



GARRISON KEILLOR: the *Prairie Home Companion* host teams up with CBC's *Double Exposure* on Saturday

# North of Lake Wobegon

Garrison Keillor ventures to Vancouver to broadcast quick impressions south

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Vancouver Sun

It would seem likely that Garrison Keillor and the folks who make up the *Prairie Home Companion* road company would roll into Canada from the U.S. in pick-up trucks at some remote border crossing, where travellers give their *bona fides* to the part-time guard, who also manages the Husky station. They would get directions — "About five 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 first-ever Canadian broadcast of the show.

Instead they will arrive 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 middle) the author and monologist's radio variety program has, in the words of associate producer Stevie Beck, made Keillor and the town "household names in some households." It is heard in the U.S. over National Public Radio by more than two million people each week. A Saturday night on the program 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. Kloef-korn, 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.

Some of the advance press for the Canadian broadcast states that Keillor will use the show to explain Canada to his U.S. listeners. Over the phone from Wisconsin, near the Minnesota bor-

der, 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 ordering take-out 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. Natalie MacMaster will play a few Cape Breton fiddle tunes. The CBC's Vicki Gabereau will be a guest, as will *Double Exposure's* Bob Robertson and Linda Cullen and the musical group *La Bottine Souriante*. Bill Richardson will read "an epic poem," all of which leaves barely room enough for a recipe and an anecdote.

Whatever Keillor 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. I've never been inclined to that."

But expect spontaneity.

Keillor's crew tell admiring stories about his ability to ad-lib. Once, just before going to air for a live show from Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Conn., he decided 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.

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 humorist Roy Blount, then did a long improvised piece in the dining room. Tranquil, even soporific, he might be. But he gets around.

Tickets to *A Prairie Home Companion* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre this Saturday are \$30 to \$45 through TicketMaster, 280-4444. The broadcast begins at 2:45 p.m. It will be broadcast Sunday from 3 to 5 p.m. on CBC Radio.