


# LIFE



## 'Prairie' Tale

*Garrison Keillor brings 'Prairie Home Companion' to the Spokane Opera House for a live broadcast*

By Jim Kershner  
Staff writer

**T**he news from Lake Wobegon first leaked out back in 1974, on Minnesota Public Radio. Within 10 years of that first broadcast, "A Prairie Home Companion" was a cultural phenomenon. Garrison Keillor was on the cover of Time and "hot-dish" was on everyone's lips.

Now, nearly 25 years later, this show should have run its course. In pop-culture time, a decade is forever and two decades are infinity.

But "A Prairie Home Companion" doesn't run on pop culture time. Like the mythical Lake Wobegon itself, "A Prairie Home Companion" belongs to no particular era and to all particular eras.

As the show approaches its 25th birthday, "A Prairie Home Companion" still draws huge ratings numbers (2.5 million listeners a week), impressive pledge-drive donations and sold-out shows. When the show goes on tour, as it does for half of its dates, most sell out easily.

In Spokane, the first show sold out not just easily, but instantly, so another show was thrown in for good measure, which also sold out. The live broadcast is at 3 p.m., and the

Continued: Keillor/DB

### A 'Prairie Home' primer

- **Place:** Spokane Opera House.
- **Times:** The live broadcast begins at 3 p.m. Saturday and ticketholders should be in their seats by 2:30 p.m. The broadcast will run until 5 p.m. The second show begins at 7 p.m. Saturday and could run past 9 p.m., since it is not a live broadcast.
- **Guests:** The Bullas and Butch Thompson.
- **Tickets:** Both shows are sold out, but there may be some stage bleacher seats for students with I.D. There may also be some regular seats released at the last minute (Friday or Saturday). Check with G&B Select-a-Seat.
- **Access and parking:** Many downtown streets will be blocked off because of Hoopfest. However, Bernard will be open, and Spokane Falls Boulevard will be open in front of the Opera House and points east. There should be parking spaces available in lots, but allow plenty of time. Another option: Park at the Spokane Arena and take the shuttle bus.

Staff illustration by Bridget Sawicki

accompanies their publication.

book and are not associated

published this year.

## 'Keillor': Will broadcast first show to nation; other will be recorded

Continued from D1

second show begins at 7 p.m.

"That might only happen once a year, where we'll do two shows like that," said Tim Russell, one of the show's voices and impersonator extraordinaire. "It only happens when the demand is extremely high."

The first show will be broadcast to the nation, and the second show will be recorded for possible future broadcast, maybe some time next year. The guests will be the same — the Bullas, a bluegrass family band from Northport, Wash., and pianist-clarinetist Butch Thompson — but the material will be entirely different.

"I guess Garrison will have to do a lot of writing," said Tom Keith, the show's veteran sound-effects genius.

No doubt Keillor is huddled in his rural Wisconsin home right now, pounding on the word processor. Russell said Keillor writes "99 percent" of the material — skits, songs, pretend ads, as well as his 25-minute monologue.

That's one reason why interviews with Keillor are doled out only rarely, and also why he has a reputation for being cranky and remote.

"Any time anybody talks to him, they're interrupting his writing, because he's always writing in his head," said Katy Reckdahl, the show's P.R. person.

A surprising amount of the

material is written on Friday on the plane, or even on Saturday morning in his hotel room.

All of which means that right now Keillor himself doesn't know exactly what will be on Saturday's shows, much less Keith, Russell and the rest of the 17-person cast and crew.

"Not a clue," said Russell. "We'll see when we get there Friday."

If things go right, they will first see the material during an informal run-through Friday night when Keillor shows up in town. The next, and final, rehearsal will be at 12:30 p.m. at the Opera House.

And if things go wrong, like they did last week due to fogged-in airports on the way to Portland, Maine, they won't even get that much time.

"We didn't see the scripts until 1:30 p.m. last Saturday," said Keith.

Keillor does not exactly read his "News from Lake Wobegon" monologue, nor does he exactly improvise. Usually, he has a written version, which he has been known to study intensely even in the minutes leading right up to the monologue. But when he walks out to his stool, the script is tucked back in his pocket, and he gives every appearance of spinning a yarn straight out of his head.

"I am quite certain he has a photographic memory," said Russell. "Sometimes he'll go off on a tangent, and let it take him somewhere else. But he knows where he's going, and where he

wants to end up. It's fun to watch the show, just for that reason."

Keillor's goals for his monologue are modest, as he recently told the Washington Post: "It's all you can do to get the stuff to come out decent, just try not to be fatuous and dorky. And try to make the 'News From Lake Wobegon' as faithful as possible to a town even though you're sitting in a Mariott in Austin, Texas."

Keillor has accomplished far more than that. He has created a town that many people know more vividly than their own cities, and he has done it entirely with the magic of words. He is a born American storyteller, and one of the few to use radio to its full potential.

He has always loved radio — Bob and Ray were favorites — but he didn't come up with the idea for his own show until the New Yorker sent him to the Grand Ole Opry in 1974 to do a feature. Four months later, "A Prairie Home Companion" was born.

Keillor has put the show on hiatus four times, usually to pursue his writing career. He has written numerous best-sellers (including the current "Lake Wobegon Boy"), but he never cranked out what he considered to be the Great American Novel. He always came back to radio.

And his fans have been glad he did. A Spokane Valley man of my acquaintance says that his idea of happiness is to sit in his basement on a winter Saturday afternoon, tying flies and listening to the news from Lake Wobegon.

To many fans, the show is a "Companion" indeed.