

The Star-Herald, Kosciusko, Miss., June 7, 1990 5

Keillor (broad)casts his spell from Memphis

by Jack Weatherly
Editor of The Star-Herald

What a treat to listen to Garrison Keillor broadcast live from the Orpheum in Memphis.

Creator of "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor captured in song and word pictures the essence of the town where I grew up and spent more than half my life.

As is his style, he did it in a gently mocking, always loving way.

"Prairie Home" was discontinued on Keillor's whim in 1987, but, thankfully, has been replaced by his "American Radio Company of the Air," which visited Memphis last Saturday.

The same magic that created Keillor's Lake Wobegon works when applied to a real place. After

all, it takes imagination to understand the world around us.

The air in Memphis was "sweet and thick," he said, like someone savoring a delicacy and saddened that the experience will end so soon.

"There are just so many great American cities, and you can only see them for the first time once," he observed.

Things American are Keillor's specialty. He himself has already become an American institution.

Like a latter-day Will Rogers, he makes us look at ourselves as if we had stepped in front of a mirror for the first time.

Music and barbecue — no doubt at times as thick and sweet as the atmosphere of Memphis in June — were reflected.

Memphis is "a gorgeous city . . . and music is its most gorgeous part," he mused in that half-whisper baritone of his that always sounds like he is letting you in on a secret.

Soon the house band would break into a nice rendition of "Beale Street Blues," by W.C. Handy. (That more than made up for his lame, if sincere, opening medley of Chuck Berry's "Memphis," and "That's All Right, Mama," popularized by — who else? — Elvis Presley.)

Handy "wrote blues so white people could play it," Keillor joked.

And some white fellas — Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison and Johnny Cash among them — contributed their part to create another uniquely American music: rock and

roll. Keillor remarked at the smallness of the legendary Sun Studios, where rock was forged.

"It's about the size of a truck," he said.

You know, he said, even Beale Street and Graceland aren't that big.

But then that is the nature of Memphis music, he observed; it was created by people who were poor, who didn't have big houses.

Not staying serious for long, his troupe did a hilarious sendup of another Memphis tradition — the Peabody ducks.

They descend by elevator from their rooftop digs each morning, enter the hotel lobby on red carpet and splash about in the fountain till late afternoon.

We hear feathered hopefuls going through tryouts while the familiar sounds of "Chorus Line" play in the background. It was a hoot. (A honk? Quacked me up? Sorry.)

"Great Moments in Tennessee History" has some fun with the Volunteer State's past.

Davy Crockett is overheard talking with the person who is ghost writing his autobiography. Despite his protests, she insists that the congressman sound authentic.

"You're a backwoods hero. You gotta sound like one," she says. In 1952, Kemmons Wilson,

founder of Holiday Inns, tells his interior decorator that the decor of the first of his motels is really tacky.

Of course, no Keillor broadcast

would be complete without the news from Lake Wobegon.

But the real news for me — now that I've lived here for six months — is that there are a number of similarities between Keillor's mythical stomping grounds and our town.

And he reminded me of something else. Something I tend to forget.

While I have lived all over the South, my center has been and probably always will be Memphis.

It's as if I've taken a big clockwise arc around the region, from Arkansas to Georgia to Mississippi.

And, for me, the hands of time still revolve around that big city to the north.

Thank you, Garrison.