



CONNIE PETTY

Garrison Keillor, left, performs with the New Gospel Choir Tuesday at the Oregon State Fair.

Keillor shares a few of his tales for crowd at state fair

BY CONNIE PETTY
For the Democrat-Herald

SALEM — Garrison Keillor spun a story about his Minnesota hometown Tuesday night at the Oregon State Fair.

Keillor, host of A Prairie Home Companion radio show, calls the town Lake Wobegon.

That's not his hometown, Doris Ehlen said waiting in line at a rest room after Tuesday's concert.

"It's Anoka, same as mine," the Oregon City resident said.

Her stepdaughter graduated from high school with Keillor. "He was such a shy bookworm in school, she hardly even knew him," Ehlen said.

According to Ehlen, Keillor was well known in Minnesota before he began his radio show in 1974.

But now, 24 years later, his musings make up one of the most popular programs on the radio.

Oregon Public Broadcasting airs the show at 3 p.m. Saturday and noon on Sundays. Tuesday, Keillor was introduced by OPB radio announcer Gray Eubank.

Keillor was joined at the L.B. Day Amphitheater by the Oregon State Fair Summer Orchestra and the Hopeful Gospel Quartet, of which he is a member.

Before the monologue most folks came to hear, the humorist said he'd always wanted to sing opera. "So here's from 'Carmen' " and launched into a parody of Bizet's music.

Keillor told the audience a state fair like Oregon's is "the last hurrah." It marks summer's end, and "back home, the last of the fresh sweet corn,"

he said.

One of six kids, Keillor said the family "raised most of our food out back." After church the family came home to his mother's pot roast and vegetables "cooked until they would do nobody harm," he said.

Leaving behind a pot of water to boil, the children picked the corn, husking it as they walked along the row, then boiled it a few minutes, prayed and slathered the corn with butter and salt. That corn was "the proof that God loved us," Keillor said, then concluded the segment singing "a hymn to an ear of corn."

Keillor began his main story with his traditional, "It's been a quiet summer in Lake Wobegon."

He spent his boyhood summers getting to read "all the books I wanted — and not make reports." When he was 13, his Uncle George gave him an old Underwood typewriter. "With this beautiful piece of machinery, I decided to become a writer," Keillor told the audience.

Punishment was sending him to his room, "where I wanted to be." They should have sent him out to play with the other kids, he added.

Keillor then launched his main story, about cousin Helen Marie, who, at 17, was being forced to marry her boyfriend because they were pregnant, or face the wrath of the church.

There are marriages that quit and marriages when you just keep on praying, Keillor said.

Helen Marie's wedding ended with a march. As Keillor developed the story, the orchestra played Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream," concluding with the triumphal wedding march.