

Keillor prefers the simpler life

By **GERI PARLIN**
Tribune arts reporter

"It has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my hometown."

It was with that line that Garrison Keillor used to greet his audiences on "A Prairie Home Companion," that comfy, cozy Midwestern radio show that turned Keillor into a national celebrity.

Oh, he never quite obtained the folk status of his fellow Minnesotan Bob Dylan. Keillor spoke not of times that are a changin' but of a time that never changed because he had captured its innocence and purity and brought it to life again on the radio. Keillor put Minnesota on the map the way Minnesota wanted to be put on the map. If Minnesota was out of step with the rest of the country, it was a dance step Minnesotans were proud of.

"Minnesota believes in a philosophy of self-denial," Keillor told the audience at a two-hour benefit performance in Viterbo College's Fine Arts Center Sunday afternoon. That's why Minnesota never quite got into the swing of things in the 1980s. "Minnesota did not go for Reagan, so it experienced the '80s in a different way."

That different way allowed the home-grown humorist to elbow his way into the national consciousness through a gentle, self-deprecatory humor that drifted into

\$25,000 raised

Keillor's concert raised about \$25,000 after expenses for Jason Koppelman's scholarship fund. Also added to the fund was about \$500 raised in a raffle of a "Star Wars" poster. The poster was won by Central High School senior Stacy Hundt.

The first scholarship will be awarded next spring.

the minds and hearts of Americans through the radio airwaves.

Even when Keillor took himself off to Denmark in a huff, claiming that the press had driven him from Minnesota, he remained in our hearts and mind. Yes, Mr. Keillor, gallivant to foreign soil if you must, but return to us refreshed and resume the yoke of radio stardom.

He never did return to us. Instead, he planted his feet on the concrete of New York City, and there reincarnated himself as the host of "The American Radio Company on the Air."

He could call himself Big City and he

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Colby Asherman of the Tribune staff



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GARRISON KEILLOR shares the stage with part of the audience Sunday.

RETURNS TO MIDWEST: Garrison Keillor performs a benefit concert at Viterbo College's Fine Arts Center Sunday afternoon.



Cathy Acherman of the Tribune staff

FUND-RAISER: Garrison Keillor's concert appearance Sunday night at Viterbo College raised about \$25,000 for the Jason Koppelman scholarship fund.

■ Keillor likes simple life

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could be geographically distant from the help-your-neighbor atmosphere of the Midwest, but we knew our Midwest pal was in there somewhere, waiting for just the right invitation.

That invitation arrived via the U.S. mail, when Kent and Janet Koppelman of La Crosse wrote to Keillor about the death of their son Jason. Jason, 19, who died Sept. 13 in a car accident, had loved Keillor's latest book, "We Are Still Married," and the Koppelmans thought Keillor should know.

Keillor was so touched by the Koppelmans' letter that he volunteered to perform a show to raise money for a scholarship fund the Koppelmans were setting up in Jason's name. And so it was grief and loss that finally brought Keillor back to us, with the same gentle humor, the same hoksey songs and the same Minnesota mentality that could declare "Bill Bailey" an old Danish tune.

Though he is a New Yorker now, he recalls the wide open spaces when he types a story for the New Yorker or works on a bit for his radio show. "I ride every day on my big Underwood cross the wide open page."

The fictional Lake Wobegon was mostly absent from Sunday's show, but Keillor made up for that by fictionalizing the early days of La Crosse.

Viterbo College was founded by nuns, Keillor explained, but these were not your run-of-the-mill, pray-all-the-time nuns. "They were engineering nuns."

You can almost picture the nuns at their drafting tables, plotting the future of La Crosse and

building Viterbo brick by brick, pushing up the sleeves of their brown habits as they trundle wheelbarrows to the building site.

When it came time to name the college, they took the "Vi" from vitality and the "terbo" from the turbo engine, and came up with Viterbo — the "engine of life."

Once the college was discovered, it needed a town built around it. The nuns left that discovery up to their friend Lisle La Crosse. He would have spelled it Lyle like any God-fearing Lutheran from Minnesota, but he was French, hence the funny spelling. Anyway, Lisle painted a picture of La Crosse and "then people just filled it in."

Once he has established the origins of La Crosse, Keillor quite naturally goes on to explain why God created winter.

"Winter is good for us, and this one isn't quite cold enough and doesn't have enough snow. Studies have shown that cold makes us intelligent. The government has repressed this information."

It is only the weak and the sick who opt for the more temperate climate of Florida, maintains Keillor. "If you're ill, I suppose the South would be the place for you to go."

Maybe it was the cold that made Minnesotans just naturally more spiritual. Keillor will forever remember his brush with gospel music. As part of a five-member gospel quartet, the teen-aged Keillor penned a song he felt sure would win the gospel competition. But his compatriots in song refused to sing what he calls "the first a cappella, gospel, doowop, teen-age, car-crash song."

It wasn't until he was halfway through the song that Keillor real-

ized how the song might affect the Koppelmans. He apologized to them after the performance. "I have the unerring instinct to go in the wrong direction."

As Keillor matured, so did his taste in music. When he grew to be a man, his musical tastes wandered into classical music.

"This is a song I wrote with Georges Bizet." To the tune of Bizet's "Carmen," Keillor sang the story of Duane, a 4-Her from Omaha who felt a need to express the Frenchness in himself, so he ran off to France and became Georges Bizet.

Keillor said he was honored to perform the concert for Jason's scholarship fund. "A person doesn't get all that many readers. You hate to see a good one go."

As to why Jason liked the book, Keillor figures it may be for the same reason Keillor himself likes it.

"There are quite a few good sentences in this book."

Following the concert, Keillor accompanied Janet and Kent to Oak Grove Cemetery to visit Jason's grave.

Asked how he felt at the cemetery, Keillor paused before replying. "I don't know how to describe it. I have a son the same age."

Kent said the concert helped the healing process. "I think it was part of what we had hoped it would be. I learned why Jason liked him so much. There were moments that were hard. There were tears in my eyes when no one else had them."

Jan Koppelman said she was glad it was over. "It's been a terrific afternoon. I cried during some of it, but it felt good overall."