

Saturday night with . . .

By MICHAEL BERRYHILL
Star-Telegram Writer

Like most true places, Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, cannot be found on any map.

"It is the little town that time forgot, that the devils cannot improve," said its founder.

It exists in the exact geographical center of radio broadcaster Garrison Keillor's imagination. "Despite the fact that Lake Wobegon has been deprived of state and federal government for the past century," Keillor said, "it has gotten along the best it can on the Golden Rule, Standard Time, the power of Powdermilk Biscuits, and the principles of never offering advice unless you're asked for it, never go looking for trouble, and always knock before entering, and by the fact that all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

Lake Wobegon is probably the only town in America whose merchants sponsor a syndicated radio program on National Public Radio, a network that is supposed to shun commercials.

Every Saturday evening at 5, hundreds of people buy tickets to watch the live broadcast of *The Prairie Home Companion* in a rescued vaudeville theater in downtown St. Paul.

They come from all over the state and the country to see and hear what eclectic bunch of musicians

When and Where

A *Prairie Home Companion* is broadcast in the Fort Worth-Dallas area on Saturday nights from 10 to midnight on KEAFM radio 60.1 FM.

The show is taped from the live Minnesota broadcast at 5 p.m. Saturday.

Keillor will gather. The house string band, the New Prairie Ramblers, will play, and perhaps the Knights of Carleton College will sing, or a cowboy troubador, or a Swedish come band, or an opera singer singing the Minneapolis Yellow Pages.

Keillor is partial to groups such as Uncle Willie and the Brandy Snifters, a string band that takes its inspiration from an extensive collection of 1930's records.

There are a great many people who want to go and make music in public: who are talented enough and good enough," Keillor said, "but they sound an awful lot like a lot of other people."

Now there are people who take their inspiration from people who take their inspiration from old records. They can do a good job, but it isn't quite there for me.

Sometimes the gangly, pathologically shy Keillor will sing a ballad of his own making, backed by the Ramblers, while he strums on his autoharp.

Most of all, people come to listen to Keillor, whether it is his news of Lake Wobegon, or his patented, dry commercials for Powdermilk Biscuits ("Heavens, they're expeditious"), Dorothy's Chatterbox Cafe home of Dorothy's famous rhabarb pie, and Jack's Auto Repair ("All the tracks lead to Jack's where the bright, flashing lights show you the way to complete satisfaction").

Sometimes Keillor will read a letter from Lake Wobegon expatriate Barbara Ann Bunsen who married and moved to Wisconsin to remodel an old farm house and work a combination walnut farm and llama ranch.

Or he might tell a story about the time the town Christmas tree by the statue of the Unknown



Norwegian was blown down and almost hit Mr. Krebsbach, who was coming home from three beers at Wally's Taproom.

Or perhaps he will outline the ethnic structure of the town, which is half Norwegian Lutherans and half German Catholics. Lutherans are easy to spot because they drive Fords bought from the Lake Wobegon Lutheran Ford dealer. The Catholics all drive Chevrolets from the Catholic Chevy dealer.

Or he will simply tell his audience what's going on in town, as he did last June:

"Most of the seniors will be leaving Lake Wobegon, most of them immediately, there being nothing in town for them to do other than lean a round in front of the Chatterbox Cafe. So they've been doing a lot of extra leaning this week."

"A whole gang of 17, 18-year-old boys gather there for a few hours every evening. Hanging around. Learning. Saying things like, Heyyyyy. They say that a lot. Got to get the sound just right. Heyyyyyy. Or

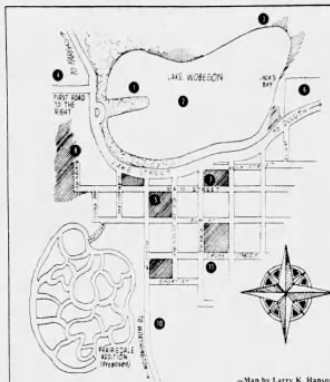
sometimes they go, Eeeeeee-hawwww. Sometimes they shove each other. Heyyyyy, what are you doing? Heyyy. Eeeeeee-hawwww.

"A parent listening to this thinks: Good Lord, how ever are they going to support themselves? These boys are old enough to make babies. God preserve us. They are going to be standing here a year from now with a baby under their arms, saying Heyyy. What's that you got there, Duane? Heyyy, this is my kid, Duane, Jr. Heyyy. All right. Wanna play catch wid'm?"

Keillor praises small town life above city life. He says going to a cocktail party is just like going to a job. People are required to put in three hours and say strange things they don't really believe.

"But in Lake Wobegon, they don't invite you up to the porch to talk, they invite you to sit. You may talk if you wish, especially as the sun goes down and it gets

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—Map by Larry K. Hanson

Keillor's kingdom

Keillor on Lake Wobegon's high points.

- 1. Tentative Point.** Camping, fishing, and biking a little ways. Nature trail features 100 of flora, fauna, marked with large easy-to-read labels ("Wren," "Squirrel," "Oak," etc.).
- 2. The Lake Wobegon Piles.** Concerned that lake-leaked following use of dynamite to catch lunker walleyes, townspeople dumped strapped autos, appliances, farm implements, trash, into the hole and created these twin 180-foot-high islands in 1956. Now regarded as Primitive Art, they are kept up with funds from the Minnesota State Arts Board.
- 3. Art's Bait.** A terrific hobby bait shop scenic tract, ideal for the bait shop operator who seeks privacy and can make a few repairs. \$8M, no payment till June—Jack's Realty.
- 4. The Radio Hall of Fame.** Gallery of broadcast treats, each star featured in a unique "Memory Sale" with tape cassette of voice plus other mementos—shirts, shoes, wallets, car keys, etc. Two miles west of town in former Farmer's Grain Terminal. Ask at Clarence Bunsen home in town for key. Open daily 9-5, weekends 12-6, except July 18-August 4 when Clarence and Arlene visit daughter Donna in San Diego. Please turn off lights before leaving. Thanks.
- 5. Sons of Knute Temple.**
- 6. Jack's Auto Repair.** Founded in 1946 with two pumps and grease pit, Jack's today is a multi-thousand-dollar agglomerate that includes Jack's School of Thought (correspondence), Warm Car Service, Dry Goods Emporium, Jack's Fountain Lounge, and Jack's Home, a rest spa for persons of all ages. A "must" for every visitor. 100 of items priced to sell plus large license plate collection, rocks, trained news, etc.
- 7. Mist County Historical Society Museum.** Colorful tiny dioramas portray historic scenes, including "Action Expedition Seeks North-west Passage to Moonhead," "Utahian Missionaries Teach Indians Interpretive Dance," and "Early Settlers Wait for Train." Visitors may view the controversial Wobegon Bunsenstone ("Not as shipped & stayed awhile to visit & have coffee & shot nap. Sorry you weren't here. Well, that's about it for now.") widely accepted as authentic but questioned as to its interest, plus the Boston Ferns of 1922, bromized, the only houseplant to survive "The Winter of Discontent."
- 8. Wally "Old Hardsands" Bunsen Memorial Field.** Home of the Lake Wobegon Leeches baseball and Looms five-man football.
- 9. Geographical Center of Lake Wobegon and Surrounding Area** (not shown). This grassy plot ringed with white stones marks spot where four teams (East, West, South, etc.) of late surveyors met in 1872 and realized they were off by a few miles. The overturf of maps was resolved by leaving Lake Wobegon out entirely, a complex geographical problem explained in more detail elsewhere. Map Day is observed here on February 29 every Leap Year.
- 10. The Powdermilk Biscuit Plant.**
- 11. Lake Wobegon High School.**

'Prairie Home Companion': the spirit of Lake Wobegon

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dark on the porch. It's easier to talk in the dark, it's sort of like radio."

Radio is the medium Keillor loves despite his early hopes to be a poet, and his success at publishing his humorous pieces in *The New Yorker*.

Keillor once tried to live for a year on his writing after leaving a radio program where he was required to play only classical music. The poverty was too much, but he has said his success at publishing in *The New Yorker* got him an invitation back to the radio, where he did a wake up show for a public radio station in St. Paul.

There he woke up Minnesotans with Bach, Beethoven, hillbilly music and the Beach Boys. "Help Me Rhonda" seemed to be the essential Keillor song.

Keillor said he got the idea of doing a live radio program after *The New Yorker* sent him to Nashville in 1974 to write a piece about the Grand Ole Opry.

The Opry has become ossified, Keillor said, but it is still the longest running radio show in the country, longer than the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, longer than the Mormon Tabernacle choir on Sundays.

"The audience slowly grew, and we kept moving to larger quarters every year or two," Keillor said. "I thought the audience understood quite well what was going on. People who wrote about the show always had to work in the word nostalgic and they were right in a sense, that we were picking up and reviving something.

"I never thought we revived something out of nostalgia or that nostalgia is enough to keep something going more than once or twice. I think it was a simple and wonderful idea that declined.

"Twenty years after the novelty of

TV wears off it will be ready to be picked up again."

Part of the success of the show in Minnesota might be attributed to the Scandinavian background of the state.

"There is a kind of Scandinavian, more particularly Swedish conservatism and stubbornness that I think is so strong that if you live here you don't notice it," Keillor said.

"A good example in radio is WCCO which is very unusual in that it has never changed its format. It sounds basically the same today as when I was a kid. They still have far and away the largest share of the audience. They are a habit their audience will not break, ever. A lot of people who never listened before, begin to tune in in order to feel normal.

"They listen to the grain and hog reports. There's a little music and an absolute compulsion about the weather."

Keillor said he doesn't know how well his program is doing nationally, now that it is syndicated.

"We pretend not to be interested," he said.

But the 650-seat World Theater is nearly always sold out, he said.

Several weeks ago Keillor had Bill Staines, the winner of the Kerrville championship yodeling contest on the show.

Staines was brought to you by Powdermilk Biscuits.

"Powdermilk Biscuits make shy people bold and make bold people lie back and listen for once," Keillor says.

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