

## 42nd in hot sauce?

By Garrison Keillor

All of us should be pleased to read the fine reviews that Minnesota has gotten in some of the classier national magazines ("a rare achievement"—*Fortune*; "one of the best"—*National Geographic*; "light and imaginative . . . cultural"—*Esquire*) and to see our state rank high in national quality-of-life surveys.

I say it's time we stand up and give ourselves a pat on the back, especially those of us in education, politics, the arts and the environment, who have worked so hard to make life in Minnesota one of the highest-quality lives anywhere in the country.

At the same time, though, let's not be complacent and figure the job is done just because we have the Guthrie Theater, the Metropolitan Council, excellent laws and a lot of universities. There's more to quality of life than that, and now's a good time to get cracking on those areas of life where we need improvement.

Sex in Minnesota, while participating in the national upturn of the 1960s, is still largely seasonal, with peak periods in May and December followed by months of lowered efficiency (measured in heartbeats per minute per foot-pound expended energy) due to outmoded methods. We lag far behind California, for example, in terms of average participants per act. Large-group sex is scarce, especially in rural areas and unincorporated municipalities. Our celibacy rate is almost twice what experts consider acceptable.

Despite quality schools, the level of conversation in Minnesota is declining — we are barely more interesting than such traditionally boring states as Iowa, Nebraska and New Hampshire. We lead the nation in repetitive talk about weather and rank high in discussions of children, colds and gas mileage, while scoring low marks on China, the occult, dolphins, stock options, cloning, the anti-novel, reality transfer, gypsies and the fourth dimension.

In fact, general interest has been declining since 1958. "Not sure" or "don't care" have reached as high as 35 percent in some surveys, while average bedtime has crept up to 10:20. From January through late March, humor is so low as to make us the laughing stock of Proia, Dubuque and Hoboken. Random studies of more than 10,000 sentences indicate that the use of rising inflection has fallen dramatically.

Taste has made substantial gains in Minnesota since the early '60s — when we led the nation in tuna-fish-casserole consumption and number of stocking caps per capita — but at a much slower rate than the growth of the Gross National Product. Food is typically bland: ground-beef patties, mashed potatoes, green beans and jello, for example. We are 38th in the use of garlic, 42nd in hot sauce. Despite attempts to eradicate it, lutefisk persists in Minnesota, as does the blight of face-wrinkling coffee.

A stronghold of stretch socks, cocker spaniels, salt-shaker collections, love seats, Tupperware parties, moron jokes, pink plastic flamingoes, humorous wall plaques, high-school yearbooks, Hamm's landscape paintings and Plywood Minnesota basements, our state lags behind in quality tape decks, geodesic domes, hand looms, Shaker chairs, 10-speed bikes, home

saunas, candle shops, plank floors, harpsichords, soccer shirts and moccasins.

Only one out of 10 young couples is living in an old barn renovated into a terrific home for just a few thousand dollars and a lot of work. Two out of three Minnesotans don't eat off stoneware.

Consciousness in Minnesota remains slightly below the national level, and forecasts indicate a mounting deficit in spiritual depth. Consciousness-raising, though up last year, centers, for the most part, on such low-yield axioms as *Appreciating Our Natural Heritage*, *Sharing as the Basis of Long-Term Relationship* and *Accepting the Good With the Bad*.

We produce few prophets, mystics, seers or sages—in Minnesota, a visionary is one who forecasts the fireplace-log boom—and our poets, though numerous, practice the same old Snow-is-falling-in-the-meadow-I-am-lonely philosophy of outdated Wordsworthian romanticism that also characterizes our leading TV weatherpersons.

In fact, winter is basic to the Minnesota character. For six months out of 12, self-awareness is focused on sensations of heat and cold. Subtlety is rare from November through April; most Minnesotans stick to business, do one thing at a time and mean what they say (Minneapolis, for example, uses less irony in the month of January than any major city except Philadelphia).

This is not to say that Minnesota is no good at all. Quite the opposite. We can all feel proud of the tremendous strides our state has made thus far. (In fact, pride is one of Minnesota's fastest-growing feelings, outstripping last two-to-one—"OK" or "not bad" is still first, followed by "about the same".) But we have a long way to go before Minnesota life is everything it can be.

Good living is everyone's responsibility. The job cannot be done entirely by those of us whose lives have put Minnesota "over the top" in terms of goodness. Take humility, for example. I've done all I could in this area, but it's not easy. One guy just cannot do it all unless everyone gets behind him. And it wouldn't hurt to get a little recognition now and then, either.

Garrison Keillor is a Twin Cities freelance writer.



"I hear American women are getting themselves into this equal-opportunity nonsense."