

# Look who's comin' through that door ...

## San Diego fans are in a Lake Wobegon daze

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**G**arrison Keillor steps on stage and stands before a microphone and a music stand probably meant for the notes he doesn't need anyway. He glances at his pants, pushes his glasses up his ski-slope nose, and begins to speak as if he'd just been interrupted in a conversation with his 300 luncheon guests.

"I just spilled something on my leg," his baritone voice breathes into the mike. Not really funny, but the audience laughs.

"I guess I was over-anxious." Pause. The audience waits for what it knows will be something gently humorous.

"I was in Phoenix last night. I got dehydrated. I've been drinking quarts of water. I may have to excuse myself. . . ."

More laughter and more jokes about Phoenix, which, of course, this San Diego assemblage eats up — just as they will do with the fittingly Midwestern lunch that will be served — Jell-O and fruit cocktail on a lettuce leaf with the obligatory dollop of whipped cream, biscuits, fried chicken, potatoes and gravy, green beans and iced tea. No dessert.

The sold-out event at the U.S. Grant Hotel Tuesday is a fund-raiser for KPBS-FM, and the humorist/radio celebrity appears to be worth every bit of the \$30 ticket cost. His radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," featuring stories about Lake Wobegon, Minn., spawned a cult following that treasures every word about Powdermilk Biscuits, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, and the Sidetrack Tap, where Wally and Evelyn preside.

The show, which began in 1974, ended in 1987 when Keillor married and moved to Denmark. But his "farewell tours," featuring his famous monologues about Lake Wobegon ("the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve") still



John Nelson/The Times-Advocate

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Garrison Keillor greets Beatrix LaGarde and Ken McGinnis of Escondido before a lunch at the U.S. Grant hotel Tuesday.

## Keillor

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pack 'em in. Last night's performance at Symphony Hall sold out almost immediately. (The show will be broadcast at noon Sunday on KPBS-FM, 89.5.)

The fans, who have come from as far away as Orange and Los Angeles counties, are waiting patiently in line to meet "America's tallest radio humorist" before lunch. He not only matches their patience, but actually seems to enjoy himself.

"Hi, how are ya. Nice of you to come," he says with a Sunday-style handshake.

"I sent you a serigraph of a pink house with a pink car," says a short, balding man who explains he's an art teacher.

"Yes, I have it in my office," Keillor replies. "Didn't I send you a note?"

"No."

"Oh, I'm embarrassed. My mother brought me up better than that."

The guests file past. All who can boast of their Minnesotan — or at least Midwestern — roots do so. Most must crane their necks to meet the eyes of the 6-foot-4 author.

"I just sneaked away from work," says a man who slips a copy of "Lake Wobegon Days" into Keillor's open hands for autographing.

Keillor's been on tour since May 20. He's quite used to this.

"Thanks for coming," he says, signing it. "Now, don't work too hard."

The line of fans is as orderly as a Lake Wobegon Lutheran Sunday service — ladies in polyester pant

suits, the Yuppie lunch bunch, a man who resembles a sea captain (Keillor's interpretation), matrons with silk scarves and pearls, a potbellied man with suspenders and a Hawaiian-print shirt that falls open to reveal a stained undershirt.

"Welcome to San Diego," they say. Or, like an older woman in blue taffeta, they try for *real* kinship.

"I met your folks at the funeral of So-And-So in Minneapolis," she says, her small hand sandwiched in his.

"So you're related to the So-And-So family," Keillor says, hitting the mark.

"Yes!" she beams. "Why, yes."

Keillor mentions a dry throat. One woman promptly stations her oversized purse on a nearby table, ferrets through it and unearths a six-pack of cherry lozenges.

"Here, take these," she says in a motherly tone. "You'll need them for tonight, too."

"This is wonderful," he says, raising his thick, devilish eyebrows and accepting the small token of appreciation for the hours she and her children spent before the radio listening to him.

He pops one lozenge into his mouth. The others are filed in his inside pocket, joining the many envelopes handed to him by his adoring public.

Once inside and seated at the banquet tables, the faithful are again treated to the Gospel according to Garrison.

On America's cities:

- "This whole tour across this country has shown me that there are some great cities and some others that are interchangeably horrible."

- "Cincinnati. Cincinnati. Now

there's a great city. And Kansas City. You always know when you're in Kansas City. Madison, Wisconsin. Gorgeous place. Oklahoma City. It's so vast. . . It's a city that when you get there, you not quite sure you're there yet. Next to Anchorage, Alaska, it's the ugliest city in this country."

- "I feel I've been away for a long time, having lived in foreign cities — New York and Copenhagen. I've been to Denmark and I've seen homogeneity and I don't like it. It's un-American."

On public radio:

- "Public radio is many times the employer of last resort."

- "The listeners of public radio are patient and long-suffering. Whatever I particularly want, it gives me something else."

- "Public radio was the only place I could go do what I love to do most and become adequate at it."

- "I love public radio because we take responsibility for what we do, which makes it an adult line of work."

- "There's no excuse for television to do the shabby, demeaning things to the audience that it does."

On his wife, Ulla Skaerved:

- "She doesn't travel with me because, in her words, 'I do not care for going about the country being a hood ornament.'"

During lunch, Keillor circulates between tables, graciously chatting with the patrons as they butter their (Powdermilk?) biscuits, make gravy dams with their mashed potatoes and sip well-lemoned iced tea.

"I think I'm coming down with something," Keillor confides in a journalist at a back table. "I think I'm wearing down."

But there is no sign of this as he

takes the stage again to entertain questions.

Do you ever watch television?

"Yes, I 'commit' television every once in a while, but then I get disillusioned and reform."

Can you tell us about your new radio show (to begin broadcasts Sept. 30)?

"I'm somebody who works very close to deadline. I don't trouble myself with these long-range questions. I picked up that habit in high school. I always felt the best term paper was the one that was fresh — done under high pressure. You don't want to do these things thoughtfully and leisurely."

Could you do something on cats?

"I've had some cats, but they died, so I've moved away from cats. I think they're overdone. I don't want to be a part of that movement."

Despite at least five opportunities to end the monologue, Keillor sticks with his fans. Finally, like a pop singer who launches into a medley of hits, he brings out a radio-listener favorite — a silly rendition of airline instructions to the tune of "Tell Me Why" — in the key of C.

*In the event of the loss  
Of cabin pressure, the panels  
above*

*Your head will open  
And a mask will drop down.  
Grasp the mask firmly  
And breathe nat-ur-a-ly.*

If you couldn't get tickets to Garrison Keillor's San Diego appearance, tickets were available at press time through Ticketron (213-480-3232) for the June 10 show in Universal City. That show will be broadcast live nationally at 4:30 p.m. over public radio.