

Monday Tuesday Wednesday **Thursday** Friday

Minneapolis Tribune July 29/1976/1C

LAKE WOBEGON

For Garrison Keillor, fantasy is a lot more fun than reality

By Irv Lotofsky
Staff Writer

Ah, the air around Lake Wobegon is pure and health-giving. The women are strong, the men are handsome and all the children are above average. Great herds of elderly holsteins roam through the fields enjoying their retirement after years of useful service.

On given days in Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keillor drives his ratty old green Opel into Jack's Auto Repair for a lube job, grabs a snack at Jack's Toast House and pops into Dakota Dave's Men's Store (on the Jack's Auto Repair Mall) where the giant concrete list on the roof beckons us to come in and buy and be happy with what we get, like a flannel shirt or white cotton socks.

On Sundays, which is Visitor's Day in Lake Wobegon, Keillor wanders into Sons of Knute Hall to watch the series of short films on the Bunsen family, including Highlights of Family Picnics Over the Years, Duane's First Christmas, the travelogue features (The Bunsens in Bemidji, "North Shore Odyssey") and Highlights of a Twins-Cleveland Game in 1965, with a good shot of Ted Uhlaender in the on-deck circle.

Lake Wobegon doesn't precisely exist. It is a whimsey, a diversion, a figment of Garrison Keillor's imagination. But Lake Wobegon nudges up against enough universal truths to stir responsive chords in a growing number of believers who come across the Keillor programs on the Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) network, that is, "A Prairie Home Companion," live, 7 to 8:30 p.m. Saturdays, and "A Prairie Home Morning

Folklore has it that Lake Wobegon was left off Minnesota maps by somewhat of a statistical error. It seems that surveying teams working in the area in 1872 met in Lake Wobegon and realized that their charts were off a few miles. They resolved the overlap of maps by leaving Lake Wobegon off entirely. However, Larry K. Hanson has supplied the "official" map of the area, at left, pinpointing the various spots of interest: No. 1, Tentative Point; No. 2, Lake Wobegon Piles (scrapped autos and farm machinery, mostly); No. 3, Art's Bait; No. 4, Radio Hall of Fame; No. 5, Sons of Knute Temple; No. 6, Jack's Auto Repair, Jack's School of Thought, Jack's Fountain Lounge, etc.; No. 7, Mist County Historical Society; No. 8, Wally "Old Hardhands" Bunsen Memorial Field; No. 9, geographical center of the area, left off the map, unfortunately, and No. 10, Powdermilk Biscuit Plant. Not Shown: Municipal Sanitary Landfill.

Photos: John Craft

Show, "likewise live, 6 to 9 a.m. weekdays.

The Saturday show is a down-home barn-dancey show with guest stars like "radio sweethearts" Janis Hardy and Vern Sutton, rambling jazz pianist Butch Thompson, gee-tarists Bill Hinkley and Judy Larson, Thema Buckner and the Minnesota Gospel Twins.

(The show frequently trucks around the state. Keillor reported that only 30 showed up when the troupe stopped at the Sons of Knute Hall and 25 left when it was announced that the bingo had been rescheduled for the high school auditorium. But he doesn't hold it against Lake Wobegon because the folks probably had other things to do, like moving their lawn sprinklers.)

The mainstay act is the blue grass Powdermilk Biscuit Band composed of fiddler Rudy Darling, guitarists Sean Blackburn and

At decent intervals Keillor affects what he calls his "Shearna County voice" and hippodizes about the mystical healing powers of another of his whimseys, Powdermilk Biscuits, which, despite lack of empirical evidence, are reported to cause regularity. "They're expeditious!"

He goes on: "On these hot, humid days, many people feel kind of slimy and loathsome, sullen, moody and bitter and lash out at people they love. Many people have been put back on the track

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Garrison Keillor as he looks today, top photo, and in his high-school graduation picture, lower photo.

Keillor

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by these tasty morsels . . . Ready-made in the brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness

There is nothing much about Garrison Keillor's public presentation to suggest "beat" Updown. The exception is the 25 or so articles that New Yorker has published since 1968. A high school teacher in Anoka turned him onto the magazine. E. B. White, Thurber, John Updike. It was class. It was Broadway and New York.

"I wanted to go there and live there and be a writer for New Yorker Magazine because I would be free from all those people who had known me and whose knowledge of me was a limitation on me. If I left Minnesota I would cease being the person that I was and I would be a glamorous, witty, sophisticated, well-dressed man living a high old life in New York."

But life didn't follow his scenario. He is New Yorker's "Midwesterner" writer. He is basically Minnesota, a quiet, internal, lonesome writer. Even his radio persona projects a soft-shell reticence, and it was with apparent difficulty that he sat down to talk about the essential Keillor and coming of age in Minnesota.

He was the third born of John and Grace Keillor's family.

"My father worked for the Railroad Mail Service until the Post Office discontinued it. He was on the run from Minneapolis to Jamestown, N.D. But with six kids he also did carpentry. He had such a gift with his hands. He could make anything. I remember feeling absolutely incompetent at any mechanical thing since I was a little kid. When I owned a car I never worked on it like normal people did."

In 1948 John Keillor moved the family to Brooklyn Park. He dug out a basement in the cornfield and put a house on it a year later.

"We were members of a small fundamentalist sect that the people never heard of, the Plymouth Brethren, which was strict. Dancing, card playing and going to movies, smoking and a lot of other things — going to ball games was all right but not on Sunday — those were all wrong and were preached against regularly. . . . Some were tremendous gospel preachers and hellfire preachers and were frightening to listen to. . . .

"The kids I was brought up with in the 'meeting' had a sense of humor about a lot of things. . . . Certain members would always profess any remark about the future with the phrase 'Lord willing and in my writing, say if one kid wrote a letter saying they planned to be in Wilmar on Tuesday, they'd write D. V. after it, Deus Volemit, because He would come back at any time and there might not be a Tuesday as we knew it."

At Sunnydale School, west of Champlin, he started the Sunnydale Star. Later, in the sixth grade at Riverview School, he started the Riverviewer, kid journalism.

Young Garrison's interest in poetry and things literary and journalistic caused frowns.

"They believed that it was a dubious kind of thing, depending on the kind of literature, that it probably was wrong for a Christian to do."

In the eighth grade young Gary Edward Keillor took Garrison as a penname because "it sounded mighty, formidable, like someone not to be trifled with." He began covering sports (33 home games) for the Anoka Herald.

"My parents, especially my mother, were very dubious about it. She felt that while there was nothing wrong with writing about sports, if you wrote for a newspaper you'd come into contact with people of the world and they'd become your colleagues. . . .

"Then when I published some poetry for a high school literary magazine, they were quite upset."



Garrison Keillor circa 1969.

They felt it was a shame on the family . . . I don't feel like an outcast now, but I recall vividly a time when I did."

Even now, with his parents moved to Orlando, Fla., he will consider their sensitivities. His New York agent wanted to place an article in Playboy "but I thought it would be an unnecessary insult to them."

They seem to understand: "I think they do grasp it now and feel comfortable with it (my writing) and they've told me often that they know writing must be very hard and they look for my pieces in New Yorker. I did a railroad piece called 'My North Dakota Railroad Days' and my dad liked it a lot."

One of his growing up stories will be published shortly in New Yorker. He was 12 in the summer of '54 and a cousin drowned in Lake Independence. Keillor's mother insisted her son take swimming lessons at the YMCA on LaSalle Av.

"I went a few times and I couldn't force myself to go again. It was so dreadful. . . . The instructor was a real bully, with no real interest in teaching kids to swim. He had a greater interest in making fun of kids who couldn't swim, and I was terrified of the water. . . . I had a lot of dreams of being pulled under the water and drowning and dying. I asked if I couldn't stop, and I was unable to tell my mother what the real situation was and she pool-pooled it."

But he continued to take the bus into town and strolled along Hennepin Av. and read at the library and felt guilty and worthless.

Then he heard about "Good Neighbor Time" at WCCO Radio. You could sit and watch the show for free — Bob DeHaven, Wally Olson and his band, Jeanne Arland, Hal and Ernie Garven and Burt Hanson.

"It was wonderful. The only happy thing about coming downtown. And Cedric Adams, after the show was over, he would walk in and sit down at a table and do his noontime news and everybody would stay. I mean, everybody would stay and watch this man read his newscast."

"And I can remember getting into the elevator with this man, and I was looking at his tie, which was a blue tie with a floral print, and it looked like the most expensive tie in the world. There was this



"I wanted to be there with him, be one of the guys. You know, he like Bob DeHaven, just real comfortable and friendly and jovial and not this screwed up little kid, scared all the time. He friendly and easy with people."

The high school years also were full of the traditional travails. "I loped around in the hallways, slouched around, tried not to look so tall (he's 6-foot-4) and worried a lot about how I looked. I was very certain I looked awful and I was real conscious about trying to blend in."

"I developed a stiff face. People are always asking me what's wrong. Even my kid asked me, 'Why are you so unhappy?' And I'm not, but I developed a real stiffness when I was in high school, where you are subjecting your whole body to the fiercest control at all times, you know, as if without that control your arms and legs would fly off and you'd be a spastic."

Growing up wasn't a total failure. He did poorly on pushups and parallel bars but he performed nicely in the intramural team sports.

One of his major achievements occurred during a father-son softball game (he has written reminiscences about it since) when, patrolling third base, he robbed Uncle Don of a certain double with a tricky backhanded nab of the sizzling grounder. It would have made Brooks Robinson look outfield by contrast, or so the memory goes.

"And I followed him down the street, down to the Minneapolis Club and he turned into the gate and I watched him walk into this great mansion."

A few years ago Keillor organized a sort of pickup Lake Wobegon Leeches slow-pitch softball team that plays once to three weekly

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around the Twin Cities in free lance games. He will pitch, play first base or roam the outfield, as they say. It is one of the few teams with a sense of humor, he claims.

After high school he figured he would write and write as the best way to become a writer. But he began to panic.

"Well, I had fears that if I didn't go to college, I wouldn't make anything of myself and I'd become an ordinary person."

He enrolled at the University of Minnesota. He washed dishes, worked the parking lots, read newscasts on the on-campus WMMR and was hired at KUOM. Working on an English major and a journalism minor, he became editor of the now-defunct Ivory Tower.

A middle student at Anoka High, he didn't do much better at the university. He "hung on" and, under pressure of editor duties, he did to hold F's and academic probation: "Then I went to work at it and got very good grades. Even an A in Public Health."

But it was not otherwise a successful time.

"It was a mistake to have gone to the university, to spend the time I did and to have done the things I did. . . . It had a corrupting influence on me on what I wrote. It removed me from what I had to write about and what I still have to write about — which is people that I come from and the class of people that I have some feeling about."

"In a very short time I pretended

to, well, you can hardly call it sophistication, but a sort of juvenile sophistication. . . .

"At that time the wrong things were being satirized. The satire was against lower middle-class people, Minnesota as part of the Bible Belt, fundamentalists, small town culture. How could I ever pretend to be from some place else, but I did."

"In my writing I pretended I was a stranger here, that I came from New York and I was commenting on this strange, outlandish behavior of the residents."

He also is striving to get rid of the deep, rich, authoritative "educational radio" voice that he practiced as a little boy (reading Star and Tribune news stories into a mailing tube) and perfected at KUOM.

"I want to be perceived as a person sitting in a studio reading wire copy, like somebody sitting across the breakfast table from you reading an item."

The KUOM duties began to gnaw. So he quit. Then he took a job at KSJR-FM at Collegeville, the founding station of MPR, and moved up to nearby St. Cloud, then rented a big brick farm house at Freeport.

"I started doing a classical music show, 6 a.m. to noon. But it was pretentious of me to sit and play music I didn't know, and to sit there and play opera and try to guess at the pronouncements."

"So I started playing other music I did know. But people who

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...wring quite a lot of weight at the station didn't like it and the station manager sent a memo saying that hereafter all programs should conform to the music policy of the station.

"It wasn't so much that, well, I could understand that they needed money and there were people who were alienated. I just didn't like getting it in a memo. I told them I was quitting.

"It's like standing around talking to somebody in a friendly way and you notice that they're pissing on my foot. Well, you have to point that out. 'Pardon me, but you're pissing on my foot.'

"People in a position of power or imagined power have a habit of doing that. They're friendly, nice, sweet, wonderful people or at least polite people — and all of a sudden they'll do this weird thing."

Then it was "scary." With a wife and child (he and his wife are now separated) and no job, he pushed his writing. New Yorker had bought its first Keillor piece, a tale written in newspaper style about a couple who hired a prostitute as a companion for their 17-year-old son as a way of keeping him home. She also cooked breakfast for the family, and Keillor included her recipe for fancy eggs.

New Yorker liked its brevity, a page and a half typed, and sent on \$500 plus (for his usual length he gets \$1,100 to \$2,000.)

"I would sell a story and then wait two weeks and call and ask for the money. It bothered me that I was spending so much time doing what seemed like humiliating, adolescent things to do... to look through New Yorker to get ideas on how to write another story they would want. It did me so good and I knew that but just to be busy and be neurotic and try to have a plan about it and go at things straight."

After a year of virtual poverty, he caught on with KSJR's new companion station, KSNJ, emerging out of makeshift studios in St. Paul. The same person who had befouled his feet at KSJR brought him back to public radio after "a face saving way" was found through an intermediary to get them together.

"I think that the fact that I write for a high-class eastern magazine made it all right with some people. It's an unpleasant thing for me to think about, but that's how a lot of people's minds work. I would never have been able to get away playing the music I did unless it happened to be associated with a magazine which, although it has changed, still in the Midwest stands for 'bean' Upown."

So he continued blue grass music and whatever struck his fancy. Jack's Auto Repair ballooned into a multi-thousand-dollar conglomerate, including Jack's School of Thought (by correspondence), a collection of trained news, etc.

"I wanted to get out of the format of KUOM and KSJR... We now turn to the music of Schubert... I wanted to keep Jack's garage. But I kind of ran out of ideas. I don't know that much about cars... Then I started retail sales, things I'd actually seen them sell, air fresheners, novelty items, then clothing, all out of fashion stuff that they'd buy in large carload consignments."

He began expanding on Lake Wobegon, his heralded Radio Hall of Fame, Art's Baits, the Municipal Sanitary Landfill, "the only town dump in Minnesota to be located on the top of a hill."

Three years ago he quit the morning show to devote more time to writing — only to discover that he wasn't writing that much



Staff Photo by John Cech

Garrison Keillor looked relaxed while on stage during a recent airing of "A Prairie Home Companion." But later he related... in doing the stage business I'm doing something that really goes against my nature. I'm doing it because I can't do it."

more.

"Some people whose opinions I really trust told me that they found it difficult to listen to the Saturday show, that it was too much a piece of nostalgia, even though they knew I wasn't doing it for that reason — and the morning show was more where my talents lay..."

"That struck a chord with me because I have a feeling that in doing the stage business I'm trying to do something that really goes against my nature. I'm doing it because I can't do it. I'm kind of making myself do something because it's difficult... having been so awkward and retiring and just, you know, a person who was afraid to walk into a room full of people — and now I've pushed myself to stand up on a stage and try to do humor and sing... it's a curiosity to me. I sit back in amazement as I watch myself doing it."

But writing is his joy.

"The person I would like to be like is E. B. White but it would be terribly vain to say that I'm like him... I haven't read him for a few years because I worry about becoming too obsessed with him... He probably is the most meticulous writer who ever was, more meticulous than any poet who ever wrote, with the possible exception of William Carlos Williams, and who has a better car than most any poet I ever read."

His agent is proposing a Keillor book expanding on his New Yorker pieces on Station WLT (for With Lettuce and Tomatoes) and a film person is interested.

"Writing is one way poor people can make a lot of money

hope the book makes me a lot of money. I don't think it will. It's not that I'm shy about the idea (of making a lot of money), it's just that I'm a particular kind of writer. I'm a slow writer. I'm a small writer and I do the kind of thing that it seems to me to have only one home, and that's the New Yorker."

He claims few major indulgences. He owns no property except a few books and records. He doesn't require fancy clothes (he wore white denim, ripped wide at the right knee, on this occasion) and he doesn't hang with fast, expensive women.

"So to me earning \$15- or \$18,000 a year is as good as earning \$50,000. Almost, I think."

Experts offer advice on highway crises

If you are driving along the highway one day, step on the brake pedal to slow down and nothing happens, what do you do?

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has the answer, and has made it available in a free booklet, How to Deal with Vehicle Emergencies.

The booklet contains advice for the no-brake situation: Get off the highway onto a shoulder, apply the emergency brake, shift into a lower gear or, if in immediate danger of an accident, sideswipe a snowbank, guardrail or anything else that will slow the car down.

The booklet is available from the Consumer Information Center, Dept. 30, Pueblo, Colo. 81009.