

Keillor thanks Williams for NEA support

By JILL SUNDBY
Of the Gazette Staff

The National Endowment for the Arts gave Garrison Keillor a boost when he needed it.

Now he's returning the favor. Keillor — a writer famous for his down-home radio program "A Prairie Home Companion" — presented "An Evening in Story & Song" Friday night at the Alberta Bair Theater as a campaign fund-raiser for Rep. Pat Williams, D-Mont.

"He was the guy who saved the National Endowment for the Arts," Keillor said of Williams, in an interview before the show. "He pulled it out of the fire when it was about to go down in the great storm of religious right-wing rhetoric. He stood up for it at a time when so many other people in Congress were running as fast as they could. Congress is easily terrorized."

The NEA has come under attack by conservatives who say it funds questionable or immoral art. For his support of the NEA, some opponents have labeled Williams "Porno Pat."

Ron Marlenee, R-Mont., has made Williams' support of the NEA a campaign issue. Marlenee and Williams are going head to head in the race for the lone congressional seat Montana will have after the next election.

Keillor said his radio show started in 1974 and operated on scant funds until 1976. "Then we got \$50,000 from the NEA and it's what kept the Prairie Home Companion alive."

The NEA "works exactly the

way conservatives believe government should work," he continued. "The government comes in, it does a small thing that makes a difference and then it pulls out. We received NEA funding for four years and then we were on our own."

Keillor said it was once prestigious to say "this was made possible in part with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts" but that "now people like Jesse Helms and Congressman Marlenee have really destroyed a wonderful institution."

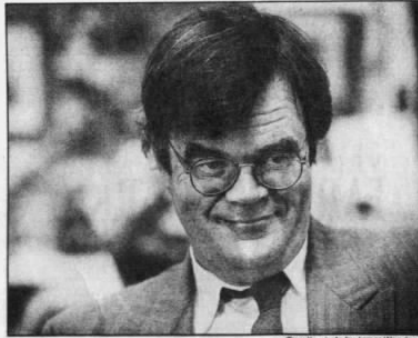
"The arts used to be a cause that everyone could stand up for because it meant the great masters, the ballet, Mozart. Then some people in the right wing, Jesse Helms, one of the great old curmudgeons of politics, discovered he could hold up photographs of gay men in their underwear and everybody would throw up their hands in horror."

"So all of the money for ballet, museums and orchestras — for all the little arts organizations in thousands of cities — was about to be endangered by this piece of fiction, a grant that was never made."

Keillor was referring to controversial photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, who never received NEA money directly but whose photos were displayed by galleries that received NEA funding.

Keillor said this is his first visit in Billings since he was a teenager, when his family stopped here en route to an annual Bible conference in Idaho.

Raised in Anoka, Minn., Keillor



Gazette photo by James Woodcock

Radio icon and author Garrison Keillor appeared Friday night in Billings at a fund-raiser for Pat Williams.

begins his fiction with a few facts, he said. "I grew up in the country, so the lives of the people I grew up among, including my fundamentalist family, are really the foundation for a great deal of it."

Now he's moving back to Minnesota after living in New York, which he liked ("It's a great place to disappear in a crowd"). He is building a log cabin on the St. Croix River, on the Minnesota-Wisconsin boundary. "It's an old Swedish log cabin I took apart,

moved, put back together and added a few logs on the bottom. Those Swedes were shorter than I am," said Keillor, who's 6-foot 3-inches.

He will host his new live radio show; continue singing bass and touring with his gospel quartet; and work on a novel about Lake Wobegon and "a collection of stories about guys."

On Saturday he travels to Missoula for another fund-raiser and then it's "back to Minnesota to put the chink in my log cabin."

Keillor worked for KEMC chief

The head of the public radio station based in Billings offered Garrison Keillor his first radio job.

Marvin Granger, general manager and program director at KEMC since 1984, hired Keillor at the University of Minnesota's radio station in about 1964 or 1965.

"He was a graduate student in English at the University of Minnesota and he quite literally was looking for a job to pay the bills, a part-time job," Granger recalled.

Keillor had done some work for a student-operated closed circuit radio station that served the campus dormitories, Granger said. "He did not have very much experience but he had a wonderful voice, a deep resonating voice. I was familiar with him from the Ivory Tower, the University's literary magazine, from pieces he had written in that."

"It wasn't at all difficult to hire him because people with a good voice and sort of natural talent don't just walk in that often." The two worked together at the university station and at Minnesota Public Radio for much of the period from 1965 to 1973, Granger said.

Keillor started his own radio show in 1974 and did Prairie Home Companion for 13 years. He left radio for three years and now hosts the American Radio Company, a continuation of Prairie Home Companion.