



Small Photo by Peter Crabtree  
On his way backstage for a shave and a clean shirt, Garrison Keillor stands for a photo at Stratton Mountain on Saturday.

## More Woe

### Saturday Night Companion Brings Prairie Wit to Stratton

By PETER CRABTREE  
STRATTON MOUNTAIN — It is just about 6 p.m. when Garrison Keillor appears on stage for a sound check. With two bottles of mineral water in hand, he prowls among the lights, microphones and monitors in a pair of Day-Glo green shorts, his long, pale legs ending in a pair of sneakers. "Those are some wild shorts, Gene. They look good on you," says Linda Williams, part of The Hopeful Gospel Quartet that Keillor anchors by singing tunes.

Keillor, whose gentle yet often pointed stories about the fictional Lake Wobegon have made him a folk hero to his fans, acknowledges the compliment with a nod and proceeds to bounce on his toes like a boxer loosening up before a fight.

He croons a few verses of "Old Man River," imitates a carnival barker — "They walk, they talk, they crawl on their bellies like reptiles" — and with the quartet rehearses songs they will perform that evening beneath a "Spandex cathedral" of a tent at the Stratton resort.

It is Saturday night, the night Keillor laid claim to years ago with "A Prairie Home Companion."

And it is the first time he has been back in Vermont since his "American Radio Company" was broadcast from the Flynn Theatre in Burlington last winter.

**Going Back Home**  
Dissatisfied with performing in New York City, Keillor was looking to move the show to a new base then. But Vermont wasn't it. This spring, he left five years ago after complaining he had been turned into a celebrity and burned by the press.

"It seemed easier in all of the simple practical ways," Keillor said in an interview Saturday about his decision to go home.

"I've become more and more interested in what's easier as I get older. I turned 50 this summer. . . . I think it's a time in life when you decide you can't be anybody other than who you are. It's simply too late.

"And I'm a Minnesotan," he continued. "I come from flat country and this country up here is fundamentally different from what I come from. . . ."

**"Vermont is a state that were it flat would be one of the largest in the union. And it's a state of terrific good taste."**

Garrison Keillor

There are some other rules that apply and it would take me a long time to learn them and be a Vermont. And even then I wouldn't be a real one. And other people would comment on it and point it out to me.

"I know Minnesota well enough that I can go back there and be efficient, break the rules, and be outrageous if I wanted to. In Vermont, I would just be trying to learn the rules."

Maybe. But when interviewed, Keillor is nearly as laconic as the stereotypical Vermont. There are long pauses in between and in the midst of sentences. The author of "Shy Right: Why Not Pretty Soon?" is thoughtful and deliberate.

"Garrison, will you autograph my shirt?" an usher asks.

Keillor searches for the right response. Is that what the man really wants? Keillor eyes, before signing his shoulder.

**Gathering of Guys**

Keillor is at work on a collection of short stories, entitled "The Book of Guys." He's not sure when it will be finished, but he knows it will include "Zeus the Lutheran" and a piece about a man who becomes very successful "in the self-renewal business" but forgets his address and can't find his way home.

At the mention of self-renewal, the conversation turns toward Keillor's admiration for the poems of fellow Minnesotan Robert Bly, who in recent years has become a guru of the so-called men's movement.

"I think it's a hard time for men," says Keillor. "And if it brings people comfort to pat their bellies and dance around. (See Page 7: Keillor)"

# Keillor

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with Indian paraphernalia as if they were Boy Scouts, I don't mind. It's certainly no more eccentric than the Republican Convention."

## GOP Chicanery

Raised a member of the Plymouth Brethren, a fundamentalist sect that shunned "drinking, card playing, liberal education and too-friendly association with non-believers," Keillor has nothing but scorn for the Republicans' family values campaign.

"It's cynical to the very core," he said. "I mean, their belief in the family, I suppose it's the same as everyone else's. It's what everybody wants, isn't it?"

"Nobody wants to be alone, nobody wants to be different. Some people just are. But to make it a political position is such chicanery, so dishonest."

"George Bush is the most cynical president I can think of since Warren G. Harding, a man of astounding shallowness. And I think it's very dangerous when politicians start becoming interested in our culture, which is what families are."

"The Republican Party today is very scary," Keillor said, pronouncing it scary in his broad Midwestern way. "It was an ugly convention, very nasty. I should say something about it tonight, see how this crowd feels about it."

When Keillor appears on stage an hour later, he does. The audience loves it.

It applauds loudly when Keillor, freshly shaven and wearing a white suit and red tie, says the Republicans have "a theory of economics not so different from that held by a drunken cowboy."

And it applauds again when Keillor says that if politicians "make a mess of the government they should not then change the subject... They shouldn't tell me about my family, because my family is a lot more complicated than government," says the twice-married Keillor.

Then Keillor and the quartet perform songs from the sound check and more. Some are done a cappella, others are accompanied by guitar, bass and dobro. The show is a mix of gospel ("You Can't Hurry My God"), country ("Rollin' and Ramblin', The Death of Hank Williams"), and whimsy ("A Hymn To Sweet Corn.")

In between the tunes, Keillor offers set pieces about his strict religious upbringing — "We couldn't dance, nor even walk rhythmically" — and a meditation on skiing.

"Stratton is named for the sound a bone makes when it snaps," he says. "The Bible does not recommend skiing. When the Bible does make reference to sliding downward, it is not in a recreational sense... The Biblical term for skiing would be de-gradation."

As the night turns cool and the show winds to a close, Keillor stands alone in the spotlight and leads the audience in a sing-a-long hymn both sincere and foolish. But not before he offers praise for Vermont.

"It's a state that were it flat would be one of the largest in the union," he says. "It's a state of terrifying good taste."

It's architecture is so severe, and its culture so Puritanical, Keillor says, "that it makes a person long to get drunk and to pour French dressing down your naked body and be squeezed by a large woman."

It's a good thing I don't live here.