


CAROL ANN CAMPBELL



The prairie comes east

Garrison Kellor's home-span stories describe a mythical place called Lake Wobegon, "the town that time forgot and the decades could not improve." The other night he went to the mythical Paterson.

Kellor is Minnesota born and bred, and he doesn't seem like the kind of person to draw crowds in northern New Jersey, where, unlike Lake Wobegon, we don't eat Powder Milk Blacitas or spin yarns at the Chatterbox Cafe.

Kellor brought his rural humor to St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Paterson to raise money for the congregation's shelter for homeless men.

The church was packed, a testament to the popularity of "A Prairie Home Companion," his old down-home show on National Public Radio.

Kellor got a lot of suburban folks to drive their Volvo and station wagons down the streets of Paterson — some, perhaps, for the first time.

They parked at the abandoned Masonic lodge, walked past the Roman Parks Apartments, and filled the magnificent old church, whose 180 families are struggling to increase the congregation.

The Rev. Robert Mayo beamed as more than 600 people squeezed into the pews. Mayo liked the looks of a jammed church; Sundays should be so crowded.

Standing in front of an intricate iron gate, Kellor began by singing "Get Along Little Dogies," a Western tune that you don't normally get to sing in church.

He said that a few years ago, after he canceled "A Prairie Home Companion" and moved to Denmark with his wife, Ulla Skarved, he was so desperate to hear English that he started going to an Episcopal church, where he worshipped with "a lot of Brits."

"There were a lot of elderly people in tweed, and people who looked like they just shot a for that morning," he said.

Kellor, a master of the gentle art of church humor, poked fun at the denomination he grew up in, the Church of the Brethren, a fundamentalist faith that forbids gothic architecture, priestly vestments, incense, or musical instruments.

"Not even a harmonica. They have a metal detector at the front door. We didn't get to sing any of the Protestant hits."

Kellor now lives in Manhattan and attends a church whose congregation is black and white, and gay and straight, and single and everything else. Once in a while, some nuclear families will actually show up.

"We have fill-in-the-blank prayers. We pray for things such as peace and justice. Sometimes I think the blanks should be longer."

Kellor is one of those people who can tell church jokes right in the church. He gets away with religious humor because he comes across as a faithful man who — despite all his funny stories — takes religion seriously.

So here is Garrison Kellor, a symbol of the upper Middle West, telling New Jerseyans about life and religion in Minnesota. He tells of the Norwegian Lutherans who settled in Lake Wobegon on their way back from North Dakota, that is, after a migration from nowhere to nowhere.

He tells of the German Catholics who settled in Lake Wobegon because they misread their maps — and refused to admit it.

But he was solemn, too. He led his audience in "How Great Thou Art" and "Book of Ages."

Then Kellor returned to his favorite subject, and how Lake Wobegon is not the end of the world. "But you can see it from there," he said.

He talked longer than two church services, but just a few folks snickered out. Only two nodded off.

He ended by leading everyone in "Amazing Grace." When it was over and St. Paul's was \$7,000 richer for Kellor's appearance, the church sneered out, and the homeless men went to sleep in the shelter.