

Keillor's Wobegon changing

By JAY RATH
Special to The Capital Times

The unthinkable has happened: A major character in Lake Wobegon has died and one of the town's best-known marriages is on the rocks.

The news came in Madison Thursday night during an extemporaneous monologue by humorist Garrison Keillor, whose mythical Minnesota village was made famous on public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion." The program's third annual farewell tour is currently traveling the country. The Thursday performance was the first of two here. Tonight's performance at the Madison Civic Center is sold out, but it will be broadcast live statewide beginning at 8 p.m. on Wisconsin Public Radio.

Serene Lake Wobegon is probably boiling with gossip over the recent, uncharacteristic events there. Keillor's monologue was created in response to suggestions from the capacity audience. News of a character's bikini, deaths, births and marriages was requested. Will Keillor deliver the identical monologue tonight or will he make up another in response to new suggestions? If he doesn't, and if you want to wait and listen to the broadcast, don't read any further. If, however, you want the latest news from Lake Wobegon, read on.

Still with us? Here goes:

It's been anything but quiet in Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keillor's fictional hometown. Regular listeners surely are familiar with Ella Anderson, the long-suffering housewife whose senile husband continually imagines he is on a train ride. She died of a heart attack in February, in the middle of the night, during a visit by her daughter, Charlotte.

"She just waltzed away in the middle of the night, just rose up and out the window and waltzed out on a cloud of steam," said Keillor.

Pastor David Inqvist tried to ease Charlotte's grief, and he asked his wife, Judy, to come stay with Henry and Charlotte while he tried to phone relatives for help. Judy came and stayed for eight and a half days.

Already mad at her husband for letting church elders cancel their trip to a seminar in Orlando, Judy came home furious.

"She felt she had no life of her own. She was as angry as she could be — about that lost trip to Orlando and that bikini she would no longer wear," said Keillor.

She put on the bikini and she wore it around the house. When Pastor Inqvist came home, "he was startled to see her. He pulled shades down as fast as he could." Judy wore the bikini as underwear for the next four days.

She went to St. Cloud, bought some newer, flashier clothes and came home and fixed herself a highball in a jelly glass. Confronting her, Pastor Inqvist said, "Well, who in the hell do you think you are?" loudly enough for the neighbors to hear.

Finally, Judy suddenly asked Arlene Bunson a favor.

"I want to use your car and don't ask me where I'm going or when I'll come back," she said.

Arlene said, "OK. All right." Judy took the car and, as the story closed, was driving to Chicago. Still, there is hope, as Keillor pointed out.

"She knew she would come back to him, otherwise she never would have left him."