

Audio turns visual on 'Prairie Home Companion'



Garrison Keillor, writer/host of 'A Prairie Home Companion.'

SIoux CENTER, Iowa — It's strange to watch radio, sort of like listening to a card game or talking to the television: The senses don't quite jibe.

When "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show goes on the road, however, audio becomes visual and the listener becomes a participant, urged to sing along with homespun choruses, chuckle at comic asides and salivate at the mere mention of a Powdermilk Biscuit.

It's not your usual radio show. There are no top 40 records, no weather reports, no hog futures, no phone-in opinions. And, despite someone threatening to sing, "Grab the Hammer, Momma, There's a Fly on Baby's Head," it's not Dr. Demento.

Instead, it's a mix of music from bluegrass to classical, strung together by the leisurely wit of host Garrison Keillor and the continuing saga of Lake Wobegone.

The show came to this northwestern Iowa college town recently, attracting a small but appreciative crowd of all ages that watched as Keillor and six traveling musicians made radio. Keillor is the originator and attraction of the show, delivering homey ramblings with the timing of Bob Hope and the deadpan of Buster Keaton. He's got a "radio voice," low and soothing like a catfish wallowing in the mud of Lake Wobegone. Commenting on the flotsam and jetsam that floats by his microphone.

Tuesday through Friday from 6-9 a.m. and on Saturday from 5-7 p.m., Minnesota Public Radio travels to the mythical village located, legend says, in the geographic center of Minnesota, but which, in truth, is "never far from where you are."

It came about by accident, when Keillor began making up commercials for an early-morning radio show in 1969: "I had to have



Kim Ode

some place to put the sponsors, so I put them in Lake Wobegone. The longer I talk about it, the more I think there probably is (such a town); though I haven't found it yet."

It is a quiet town, its residents staking their entertainment hopes on the radio, an invention that's become the companion of every prairie home.

Its main industry is the Powdermilk Biscuit Co., maker of those wholesome and expeditious biscuits that "give a shy person the strength to get up and do," Keillor intones, "what needs to be done."

(Heavens! They're tasty.)

Down the street is Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, "where if you can't find it, you can probably get along without it," and the Fearmonger's Shop, "serving your phobias since 1922."

People picnic on Tentative Point, where they can look upon the Lake Wobegone Piles; these are two islands formed after townspeople, fearing the lake had leaked after dynamite was used to catch lunker walleye, dumped in scrapped autos, appliances, farm implements and trash.

Now regarded as primitive art, they are maintained by funds from the Minnesota State Arts Board.

On each show, Keillor fills you in on what's happening here, unconsciously slow-dancing with the microphone on the worn Oriental-style rug as he spins tales of the Bunsens going out to see their car turn over the 100,000-mile mark or of the Hochstetter's dog, Rex, that died of a heart attack while chasing cars.

And there always seems to be some troubadour who stops to

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trade a few melodies, gentle tunes of Iowa's flat land or the lonesomeness of a traveler interspersed with the timeless grace of a gospel hymn.

Keillor, a 38-year-old native of Anoka, Minn., originated the idea for "A Prairie Home Companion," after writing an article about the Grand Ole Opry for The New Yorker magazine. First broadcast in 1974, the program now is carried on 90 stations from coast-to-coast. It's achieved a cult following among a broad cross-section of Americana for retrieving a mellow quality from the devouring jaws of the make-bucks monster.

Host Keillor is an unassuming person, ambling on stage in work boots, khaki trousers, a blue button-down shirt and tweed blazer, each item of clothing looking just a shade outgrown.

But, he tells the audience before the show, "I can talk into the microphone like this very handsome dude and, as you can see, that might not be the case. But the audience at home doesn't know that ... and what they don't know ... won't hurt them."

Once the show begins, he keeps his eye not on the audience, but on the clock hung from one of the mike stands, a disconcerting effect until you remember that you're watching radio, not theater.

In time, regular guest Stevie Beck comes out with her autoharp, later to be joined by Pop Wagner, Robin and Linda Williams, Dave Moore and Greg Brown for two hours of music peppered with off-beat wisdom and tips from the Fearmonger's Shop for combatting deadly bed snakes.

Despite its national distribution, Keillor plays dumb about his show's popularity.

"I really have no idea how strong it is, whether it's expanding or if people are turning off their radios in disgust."

And the future?

"Well, I, um, have been thinking I'll, well, do it for, let's see, until the spring of 1982, I think. I like to have a little sunset provision in there so I don't start doing it out of habit."

