

Lake Wobegon — still at center of life

'Prairie Home' host Keillor talks stories

BY DOUG GEORGE
Tribune reporter

Garrison Keillor spoke from the kitchen of his home in New York — he has another residence in St. Paul, Minn. — and said that he could see from his window the high buildings of the city. But his thoughts, he promised, were back in the middle of America.

"I could tell stories from New York, at this point," he said during a recent phone interview. "But I feel others are doing that."

Keillor's stories, the ones that have made him a renowned American humorist, the ones he will tell during his solo appearance Tuesday at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora, are set, of course, in the very Midwestern and fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minn. — home of the Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church and the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian. His longtime public radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," which began as an old-style variety show recorded with a live audience in 1974 and which has been running on and off since, has "News From Lake Wobegon" as its centerpiece.

Keillor says some of the stories are based on real people, some not, but he doesn't worry about running out of them.

"All I need is to hear a few phrases in my head," he said, and a story might come.

A lot of what happens in Lake Wobegon is rooted among the kind of people he knew growing up, he said. Keillor was born in Anoka, Minn., in 1942, the adults around him had known the Depression and served in World War II. They were religious fundamentalists, had lived in dark times, yet were very positive people, he said.

"They did not tolerate complaining or bitterness. Their cosmology was, really, apocalyptic. They believed the world was facing the Last Judgment. Yet they loved their houses, their yards, their children."

Keillor says he understands the sense of dislocation and loneliness at the center of a lot of fiction these days, and went through his own period of alienation when he was young, it's just that he doesn't think those feelings make for good stories.

"Sadness, loneliness, being misunderstood, they're sort of generic," he said. "We all go through that, really. On the other hand, wit and enthusiasm



PARAMOUNT THEATER PHOTO

"All I need is to hear a few phrases in my head."

— Garrison Keillor, on how a story might come

and passion: Those are individual. What moves my friend the botanist is very different than what moves my wife."

Keillor, for a confirmed lefty — he wrote a newspaper column distributed by what was then known as Tribune Media Services from 2005 to 2010 that was often political — can sound like a traditionalist. In 2007, he took heat for a column about gay couples needing to be more serious as adoptive parents that he has said was misunderstood. In an occasional advice column he writes on the "Prairie Home Companion" website (prairiehome.publicradio.org), he answers an aspiring writer's question, in part, with the observation: "What influenced my writing was the King James Bible and the New Yorker magazine and which was the bigger influence, I'm not sure." Fans of his radio program might argue he's against what he sees as modern superficiality and self-indulgence, not progress. And he's quick to be

found. Is there any common thread that ties these stories together? Any overarching message? After a pause, Keillor answers with sort of a story.

"I saw this painting by Norman Rockwell," he said, referring to "Breaking Home Ties." "It's of two men sitting on the running board of an old pickup truck. And they're waiting for a train. The old man is the father. And he has rough hands, and a weather-lined face — he looks in every way defeated and worn out."

"And the man next to him is his son, and the son is going away to college, and he is upright, and his face is simply illuminated, it gives off light, it's perhaps the most beautiful face Rockwell ever painted. These are two diverging figures. Yet they are as close as two people can be. The secret of all stories is in this division, I think. One face is the future, the other is the past."

dgeorge@tribune.com