

## Keillor happy to be back in Midwest

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Garrison Keillor is happy to be back in the Midwest again.

Keillor, the former host of PBS radio's "Prairie Home Companion," spoke to a packed audience Thursday night in the Arena at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Although Keillor was happy to be back in this area, he did not show it.

"We were always taught not to show it," he said.

He spent the rest of the night reading some old stories and new stories, some nice poems and some nasty poems, and led a singalong with the crowd.

Keillor started out by telling the crowd that he lies.

"I've earned my living all my life by telling lies," he said. "I'm good at it. If I had been an honest person, I never would have

met you people."

Born in Anoka, Minn., Keillor said his family "observed a low, normal standard of housekeeping."

"When we were expecting someone, my mother would turn into a blur," he said. For the most part, Keillor's mother threw things into the bedrooms.

But visiting is one of the most important ways of knowing a culture, he said.

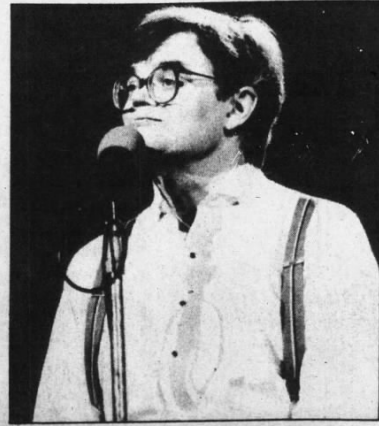
"They'd be Midwesterners: 'Oh, no, we can't come in. Just thought we'd stop by, see if you were home.'

"Then they'd stay for two hours."

Keillor repeatedly compared the Midwest to Denmark, his wife's homeland.

"Denmark is my Motherland-in-law."

Some of the mischievous things Keillor did while living there was "tell some wonderful lies." He told some Danes he



See Keillor, Page 5A Keillor

## Keillor/ Former radio host happy to be back in Midwest

Continued from Page 1A

was a cowboy, and to prove so he would sing an old, traditional cowboy song — that he had written.

He told his Danish stepchildren some American Christmas customs, like the children must bring their parents breakfast.

Keillor sang a song for the crowd he had written, which was telling in some ways. He compared himself to E.B. White and Mark Twain, but admitted they wrote better.

Before reading a story from his book "Leaving Home," Keillor admitted he had never read it because he had written it. But, since picking it up recently, he found it a good book.

"People from the Midwest tend not to give ourselves a lot of credit," he said. "Since I moved to New York, I don't have that problem."

The story is about a Norwegian who turned on his shower to find the water cold. But, he accepted this because Norwegians have learned to take what they can get.

The Norwegian then felt some pains in his heart. He had read that a heart attack is like having an elephant step on your chest. His pains were more like a big dog had stepped on his chest, and then somebody had whistled for him and the dog left.

Going to church that morning, the Norwegian man decided to make a contribution to the plate. Because he had no cash, he wrote out a check for \$30, which was more than usual for two reasons: he had almost had a heart attack, and because it was personalized.

After putting the check into the plate as it passed by, the man realized he had written the check out for \$300, instead of \$30. Can you get a refund? the man wanted to know.

Keillor returned to his talk of the Midwest.

**"I've earned my living all my life by telling lies..."**  
— G. Keillor

"I was born in Minnesota, I lived in Minnesota. I believed the Midwest was the center of the world. I believed people in the Midwest were the salt of the earth.

"Denmark is very much like the Midwest."

Of his Danish wife, Keillor said, "I am married to a foreign person. It is amazing. I almost don't even need to travel any more. I wake up in the morning and Europe is in bed with me."

One problem Keillor had in Denmark was the language. "Danish has weird sounds, like a man trying to get a hair out of his mouth, or someone choking on a potato."

In Keillor's first poem, he told the audience that the doctor had told he had a healthy blood pressure and a below normal cholesterol level. He was very depressed because he knew full well that "macho men are secretly gay/and men with low cholesterol die everyday."

Keillor recited another poem for the young college people in his audience who, he said, appreciated bad taste. So did he, he added.

Keillor let the audience know throughout the night, not only of

his Norwegian background, but of his strict religious ancestors. He said his ancestors were from England, and had come over in the 1650s to "enjoy greater restrictions than were permissible."

Getting back to the Midwest, Keillor said, "The Midwest is beautifully portrayed (in literature), and yet this is a Midwest that is not in the movies.

"It is a fragile thing. I believe you don't know this culture unless you visit homes. It is a culture of closeness. It is a point of peace, and a point of equal liberty."

But Keillor told of a fear that the Midwest culture is being threatened with extinction. He compared the Midwest, again, with Denmark, as an answer.

"The center of their (Danes) culture is the home. That this culture can be based on is these simple things. Our culture is in danger, and I am not sure we'll pass it on.

"We have an obligation to tell stories to our children. If we don't, they won't pick up on the culture we live in. It is the sea we survive in. When they leave they have to bring it with them."

Since moving back from Denmark, Keillor lives in Manhattan.

"Sometimes you think New York needs an Old Testament God. But if he sent a plague, you're not sure they (New Yorkers) would notice."

Having lived in three different places in the last ten years made Keillor think he had "Norwegian bachelor farmer tendencies."

"Their idea was to avoid all responsibility, civic or otherwise," he said.

However, as someone who has moved so much, Keillor pointed out, "You can only run if there

is something to run from. You can't be lost if you don't have a home. You can't be brave or romantic if you don't have a home."

Keillor then read the cowboy biography he had used in Denmark, and it was something like Keillor himself.

The story concerned a man who would tire of the open trail, and settle down, buying a condo over the saloon.

"You miss curtains when you're on the trail."

But soon his neighbors would complain of his loud gargling or yodelling, and he would return to the range in a huff.

Keillor left the Twin Cities, mad that he no longer had the privacy he had as a non-celebrity. He left Denmark in order to return to the U.S. and writing.

He ended his cowboy autobiography by saying, "Seeing a town yonder in the horizon, I knew the same thing was about to happen again."

Keillor then led the crowd in singing different songs, but all to the same tune. He also took questions from the crowd, most of which dealt with what had happened recently to the residents of Keillor's fictitious hometown, Lake Wobegon, Minn.

He ended the evening as only Keillor could do.

"You are the guardians of this sweet, and gentle and humorous place.

"I am proud to be here, happy to be back here, and I hope to see you again soon."