

## Just off the highway, a poet and his verse get their due



### Hear Garrison Keillor read the poem

To hear Garrison Keillor read "A Blessing," by poet James Wright during a recent broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion," call **673-9050**. When prompted, press 5070. (The recording is courtesy of Minnesota Public Radio.)

By Chuck Haga  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

STEWARTVILLE, MINN. — Words posted at highway rest stops tend to be practical, utilitarian: *Pet exercise area. No overnight camping. You are here.*

Pretty blank verse. But stopping by these woods on a snowy evening to come, you'll find ponies dancing in the willows, shy as wet swans but giddy-happy that you have come.

You'll find them in words, gold-leaf words, on a memorial to the late poet James Wright. On Monday, author and radio host Garrison Keillor — attended by more than 200 area high school students and a few surprised travelers — dedicated a plaque containing Wright's poem "A Blessing" at the High Forest Rest Area off Interstate Hwy. 90.

"Travelers who pull over and stop here can see a poem about pulling over and stopping," said Keillor, who was Wright's student at the University of Minnesota in the 1960s.

Turn to **REST STOP on B7**

### A Blessing

By James Wright

*Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota.  
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.  
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies  
Darken with kindness.  
They have come gladly out of the willows  
To welcome my friend and me.  
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture  
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.  
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness  
That we have come.  
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.  
There is no loneliness like theirs.  
At home once more,  
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.  
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly, I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.*

**REST STOP from B1**

*Poetry finds a spot 'just off the highway to Rochester'*

It is a poem, he said, "about the power of nature to put our hearts at rest."

Jamie Van Oosbree, a sophomore at Southland High School in Adams, Minn., said the poem speaks "about the beauty of Minnesota. And it's so close to us; we know what he's talking about."

When Wright died of cancer in 1980 at the age of 52, his obituary in the New York Times included these autobiographical lines: "I have written about the things I am deeply concerned with — crickets outside my window, cold and hungry old men, ghosts in the twilight, horses in a field, a red-haired child in her mother's arms, a feeling of desolation in the fall, some cities I've known."

Wright taught at Macalester College in St. Paul as well as at the university. He often traveled southeastern Minnesota with his friend and fellow poet Robert Bly. Several Wright poems have references familiar to people of the region — one is titled "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" — and "A Blessing" tells of those "horses in a field" off the highway leading to Rochester.

**Overcoming misery**

Wright received the Pulitzer Prize in 1972 for his "Collected Poems," but he was not a happy man at the time he wrote "A Blessing," Keillor said.

He was born in Martins Ferry, Ohio, in 1927. His father worked in



Star Tribune photo by Bruce Bisping

More than 200 high school students gathered Monday at a rest area along Interstate Hwy. 90 for the unveiling of a plaque bearing a poem by James Wright. Garrison Keillor was on hand to lead recitations of the poem.



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a glass factory across the Ohio River in Wheeling, W. Va. His mother worked in a laundry.

"A Blessing" was published in the collection "The Branch Will Not Break" in 1963.

"I've seen it done in needle-

work," Keillor said, "and in rye seeds glued to particle board and entered in the crop show at the State Fair. I've heard it read at weddings in meadows, weddings attended by horses.

"But the important thing to remember is it was written by a man in deep trouble," he said. Wright's marriage had failed and he was drinking heavily. He was on the verge of losing his position at the university.

"This man who was full of grief and sorrow and misery . . . he wrote a poem that has no misery, no grief in it.

"It is a love poem."

Putting Wright's poem on a rest-stop plaque was Keillor's idea, but he shared the spotlight Monday with engineers and managers from the Minnesota Department of Transportation, who authorized the plaque.

"I admit that I have made fun of highway departments and highway engineers many times," Keillor said, "and their obsessive desire to spread highways as far as possible, to make two-lane roads into four-lane, and four-lane to eight."

"I take it all back."

Also on hand to provide atmosphere: Sye, a quarter horse, and Herschel, an appaloosa; not exactly the ponies of the poem, black-and-white and shaggy-maned, but horses nonetheless.

**By the rude bridge**

Keillor also sought to draw the students into the program, leading them in singing "America the Beautiful," which like many songs began as a poem, and inviting any who had memorized a poem to come up and recite.

Benjamin Gilbert was the only

taker, and the sophomore at Rochester Mayo High School made a shaky start with Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Concord Hymn."

Gilbert took the microphone, paused, then said, "The first trick is remembering that first line." But Keillor provided a prompt: "By the rude bridge that arched the flood . . ." and Gilbert took it ably from there. After leading three recitations of "A Blessing" — by all present, then by just the women and finally by just the men — Keillor let Gilbert pull a sash to unveil the plaque.

"To the valorous go the privileges," he said.

People looked at the words, touched the words, as a few hundred feet away cars and trucks whizzed by.

In an autobiographical sketch published in 1978, Wright recalled one of the great natural settings (and highways) of his youth — the Ohio River.

"For all its dangers, the river still had the power to make the banks green, and some of us children of the blast furnaces and factories and mines kept faith with the river. The water there was beautiful in its rawness and wildness, though something was forever drifting past to remind us of the factories that lined the banks to the north. They were always there, just as the Martins Ferry Cemetery overlooking the entire town seemed, wherever one stood, to hang in the sky above the Laughlin Steel Mill."

Wright was "always fascinated with poetry as an act of inscription, of memorializing," according to a 1990 assessment of his work in the New Republic.

"Wright came to think of poetry as a way to counter all the death he saw around him, hence his love of epigrams and elegies — of inscriptions that survived a single human life."