



Garrison Keillor, now a staff writer at The New Yorker, says, "There's a kind of sweetness about living in New York that I used to think of as Midwestern."

Keillor still calls Wobegon 'home'

By Scott Alarik
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Garrison Keillor may be a New Yorker now, but Lake Wobegon is "still home" to the humorist, author and — from 1974 until 1987 — host of public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion." So when Keillor brings "The News From Home" to the Wang Center this Saturday at 8 p.m. along with jazz pianist and Companion regular Butch Thompson, don't expect hard-bitten tales of life in the urban jungle.

Music preview

According to Keillor, the big news in Lake Wobegon is the continuing problem with the sewer system. "When you cannot flush a toilet with utter certainty, it really hits a person," Keillor said from his office at The New Yorker, where he is a staff writer. "That was the big election issue in Lake Wobegon."

"The news from Lake Wobegon as I hear it is piecemeal. Correspondents stop after two pages; people who call you on the phone leave out a lot after the first three minutes. But there are advantages to staying slightly out of touch. Occasional silence is what keeps a lot of friendships together."

"There's a kind of sweetness about living in New York that I used to think of as Midwestern, but then I lived all my life in the Midwest, so what did I know? But to walk to work in the morning, and the feeling of privacy, is something I think Midwesterners

would appreciate. All the little shops. Immigrant family businesses are what you find on every block: They're the people who do the laundry, sell most of the groceries and flowers and probably run half the restaurants. That appeals to me a lot.

"I suppose I dislike the same things that get everybody down about the city. Maybe because Wall Street is so close and the financial news seems right in the neighborhood, there's a feeling of a voracious virus around, eating our very substance, devouring the mortar between the bricks. Greed I guess is what I'm talking about."

"And that is troublesome in a city where poverty is so public. In the Midwest, poverty is extremely private, discreet. Poor people do everything they can to hide themselves, but here there's no chance of that. And our candidate losing makes it even more worrisome. I can see where George Bush might be a comforting president in a small town in Alabama or out in Wyoming, but it's frightening to live in New York under a Republican president. Up in the big buildings, these guys are just going wild, like there's no tomorrow. And not far uptown, people just don't have anything."

Hearing Keillor ruminate on the New York people he is getting to know in the same slow, thoughtful way he speaks of Lake Wobegon can perhaps offer city-folk a taste of what it must have felt like for the small-town-folk of the Midwestern prairie to hear

themselves suddenly made famous. Attention as affectionate as Keillor's is, of course, flattering. But the accuracy of his vision, so much a part of his humor's brilliance, can be another matter.

"I don't know what to make of New York yet. I meet people who almost never invite anyone to their apartment, who meet their friends in restaurants because they work so hard and their apartment is so small and messy. They've had it for 20 years, and they can't afford to move because it is so cheap, because of rent control. So there they sit. By Midwestern standards, this is the home of a recluse, some old hermit who piles things up all around him till he can hardly walk through."

"On the other hand, I don't understand the people who have a place in the city and then buy a place up in Vermont and kind of go back and forth. I have good friends who live like that, but I don't understand it, because often times their business and their real friends are in the city. Their life, I think, is in the city, but they try to be country people. They want to think of themselves as Vermonters, and they make fun of other New Yorkers who have moved in more recently."

"I can understand the attraction of the country, I guess. But having grown up in the country, I knew it was the city I wanted. So here I am and, having washed up here, I don't have a powerful, secret urge to grow tomatoes."