

Keillor's Companion makes Canadian visit

Lake Wobegon radio family to air on CBC Sunday

JOHN ARMSTRONG
SOUTHAM NEWSPAPERS

VANCOUVER - It would seem more probable that Garrison Keillor and the troupe that comprise the Prairie Home Companion road company would cross the Canada-U.S. border in pickup trucks at some remote border station, where travellers give their bona fides to the part-time guard, who also manages the Husky station. They would get directions - "About 5 miles along here till you get to the big tree, 'course it's not there any more, but anyway, you take a left ..." - roll along creosote-and-gravel roads to somebody's farm and set up the equipment in the barn for the show's first Canadian broadcast.

Instead they will come in by plane, take cabs to downtown Vancouver and set up onstage at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre. This should remind us all that the places and people of PHC and Lake Wobegon, Minn., home of the Sons of Knute Lodge and "The Gateway to Central Minnesota," indeed, even the Powdermilk Biscuit Company, are not entirely real.

Since 1974 (with a six-year retirement in the late '80s) the author and monologist's radio variety program has, in the words of associate producer Stevie Beck, made him and the town "household names in some households." It is heard over American public radio by more than 2 million people each week and a given Saturday taping might include, along with singing, fiddle playing, a dog yodeling Indian Love Call and the comparative tendencies of German Lutheran and Catholic farmers, news items such as this one regarding the unfortunate death of Mr. Kloefkorn, shot while plowing by his neighbor Mr. Holmberg:

"Over the past 40 years he has been steadily getting on my nerves," Mr. Holmberg said.

That neighbor Holmberg finally took such action after four decades of progressive tooth-grinding is indicative of Keillor's way with a story. It is something we can well imagine E.B. White writing, or better, laughing at. White's essay *Death of a Pig* would fit right into a report from Lake Wobegon. In truth, it could be the top story.



Garrison Keillor (right) and other cast members of A Prairie Home Companion.

Some of the advance press for this inaugural Canadian broadcast states that Keillor will use the show to explain Canada to his American listeners and over the phone from Wisconsin, near the Minnesota border, Keillor's voice is level as syrup on a flapjack. The on-air Keillor, who is the aural equivalent of a nap in a warm room on a sunny day, is actually several notches up the dial from the off-air Keillor. It's the difference between Vin Scully calling a World Series game and Vin Scully ordering takeout Chinese food.

"I'm not personally going to explain anything, which implies giving a reason for something's existence. I'll tell people about Canada, or Vancouver, but what exactly I don't know. I'll start writing on the plane and then I usually just walk around, buy some newspapers and write something down before the show."

He says this with such a calm and soothing manner you just nod along with him. Certainly. Get off the plane, buy the papers, take a stroll, jot down a couple of hours of material and read it to a few million people. Not even two hours, really. Guest fiddler from Cape Breton Natalie MacMaster will play, the CBC's Vicki Gabereau will be a guest, as will Double Exposure's Bob Robertson and Linda Cullen and Quebec musical group La Bottine Souriante. Bill

Richardson will also read "an epic poem," all of which leaves barely room enough for a recipe and an anecdote.

Whatever he ends up doing, it will be done gently. "I'm 53 now and I've mellowed. And I never did have much interest in the cudgel that a satirist needs to use. Satirists, if they're good, really have to want to draw blood and inflict damage."

It may also be largely spontaneous. Keillor's crew tell admiring stories about his ability to ad-lib, deciding once at the last moment before air to start the show from outside, singing the theme while leaning under a tree. He had to listen to the music through a Walkman and sing along to the actual transmission.

That was during a live show from Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Conn. A little later in the show Keillor took his wireless microphone three floors up and shot a game of pool on Twain's table with writer Roy Blount, then did a long improvised piece in the dining room. Tranquil, even soporific, he might be - but he gets around.

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■ *A Prairie Home Companion*, taped tomorrow at Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Theatre, will be broadcast Sunday from 2 to 4 p.m. on CBM-AM 940.