



New York Times photos

Garrison Keillor wrote the screenplay for *A Prairie Home Companion*, which opened Friday.

*Prairie Home is a ...*  
**MANSION**

By JOYCE WADLER  
New York Times

ST. PAUL, Minn. Don't bother with a rental car, Garrison Keillor told a visiting reporter, I'll pick you up at the hotel. At 10 a.m. his old green Volvo pulls up to the Saint Paul Hotel, where the logo for his movie happens to be plastered on the room key cards, and Keillor, in Saturday jeans, loads the suitcase in the car.

His one-on-one voice, at least when meeting a stranger, is identical to his radio voice, so that getting into a car with Keillor is like falling into a radio show. When the visitor misses a statue of Lucy, of the comic strip *Peanuts*, he circles the block, then moves into a story.



The dining room houses a grandfather clock, right rear, which is inscribed with the names of Scottish poets.

DON'T THINK THE  
CREATOR OF  
*Lake Wobegon*  
LIVES IN A SIMPLE  
LITTLE HOUSE ON THE  
PRAIRIE. HIS SPACIOUS  
GEORGIAN HOME  
HAS 13-FOOT CEILINGS,  
SEVEN BEDROOMS  
AND A RESPLENDENT  
CIRCULAR STAIRCASE.

"Charles Schulz was from here," he begins in that low-key, we'll-just-mosey-along-here voice that has never suggested any fear of dead air on the radio, that more likely thinks dead air in these crass and frantic times may be a good thing. "He was pretty well miserable here. Adolescence hit him really hard. He was all pimply and scrawny, and he was rejected by the local newspaper when he had this great idea for a strip. They... umm... they just didn't think it was any good. And he felt they rejected him because he was from here, he was local. And he was probably right.

"It was one of the great bonehead mistakes of American journalism," Keillor continues, in a voice that

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## Prairie from 1F

suggests there have been many and that he has endured the consequences of one or two himself. "He got on a train and he went to New York or Chicago, off to United Features, and they took him in their arms. And he was very lucky. Forever after."

Keillor is the creator and star of public radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*, which has inspired a film of the same name. It stars Keillor, was directed by Robert Altman and opened Friday.

The radio show deals with life in Lake Wobegon, a fictitious Minnesota town of hardworking people and old-fashioned values. Keillor's life is not quite as simple as all that.

His home is a great Georgian pile atop the swankiest neighborhood in town, with 13-foot ceilings, seven bedrooms and a circular staircase of such beauty and scale that had Rhet Butler been a Midwestern boy, he would have found it quite suitable for landing Scarlett up the stairs. (If it seems doubtful that a Midwestern boy would ever do such a thing, you should know that Keillor's love life once inspired a good deal of the local *Starn* and *Dreg*, and that he has been married three times.)

The house is so grand that Keillor and his wife, Jenny Lind Nilsson, a violinist in the Minnesota Opera orchestra, feared their friends might consider them pretentious for buying it.

Ultimately, the beauty and spaciousness of the house, which was built in 1914 by the French architect Emmanuel Masqueray, persuaded them.

They are not, however, the sort of people who spend three days fretting about the right shade of gray. The instruction they gave their interior designer was to make the house comfortable and child-friendly. (Keillor and his wife have an 8-year-old daughter.)

The house contains cherished items, including a framed letter from E.B. White. There are three expensive custom rugs, patterned with pumpkins and churches, a reminder of their hometown. But as Keillor and a reporter walk through the house searching for designer furnishings or heirlooms, there comes a point when Keillor goes into his closet and starts pulling out his clothes.

"This is an heirloom," he says. "This is a suit I've had for 25 years at least."

He wears red socks with his red sneakers, and if a face can be said to be rumpled, Keillor's is it: a face perfect for radio. Although the film *A Prairie Home Companion* has just opened, he does not seem to be the sort of fellow who feels the need to shill for his product. The feeling he seems to project is that to do so is in somewhat poor taste.

And if you bring up the subject of Meryl Streep, one of the film's stars, you get a much more articulate version of the so-fabulous, just-a-regular-guy statement that is inevitable in an interview of this sort.

The roles themselves (Keillor was the script writer) bear some attention. Streep

plays a histrionic singer who has been jilted by Keillor's character, G.K., and who berates him for refusing to talk about it.

"Meryl Streep is royalty, she is the reigning queen of American moviedom," Keillor begins, in his radio voice. "And when you encounter someone of her stature, you are a little trepidatious that she may turn out to be less than you hope and your heart will be broken. She turns out to be an amazement. She's smart and wildly funny and she's irreverent, especially about herself."

Was there much improvisation?

"It's a lovely myth, but what people take for improvisation is simply very good acting," he said. He moves into a voice one recalls from a Lake Wobegon tale about a haunting. "She had me in her wave field, she had me in complete control. I was a complete automaton. When Meryl Streep's eyes are locked on you, you do her bidding. I was in her force field."

A dry, ironic sense of humor, a good manner and a reticence to talk about personal matters are what you get with Keillor. Having

worked as a journalist, he will permit himself to be badgered about why he gave up his radio show for a spell. He had married a Danish woman who was miserable in St. Paul and they moved to Copenhagen. There was, it will turn out, rather more to it than that, but we are starting a tale in the middle, which Keillor would never do, and so to his beginnings.

He was born in Anoka, a rural town about a half-hour drive from St. Paul, one of six children. His father was a carpenter and postal worker, and he built the family home, a small Cape, almost entirely by himself.

What this meant was that for a few years, until the upper two floors were built, the family lived in the windowed basement. It was quite cozy, Keillor said. His family belonged to the Plymouth Brethren, a fundamentalist group that discouraged dancing, card-playing and going to movies.

*A Prairie Home Companion*, which spoke of a place in which all the women were strong, all the men were good-looking and all the children were above average, was begun in 1974.

It made him famous and rich. Did his parents consider him a success?

"Success means different things to different people," he says, with a tight little smile. "We didn't go to movies when we were children, so the fact that I'm now in a movie is not necessarily a source of unalloyed joy."

Did his father disapprove of his life in show business?

"It was not brought up," said Keillor, 63. "They were very polite."

Keillor's first marriage ended in divorce and produced a son, now with children of his own. Keillor later had a long relationship with his show's producer, Margaret Moos.

After an Anoka High School class reunion in 1987, Keillor fell in love with Ulla Skaerved, whom he had known long before as an exchange student. He spoke beautifully of their love on the radio, but his Minnesota public, loyal to Moos, was not entranced. After he married Skaerved, a local newspaper published a front-page picture of the newlyweds' home, including the address and the sale price.

Keillor, who calls the matter "ancient history" when a reporter brings up the matter and now insists it had nothing to do with his decision to leave St. Paul, sent an angry letter to the paper, shut down the radio show and moved to Copenhagen.

Within a few years, his marriage to Skaerved was over. Keillor was broadcasting a radio show not dissimilar to *A Prairie Home Companion* out of New York, and he had met Nilsson, who also had grown up in Anoka.

"I'm sort of a quiet, vaguely gloomy person, and she's very effervescent and she's very bright," he says. "She's very open and wholehearted where I'm not."

They married in 1995. After their daughter, Maia, was born, in 1997, the couple brought her back to St. Paul to meet the family, then decided to move back for good.

"We were staying in the Saint Paul Hotel," Keillor says. "My parents came up, and my aunts and uncles and a couple of sisters-in-law and my sister, and everybody just sat in a circle and passed this infant around. She was sleeping. And it was very touching. So I wanted her to know these people. You can't hire aunts and uncles."

Keillor had by then bought a large log cabin on 80 acres in a remote, wooded area in Wisconsin. Too remote, says Nilsson, who remembers an ice storm during which their car spun out and kept them from making it to their house. "The car went like this," she says, making a circle with her finger. "It was well over a mile, and the temperature was dropping dramatically."

"Not a near-death experience by any means," Keillor says.

"Sure felt like it to me," Nilsson says.

"Then Jenny had an encounter with the deer," Keillor says.

"That was the end for me," Nilsson says. "This huge dead deer, smashing into the car. People were stopping and offering to drive me home, and I said, 'No, no, my husband will be along any minute.' He drove right past. Never turning his head."

"I was brought up not to stare at people pretending to need help," Keillor says.

The St. Paul house was purchased in 1998, for \$730,000. They will continue to maintain a Manhattan apartment; they are purchasing a two-bedroom on Central Park West that they sold in 1993.

Wait a second. They are buying back an apartment they sold 13 years ago? How much is that going to cost? "We'll gloss right over that," Nilsson says.

"We've always stayed invested in New York real estate, so the money we sold it for, we put into the next apartment; we're riding the tide with all the rest of you," Keillor says.

The specifics: Keillor bought it for \$800,000 in 1987, sold it for \$1.5 million in 1993, and is buying it back for \$3.5 million.

Is there much heartache there?

"No," Keillor says. "I always sort of regretted selling. It's a chance to recoup one's regret."



Garrison Keillor with his wife, Jenny Lind Nilsson, and their daughter, Maia, 8.

Keillor at work in his home.

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