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Keillor wows 'em at Red Cloud

National radio tribute to Willa Cather mixes humor, homage

By L. Kent Wolgamott
Lincoln Journal-Star

RED CLOUD — At 5 p.m. Saturday, Garrison Keillor loosened his tie, opened his shirt collar and began telling his public radio audience about Willa Cather and the small south-central Nebraska town where she grew up.

Keillor brought his "American Radio Company" to Red Cloud for a two-hour live broadcast celebrating the 118th anniversary of his favorite American author's birth and honoring the town that provided her literary stock.

"The town suffered in having a great writer come from its ranks," Keillor told the audience in the Red Cloud High School gymnasium shortly before the broadcast. "It ain't all a privilege, as I'm sure people up in the cemetery can tell you."

Detailed research on Cather's life made Keillor's humorous presentation enlightening, even to Nebraskans inundated with information about the state's most famous author.

The program's musical selections were appropriate as well. They included a railroad tune and a couple of William Jennings Bryan campaign songs by Keillor, a pair of opera selections (Cather was an opera fan), three hymns from Red Cloud's St. Juliana Choir and "Spanish Johnny," a folk song with lyrics from a Cather poem.

In an interview before the broadcast, Keillor said he brought his show to Red Cloud because of the community's special significance in Cather's work and because her birthday fell on Saturday.

"She really used this town to the hilt," Keillor said. "It's amazing to realize how many of her characters came from here and how much she took directly from real life."

"That's the question everyone who writes fiction is asked: How much is real life and how much is made up?"

We always want to disguise what is real as fiction. But it's interesting to me that as a Midwesterner who left so young, she kept coming back here. Her best fiction is based on her life here.

The high school gym, capacity 800, appealed to Keillor as a performance site.

"I like the idea of coming to do a show in a town of 1,200 in a high school gymnasium," he said. "My town, Lake Wobegon, is about this size and I often talk of gymnasiums. It seemed a lot more natural to do this in a gym than in some of the Art Deco picture places we do it in."

Keillor began his work on Saturday's show Thursday in Portland, Ore. But one of his assistants spent five months researching Cather and her work and another spent the last week in Red Cloud observing the town. Keillor and his cast and crew re-

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Garrison Keillor shares a lighter moment during his live broadcast at Red Cloud High School gymnasium Saturday night. The event was a salute to Pulitzer Prize-winning Nebraska author Willa Cather on the 118th anniversary of her birth.

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From page 1A **Keillor**

S heard in Red Cloud Friday night and for two hours immediately preceding Saturday's 5-7 p.m. broadcast.

The seemingly haphazard rehearsal was transformed rather amazingly into a smooth, professional show as Keillor and other performers worked amid a forest of microphones and music stands. The performers said they enjoyed the chance to pay tribute to Cather.

"It's just such a treat," said Tony-nominated actress Lois Smith, who participated in the skits and read from Cather's "O Pioneers!" and "Song of the Lark."

f **Born in Topeka**

"I was born in Topeka and moved away when I was a little girl," she said, "but as soon as I read these pages, it came directly back — the land and the sense of place."

The most popular of Keillor's troupe was sound-effects specialist Tom Keith, who gave a tour-de-force performance in a sketch about a talking, writing chicken. The comic highlight of the broadcast was a 10-minute "Lonesome Radio Theater" performance of "The Road to Red Cloud," a skit in which a pair of low-budget filmmakers aim to make a movie out of Cather's "Song of the Lark."

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The pair eventually meet Cather, reincarnated as a male farmhand, and one is kidnapped in a flying barn by Holsteins from outer space.

The proposed movie was never made — an outcome that would have pleased the author, who banned movie versions of her books in her will.

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No illusions

In fact, Keillor said he had no illusions what Cather would think of his program.

"I think she would rather come here and hear (operatic soprano) Lisa Saffer sing," Keillor said. "She'd prefer four hours of Wagner to this."

Cather probably would have been a bit baffled by Keillor's 20-minute "News from Lake Wobegon" monologue, a carryover from "A Prairie Home Companion," the public radio series that made author-humorist Keillor a national celebrity.

Although Keillor's routines often look nostalgically at his small-town past and Saturday marked the 50th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, there was little mention of the World War II bombing.

"No one needs to say another thing about Pearl Harbor," Keillor said. "I just thought on Pearl Harbor day we would do something else and come to Willa Cather's hometown."

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Important to network

The show was also important to the recently completed Nebraska Public Radio Network, which airs Keillor's program.

"If somebody had asked me, 'What is the best thing that you could do to celebrate the completion of the network?' I'd have said, 'Have Garrison Keillor come to Red Cloud on Willa Cather's birthday,'" said network manager Steve Robinson. "The fax came in May suggesting just that. It's a fantasy come true."

The Red Cloud show was the first night on an 18-city tour by Keillor's "American Radio Company." The troupe will salute another author in May when it travels to Brooklyn, N.Y., to honor poet Walt Whitman.