

Wag to show his respect for wit

Keillor moves from Prairie Home to Twain House

By **FRANK RIZZO**
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Garrison Keillor gently touched the ivory cue ball on the billiard table on the third floor of the Mark Twain House and a piece of it crumbled off like old chalk.

Suddenly the serious face of one of America's favorite humorists turned even more downcast.

"It fell apart in my hand," he said in a near whisper. "I didn't even drop it. I didn't have the pleasure." Later he would flatly declare: "I destroyed Mark Twain's cue ball."

On Wednesday afternoon, Keillor was in Hartford, the Gateway to Central Connecticut, as he might

have called it in his Lake Wobegon manner, to take another look at the Mark Twain House on Farmington Avenue and to make final plans to broadcast his radio show from the estate.

Keillor will present his live, two-hour radio program Saturday from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Twain homestead before a small, invited audience scattered throughout the main rooms of the house. He has about a million regular radio listeners.

Call it "The Mark Twain Home Companion," though the official name of his weekly show is "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company" and broadcasts from New York. His previous weekly radio

show, "A Prairie Home Companion," broadcast from his home state of Minnesota, ended its popular 13-year run in 1987.

After a train ride to Hartford Wednesday, the towering Keillor, dressed in a tweed suit and signature red tie and socks, took another look at the house, spoke to the press and was plainly, as one of the titles of his books would echo, happy to be here.

The 48-year-old Keillor said he discovered the Twain house and got the idea to do the show after he took a tour anonymously in July while in the area to perform at the Oakdale Musical Theatre in Wallingford.

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Brad Cift / The Hartford Courant

■ Radio humorist Garrison Keillor in the billiard room of the Mark Twain House in Hartford Wednesday. Keillor's next show will be broadcast from the Mark Twain House Saturday.

Though they had invited Keillor to the memorial, Twain officials didn't know he had been there until they saw the guest register with his signature. Several days later, Keillor called and asked if he could broadcast the show from the homestead.

"I loved going through the Twain house," Keillor said, "especially after I had endured an hour of the Harriet Beecher Stowe House, which was one of the longest hours of my life. . . . She has gotten herself looked to Mark Twain through some feat of affirmative action or something."

Keillor called the three-story edifice in which Twain and his family lived from 1874 to 1891 "a great house. (Twain) had a great hand in its design, from what I understand, and it certainly looks as if he did. But then he had the good sense to leave the country while it was being constructed. . . . But I'm sorry to see anybody's house become a museum, especially one as wonderful as Twain's house, because it should be filled with children and music and people farting around."

Keillor called the house filled with eccentric and elegant details "a monument to the sunny side of his nature, to the genial and sociable side of Mark Twain."

But Keillor said it is the dark side of Twain that gives the writings of the celebrated author permanence.

"(By the dark side) I mean not only the horrible things that happened to (Twain) late in his life—the death of two of his daughters whom he adored and his bankruptcy and humiliation—but also the horrors of his youth. He was a man who was born with a certain degree of blackness in his nature and I think that's what makes his writing permanent."

He said he hopes "to give people about as much Twain as you can put in two hours with a little music to give them a chance to go to the kitchen and drink some water."

He will also read selections from Twain's book "Life on the Mississippi," ("Not too much, some.")

And he and fellow actors will present the chapter from 1885's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" with the Duke and the Dauphin and their scandalous production of the "Royal Nonesuch" ("which I think is very funny.")

"And I want to recite for people 40 or 50 of Twain's great aphorisms. He was undoubtedly, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, the greatest writer of sentences that people remember."

Keillor will also read some of Twain's platform speeches, including his address to the insurance men of Hartford.

There will also be music from Twain's era. Guests include a vocal choir, the Gregg Smith Quartet. Also appearing are show regulars Rob Fisher and the Coffee Club Orchestra and the Broadway Local Theater Company.

Though Keillor has presented remote location broadcasts, most of those have been in theaters and arenas that accommodate several thousand people, said Christine Tishia, the program's executive producer. The Hartford broadcast is being locally underwritten by Aetna Life & Casualty Co.

Keillor's monologues, essays and stories have brought comparison from critics and fans to Twain himself.

"It's a casual comparison that people make," said Keillor. "It's a sort of a friendly, conversational comparison. But if you were a student in my American literature class and tried to work out that comparison in a term paper, I don't think I would give you a very high grade for it."

Would Twain approve of the goings-on that will take place in his mansion Saturday night?

"I think he approved of people coming to his house and having a good time," he said. "I think his only disapproval would be the fact that he's not here. I think he would want to be here and I think he would want to host the show."

"I think it's in the spirit of Twain to encourage the Mark Twain Foundation here to have regular parties. Instead of simply running these tour groups through as if they were coming to a chapel, which is all fine and good, but I think maybe once in a while they ought to invite a bunch of writers in to drink whiskey, smoke and shoot pool."

And speaking of pool and cue balls . . .

"It adds historic value to the room," said Twain Memorial Executive Director John Boyer of the mishap in the billiard room. "Broken by Garrison Keillor."

Where to tune

■ Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company will be broadcast on Connecticut Public Radio stations, including WPKT-FM, Middlefield (90.5 kHz) and WNPX-FM, Norwich (88.1 kHz) as well as on WFCR-FM (8.85 kHz) in Amherst, Mass.