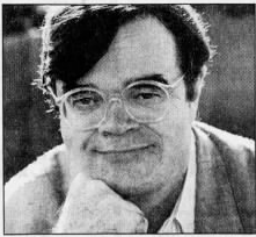


'Prairie Home Companion' gets an above-average reception at Duke tonight as fans snap up all 1,203 seats at Page Auditorium.



Coming HOME

By BRIDGETTE A. LACY
STAFF WRITER

When Nancy McGrew moved to St. Paul, Minn., from Virginia in the late 1970s, she was lonely. She was homesick and her husband was frequently on the road. But McGrew, who now lives in Garner, quickly struck up some friendships with Ralph of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery and the other Lake

Wobegon residents who gather around the Chatterbox Cafe to tell stories. McGrew is one of the many who have found a home in Lake Wobegon. Garrison Keillor's mythical town "that time forgot and the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

"I was ironing one afternoon and heard him. I thought, gosh, he's wonderful," says McGrew about the radio variety show, which is a mix of comedy sketches, folksy music and signature monologues. "I had this brand new job and didn't know a soul," says McGrew. "But [Keillor] was someone I could identify with, even the way he phrased things. He's just great," says McGrew about her radio companion, the Minnesota

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humorist and author.

McGrew, 61, was happy when she and her friend Keillor were reunited last September when WUNC-FM put "A Prairie Home Companion" back on the air after a three-year absence. Almost every Saturday evening, McGrew sets her radio dial to 91.5 FM for the show, which is produced by Minnesota Public Radio and distributed by American Public Radio. The show airs from 6 to 8 p.m.

Triangle fans will have a chance to experience Keillor's Lake Wobegon first-hand tonight, when Keillor tapes "Companion" at Duke's Page Auditorium. The program, which will be considered for broadcast at a later date, is co-sponsored by the Duke University Institute of the Arts and WUNC-FM.

The road show has been selling out all over the country and the Duke performance was no exception: All 1,203 seats sold in three days.

Christopher Bannon, marketing director for "Companion," says Keillor attracts a broad range of fans, but most are baby boomers.

His stories create that kind of nostalgic journey back to a place, where things were better than they are now, says Kathy Silbiger, director of the Duke University Institute of the Arts. "It may not have ever quite been that way," says Silbiger, 47. "But we wished it had been. And we wished we could recapture that whether it existed or not."

Notes Roger Bullard, a professor of religion and philosophy at Barton College in Wilson:

"There's a consistency of the characters that populate these stories. You always know that Florian and Myrtle Krebsbach, [a married couple] always behave in the same way. You always know the Lutherans will do one thing and the Catholics another."

Bullard, 56, also appreciates Keillor's descriptions of the landscape and weather in Lake Wobegon, as well as the fact that the tales are "so wholesome and moral without being preachy or overbearing."



"I was ironing one afternoon and heard him. I thought, gosh, he's wonderful," says Garrison Keillor fan Nancy McGrew.
STAFF PHOTO BY ROBERT MILLER

That's one reason fans such as Silbiger were so disappointed when "Companion," which first aired in 1974, was discontinued in 1987.

"I was practically in tears when he stopped doing the show," says

Silbiger. "It had been a part of my Saturday afternoons for years."

Craig Curtis, program director for WUNC, says the station aired Keillor's show throughout most of the 1980s. There was a two-year hiatus after the demise of "Companion," then, in 1989, Keillor moved to New York City to start a new show, "American Radio Company of the Air."

But that show didn't do as well with listeners. "We ran that for a year but there was extreme disinterest. The ratings plummeted," Curtis says.

Curtis says baby boomers were not as excited about life in the big city as they were about small-town life in the Midwest.

"He had created this imaginary place, Lake Wobegon, everybody knows as a universal small town in America. We wanted to grow up there, or wished we had. It's a baby boomer's nostalgia trip," says Curtis. But when Keillor moved to New York, "The show didn't

sound right to a lot of listeners. He wasn't generating the audience we needed." WUNC dropped the show, also citing its expense.

But in September 1993, WUNC

brought the show back after Keillor returned to a new version of the original show, complete with its old name. The show was again based in Minnesota and Keillor went back to the stories that had brought him fans, including Raleigh resident Gene Lloyd.

"I like the way he tells stories," says Lloyd, 46.

Lloyd likes Keillor's homespun, folksy tales about "people you have met in your lifetime, your grandmother. You can sort of picture those personality types."

His stories tend to evoke memories of childhood, says Lloyd, a Spenser native. They're a little bit old-fashioned, easy-going and slow in pace.

Lloyd, who has been listening to Keillor off and on for 20 years, usually listens to Keillor on Saturday evenings in his car.

Lloyd even likes to hear Keillor sing, a comment expressed by only Keillor's staunchest fans.

"He has a nice resonant baritone voice and he sings fairly well, in a folksy way," says Lloyd. "I wouldn't want to hear him sing opera."