more Buster the Show Dog.

Finally, it was too much for Keillor as well. With his books "Lake Wobegon Days" and "Leaving Home" both safely on the best-seller lists, he decided to return to his roots in live radio.

In the March announcement of his "farewell return", Keillor said, "It was so much fun leaving that we're coming back to say goodbye again. It is our farewell performance, and I hope the first of many."

In a pause during rehearsals Friday afternoon, singer Robin Williams said the show needed a place to start where it could be assured of a warm reception, and the Middlebury audience in 1983 had been one of their best.

At those concerts, virtually the entire audience of 700 showed up three-quarters of an hour early in hope of getting a good seat, according to Middlebury College public relations director Ron Nief.

This year, first one, then two, then three performances were scheduled, after the first tickets sold out in 13 minutes.

It will all mean fast footwork for Keillor on Saturday, since he must address a graduation in Pennsylvania before flying back to do back-to-back shows in Middlebury.

Whatever doubts Keillor & Company may have had about making a comeback, the old magic was there from the first song on. "It's a wonderful night, you're back with me, things are like they used to be," Keillor sang, in his

traditional opening.

Then he began talking as if he and the audience had been married and had broken up: "People told me you had put on weight...I like your hair the way you have it, too, it's interesting."

"I think it's good that you've all tied up with new radio shows," Keillor went on. "That's good. I haven't performed with any new audiences. I'm just a one audience sort of guy."

Keillor then brought his audience into the act, and right into the palm of his hand, by telling them he had realized during his vacation from show business that applause was much too long. With only two tries, the Middlebury alumni mastered the art of clapping once in unison at his direction.

And so it went, with the audience hardly missing stars such as Chet Atkins, Leo Kottke, and the Everly Brothers, who will join the cast later.

Keillor, now a resident of New York City, said, "I like New York a lot," but there is one problem — the New York Times.

The reason so many New Yorkers come to Vermont, he said, is because so many New York-size apartments have filled up with unread sections of The Times. The only solution is a moratorium on publishing more news, he said, after which people will no longer flee to the country in fear of the Sunday edition.

At one point Friday night, Keillor sang a song he had made up about leaving home around Memorial Day in 1951:

"I look back and shed a tear to see it in my rearview mirror. I said I'd be gone a couple months and now its been 30 years. My Wobegon! I close my eyes, and I can see you just as clearly as in days gone by."

He conjured up a vision of an abandoned farmhouse in a windbreak on the prairie, where someone can now see through both walls of the house. At the same time, he said, there's a building there where grain was stored in which you could still smell the corn, wheat and oats.

It was a farm, Keillor said, and farms never die.

Land