

Commencement ceremony in Aurora.



BILL WARREN/Journal Staff

Keillor: Garrison Keillor spoke to Wells College graduates at Saturday's commencement.

Wells students treated to old-fashioned graduation

By JOHN YAUKEY
Journal Staff

AURORA — It was an old-fashioned graduation Saturday at Wells College.

The kind where all the graduates' names were read aloud as they shook the college president's right hand and crossed over with their left to collect the diplomas rolled in red ribbon.

The procession began with Mollie Abbott and ended with Mary Ann Young, and as they crossed the flagstones in front of Macmillan Hall most stared down at a curious but familiar figure thoughtfully crouched in a leather chair near the front of the informal stage.

Tall, legs crossed at the knees, a boyish tassel of hair riding the upper rim of his scholarly spectacles — America's great radio showman Garrison Keillor had come to give the college's 120th graduating class some salty advice. And of course, he spun a story or two.

With all the publicity the former host of the beloved radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" has been getting, there was the possibility he would eclipse the occasion.

■ Cuomo speaks at SUNY Buffalo, 4A

The lanky "Minnesot'n" was the talk of the audience.

The anticipation of his speech was almost thicker than the humid morning air.

But, whether he knew it or not, Keillor stepped gracefully and lightly around the event without usurping any of its pageantry. It never threatened to become "A Finger Lakes Home Companion."

He spoke for only about 25 minutes, his parlor baritone voice settling into easy stories of childhood and parenthood, sprinkled with palpable observations that were themselves tiny tales. At an event meant to punctuate time Keillor lulled into timelessness.

"Our parents told us that listening to rock 'n roll would lead to having babies," he said, raising a hand to the class of 82 graduates seated before him. "Well, here you are."

Keillor was a perfect point of symmetry as he stood before the fan-waving but silent

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crowd of about 300. Behind him was Macmillian Hall with its red bricks, white trim, and four huge Ionic pillars, a pair on each side of the 6-foot, 4-inch Midwesterner.

"Have children," he said, followed by a pause during which his face sank into its famous inquisitive droop. "Change the world. As children you made peace in your families."

His first child, he said, freed him of the grief and nostalgia he carried through his 20s.

"Nostalgia is for people with weak imaginations," he said.

His address wandered, but not aimlessly.

He spoke fondly of "cruising for the unattainable vice" in his first car, a '57 Olds, and indirectly about the guilt he inherited from his childhood.

Raised in a withdrawn, taciturn family in the town of Anoka near Minneapolis, Keillor is the product of opposing forces. He is passionate about life despite his strict upbringing.

Like the middle Olson boy in his best-selling book "Lake Wobegon Days," he longed to reach and grab the curious medallion hanging on a chain between a buxom waitress' breasts at Mom and Dad's Cafe but was halted in mid grasp by the resounding explosion of the town's grain elevator.

He remains shamefully curious about sex.

"I should be teaching my children about love and sexuality now — but I just can't do it," he said amusingly.

He also recalled his own college graduation as "an unlikely event."

"I failed all my classes for the first year and a half, but I was busy doing other things," he said. "Graduating was like getting on the quiz show and winning the new convertible."

The afternoon was rich with the splendidly simple episodes of life Keillor cherishes and gleans.

Dogs bounded amid red and white dogwood trees in sprawling bloom stopping to gaze headcocked at the curious new insects hatched by spring's late warmth.

Children in soiled suits and pastel flowered dresses chased each other squealing like playing puppies.

After the ceremony, complete with a reading of the year's academic awards, farewell speeches for departing faculty and salutations for new members, the graduates filed out behind Keillor, who stirred a wafting trail of dandelion seeds from a lawn so freshly cut its mowing lanes were still discernible.

As the sun thinned the clouds, tintured blue from the sky, bumble bees gathered at the purple lilacs.

Theater