



Garrison Keillor at home in Spokane

By Jim Kershner
Staff writer

On long summer car trips through Montana, Mississippi, Maine — everywhere a public radio signal reaches — lonely drivers were kept company by these words on Saturday afternoon:

"Thank you, Butch. We're coming to you live from the Opera House in Riverfront Park, near the beautiful falls, in Spokane, Wash."

That was Garrison Keillor, star, author, storyteller and resident genius of "A Prairie Home Companion," beaming his show live to an audience of 2.5 million listeners.

Those listeners heard plenty about Spokane, including Keillor's own personal observation that Spokane did not seem to him like a "smaller Seattle."

"It's more like a bigger, greener Billings," he said, to a big laugh

*Radio star
broadcasts
from Opera
House*

from the sold-out Opera House crowd.

He rhapsodized about Spokane's architecture, its gardens, and its history. He complimented the city for Hoopfest (he wore a Hoopfest T-shirt under his tux) and for an even more massive event, Bloomsday. Obviously, he said, "this is a town that likes to organize things."

Keillor brought to the stage Don Hamilton, Spokane photographer and resident character, to chat about local topics including Lake Pend Oreille, Expo '74, and the Ice Storm.

He also had Pauline Flett of the Spokane tribe read an ancient tribal story about the "coming of the salmon." She read it in its original Salish — with Keillor reading the English translation.

The Bullas, a family bluegrass-gospel band from Northport, performed three songs of exceptional musicianship and lonesome high-country harmonies.

Keillor's childhood memories of visiting relatives in Spokane figured prominently in the "News from Lake Wobegon" segment.

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Garrison Keillor rehearses a skit with Sue Scott, who plays a little old lady who lost her cat.

Keillor: Idyllic retirement, free of ATF raids

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And Spokane figured in many of the show's other segments, including "Guy Noir: Private Eye," in which Guy Noir is asked to give Spokane a lifestyle makeover.

"We want to get rid of the white bread and tartar sauce and come in with the hollandaise and sourdough," says a mysterious client.

Guy Noir, thankfully, declines, although he later says he doesn't want to move to Spokane because it sounds too "wholesome" for his gritty tastes.

Funniest of all was a phony ad in which an older couple rhapsodizes about their new carefree retirement life. In North Idaho. In a walled compound. With searchlights to protect the perimeter from Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents.

The broadcast went off smoothly, which was amazing considering that a mere 90 minutes earlier, portions of it were not even finalized yet.

"Let me do something with this script," said Keillor after a rehearsal for one skit. "It's not working. I will fix it."

Meanwhile, Hamilton was pacing up and down through the Opera House seats, wondering exactly what he was supposed to do. He had been informed less than a week ago that he would be on the show, but he still didn't know exactly what he was supposed to talk about.

"I've been sitting around all week wondering what I'm going to say to Mark Twain in front of millions of listeners," said a nervous Hamilton.

Yet when showtime came around, everybody seemed comfortable. Hamilton bantered easily with Keillor, which was exactly what he was supposed to do. That one balky skit emerged miraculously fixed, having been re-written by Keillor on the spot.

Of course, not all of the show centered around Spokane. One of the funniest bits was an NRA ad parody, in which Mr. Rogers (with dead-on voice by Tim Russell) talks about his weapons.

"When I slip into a sweater, I also slip into a calfskin underarm holster," said Mr. Rogers. "That way I can be flat on the floor firing off rounds before you kids have even thumbed your safeties off."

Keillor and company did a second, entirely different show two hours after the live broadcast. It was taped for possible future airing.

Saturday's live "A Prairie Home Companion" will be re-broadcast from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. today on KPBX-FM, 91.1.