

Good news from home

By John Kovalic

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The news from Lake Wobegon came late, and without fanfare. It wasn't over until 11, but the news was good.

Garrison Keillor and the Prairie Home Companion Third Annual Farewell Tour made it to the Madison Civic Center on Thursday night. Brought to you by Powdermilk Biscuits ("Heavens, they're tasty"), the biscuits that give shy people the strength to stand up and do what needs to be done. And by Bertha's Kitty Boutique, in the Dales.

You know the rest.

The stage of the sold-out theater was backed by an American gothic house front, cluttered with F-X fixtures, sprouting with microphones, logjammed with seats and tables and props and pianos. You can tell A Prairie Home Companion — it's the one with the picture of the radio show right on the box.

Hearing Keillor's soothing dulcet voice flow every Saturday through

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speakers that have seen better days, mental images form — mind's-eye icons impossible to shatter. As the harmonies of the Hopeful Gospel Quartet fade in and out as you drive on the Interstate past cornfields and cattle, you build pictures as permanent as if carved out of ivory.

"The moral of our show is that it's good enough to be from the Midwest," Keillor said. "This is something I've learned from marrying a foreign person."

If the pictures came to life Thursday, they suffered little for it.

If the performance lagged now and then over the three-hour marathon, it frequently soared.

Backed by Butch Thompson (who originally was to make an appearance at the Los Angeles finale only), the Hopeful Gospel Quartet and the good performers of the rest of the company, the Prairie Home Compan-

ion was exciting in the slow, quiet way that suits it best.

Individual moments could be magic. Tom Keith's performances as Father Finian, Timmy, and Buster the Show Dog were remarkable. The entire audience being sworn into the Brotherhood of Knute and Keillor's half-time orchestration of "Tell Me Why" were inspired.

The News from Lake Wobegon was left for the last half of the performance, and was breathtaking. Requesting questions about the town from the audience, Keillor knit the final list (Tomatoes, Sweet Corn, the Living Flag, the Pastor and wife, etc.) into a tapestry of sometimes brilliant joy. Colored by moods of warmth and tragedy and humor and sadness, his stories and stories-within-stories became shyly magnificent as they took shape and form and tone.

It was good enough. If you don't have tickets to tonight's sold-out Civic Center show, you can hear it live on WHA-AM and other Wisconsin Public Radio stations.