

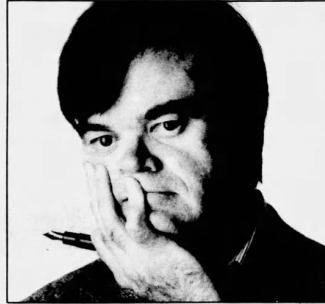
Week of Feb. 15 to Feb. 21, 1991

COVER STORY

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Garrison Keillor brings his brand of small-town charm to the shores of the Pacific Ocean as he sets to broadcast live from Sea World

AMERICAN RADIO COMPANY



Keillor's American Radio Company is finding an audience.

Anoka, Minnesota's favorite son is on the road again, and he's bringing his show to San Diego.

Garrison Keillor and "American Radio Company," his two-hour weekly public radio show normally broadcast from New York City, will be staged at Sea World Saturday. The program, which promoters say will have a "paradise" theme, will be carried by more than 200 radio stations throughout the country. This will be Keillor's only Southern California appearance on the current tour, which features a local celebrity in each city. Sam Hinton, a San Diego folk-music institution, will be one of the featured guests.

San Diego has no lack of Keillor fans. He performed here in 1989 and 1990 in sold-out performances. Audiences no doubt came to hear the consummate storyteller's "News from Lake Wobegon," a regular feature of "A Prairie Home Companion," which traveled the air waves of public radio for 13 years.

Keillor tried to leave Lake Wobegon ("the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve") behind when he created "American Public Radio."

"The old show originated from Minnesota, and it really was about Minnesota in many ways," Keillor said in a recent interview. "At some point, I started to travel around a lot, and then when I married my wife, who's from Denmark, I lost my ear for Minnesota..."

"Prairie Home Companion" was about the Midwest and the home of the good, the true and the beautiful. When I

didn't believe that anymore, I had to move on."

But Lake Wobegon fans wouldn't let him go. Keillor resurrected the monologue in the second year of "American Radio Company," which he admits got off to a rocky start. He likes to compare getting a new show off the ground to going on a canoe trip.

"Heading upstream, portaging, getting days into the boundary waters is appealing," Keillor has said. "But the first day or two is hard, stiff, arduous."

The country's "tallest radio humorist" was no doubt up to it because of his upbringing in Minnesota, country one could certainly describe as arduous. Born Gary Edward Keillor in 1942, the University of Minnesota graduate began an early morning show on Minnesota Public Radio two years later. In 1969, Keillor began writing for *The New Yorker* magazine.

■ "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company"

■ Where: Sea World's Nautical Amphitheatre.

■ When: 3 to 5 p.m. Saturday.

■ Tickets: \$35 and \$25. To benefit KPBS Radio. (\$15 day passes for Sea World available. \$5 goes to KPBS)

■ Info: 278-TIKS.

Five years later, the first sparks of an idea for a live variety show for radio were kindled.

Throughout the next 13 years, "A Prairie Home Companion" gained a national audience of 5 million and was carried on nearly 300 American Public Radio affiliate stations. The show won several prestigious awards, and in 1985, its creator was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Although a self-described shy person, Keillor is actually anything but in person. Dur-

ing his last visit to San Diego in June, 1989, he patiently and with much chatter greeted each and everyone of the 300 people who came to the KPBS fund raiser and stood in line for more than hour for the chance to exchange a few pleasantries.

During the luncheon that same day, he treated his faithful to some of the Gospel according to Garrison.

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

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

■ "My wife (Ulla Skaerved) doesn't like to travel with me because, in her words, 'I do not care for going about the country being a hood ornament.'"

About five months after the San Diego appearance, Keil-

lor returned to public radio with the "American Radio Company," a show which "like so many of us these days, is still trying to find itself. It certainly does not have as clear an identity as 'A Prairie Home Companion'... But people change, and I changed."

During the first year, plenty of mistakes were made, "but it finished strong. It didn't hit its stride until late in the year... We also conclude that the audience is still arriving."

If past experience is any indicator, the San Diego area audience will arrive in great numbers to see Keillor's production, and perhaps listen to his comparisons of life in the Big Apple as compared to life in a place where they grow them.

Some of his recent observations:

■ "It's odd to do a radio show in New York City because all the radios have been stolen. You see so many cars here with signs in the windows that say 'No Radio in Car.' You feel you've lost your audience before you start."

■ "I read in a book that it's safer in New York if you talk to yourself as you walk around. So I go around talking Danish. They say muggers don't want to fool with lunatics. In two-and-a-half years nobody's bothered me."

■ "American Public Radio is the best show on radio. I wouldn't have said that in the Midwest, where we're brought up to be modest. Now that I live in New York, I'm free to boast."

E'LOUISE ONDASH Staff Writer



"The Prairie Home Companion" familiarized the nation with the escapades of Lake Wobegon.