

Now there is something to deno... turn to page 26... CIVIL RIGHTS... asleep or snoring during speeches... it's usually to us only as juan... turn to page 26

# Nation gets slice of 'Prairie Home' life

By LAWRENCE INGRASSIA  
The Wall Street Journal

LAKE WOBEGON, Minn.—If you've ever heard of this town, you know that it is the home of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church and the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian.

The mythical town of Lake Wobegon (pronounced woeegone) comes to life each week on "A Prairie Home Companion," a down-home radio show with a lazy Midwestern pace, satirical small-town humor and a mishmash of folksy music. It's all from public radio, the same people who bring you Brahms, Bach and Beethoven.

"Prairie Home" has long been captivating them in such hot spots as Ames, Fargo and the Twin Cities—and lately in New York, Los Angeles and Washington as well. Broadcast live from St. Paul by Minnesota Public Radio since 1974, the program has won a small network of loyal listeners around the country since going national last May.

"The music you present, and your artful tales of quotidian Midwest life are a bracing tonic to counteract the dreag of public affairs talk shows," writes James M. Yeager, a fan from suburban Washington, D.C. A Massachusetts follower, calling the program "A thinking man's Grand Ole Opry," confesses to making up excuses so he can stay home to listen to it.

The show is largely the creation of humorist Garrison Keillor, a Minnesota native and public-radio disc jockey who got the idea while writing a story for the New Yorker about the Grand Ole Opry. There's nothing fancy about the format. In between the musical performances on stage at the run-down World Theater in St. Paul, Keillor regales the audience with tales of Lake Wobegon and its cast of caricatures in his elaborate meandering style.

The music itself is a rather curious blend that somehow seems to appeal even to people who can't carry a tune. There's lots of folk and country music, a bit of blues and jazz, even some light opera and choir. And to really mix things up, "Prairie Home" occasionally features yodeling, Finnish dance music, an oral melange known as "Mouth music" and—the Saturday before Christmas—a rendition of "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" in Latin.

It took a while for such a show to catch on even in Minnesota. When "Prairie Home" began in July 1974, Minnesota Public Radio booked a theater with 440 seats—and often filled only 15 to 30 of them. "Sometimes we had more people on stage than in the audience," recalls Margaret Moon, the producer. Embarrassed, she moved the show to an 82-seat theater, and it finally started selling out. Now, it nearly always packs the 650-seat World Theater in the winter and draws 800 or more in the summer at an outdoor theater.

The audience shows up early to catch a half-hour warm-up before the broadcast starts. It's mostly a young, blue-jeans crowd, but with a healthy number of people from their 40s to their 70s in coats and ties or dresses, often with children in tow. (Keillor usually wears a white suit, which he says is the only suit he has.)

The audience always includes a lot of hard-core fans who get into the act, singing

## Newspaper brings woe to Wobegon

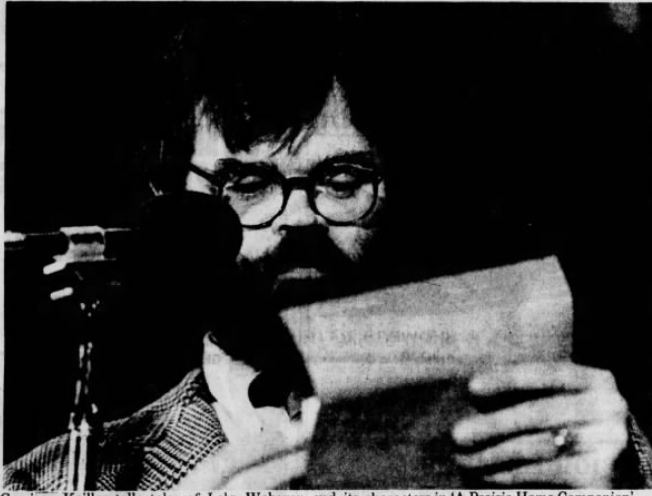
By KARL VICK  
The Minneapolis Star

Storm clouds brew above Lake Wobegon. The beloved home of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery and the mecca of Fowdermill Biscuits reels with a public radio and agribusiness controversy.

It seems that when the much-respected Wall Street Journal printed an article last week about "A Prairie Home Companion" (which The Star reprints today), it fell in Lake Wobegon like a migrating duck loaded with two tons of lead buckshot.

The national publicity for Garrison Keillor and crew pleased Minnesota Public Radio all right, but it also miffed the local public radio people. And they say it surprised Cargill Inc., the agribusiness concern, which along with the National Endowment for the Arts, has underwritten "A Prairie Home Companion" from the start.

The rub—or the rube in Lake Wobegon lingo—is that MPR took issue with the national audience estimate of 100,000 that The Journal extracted from National Public Radio consultant David Giovannoni. MPR president Bill Kling, who sits on the NPR board of directors, reportedly was angry about the figure and got NPR president Frank Mansiewicz to send a letter disavowing his consultant's estimate. MPR forwarded a copy of it to The Star upon hearing of its plans to reprint The Journal story.



Garrison Keillor tells tales of Lake Wobegon and its characters in "A Prairie Home Companion"

**Keillor**  
Turn to Page 2B

**Listeners**  
Turn to Page 2B

## A slice of 'Prairie' life

(Keillor, from Page 1B)

the refrains and clapping with the beat. On occasions when they aren't vocal enough, the performers urge them on.

But the unquestioned star is Keillor, a lanky man of 38 with a full beard that fills out his thin face. His real first name is Gary, but he adopted Garrison in junior high school because "I wanted something more distinguished."

Keillor dreamed up Lake Wobegon back in the 1960s when he started working as a public-radio-station disc jockey. (He still is host of a morning show on Minnesota Public Radio.) It wasn't until the Saturday evening program started that he began embellishing the saga of Lake Wobegon—"where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

His stories about the goings-on in Lake Wobegon are full of digressions and at times don't have a real punch line, but the audience seems to relish the humorous slice-of-small-town-life monologues. For example, one of the mythical town's residents is Senator K. Thorwaldson; Senator is his first name, chosen by his parents because "it had a nice ring to it." Perhaps because of his name, Thorwaldson developed a grandiose manner that has let him sponge off his Wobegon neighbors all his life—and be loved by them.

These tales are a "very subtle, occasionally campy and in a quiet way somewhat profound form of commentary on the nature of people in society," says Wallace Smith, general manager of Los Angeles radio station KUSC.

Keillor's satire pokes fun at sta-

tus-seeking and over-competitive people, businesses and institutions.

"It's illuminating humor about the foibles that all of us recognize in ourselves," says Rance Howe, a school-curriculum consultant from Anoka, Minn., and a "Prairie Home" fan.

Most banks, for example, aggressively seek customers who will borrow money. Not Bob's Bank in Lake Wobegon. Its motto: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." Of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Keillor says, "If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it."

Jack's Auto Repair in Lake Wobegon has diversified and now includes Jack's Warm Car Service and Jack's School of Thought. The latter offers a Head Stop program that teaches intellectuals how to enjoy such pedestrian pastimes as bowling.

"Prairie Home's" leisurely shuffle bores some listeners. Unlike the staccato tempo favored by most commercial radio and television programs, "Prairie Home" moseys along, leaving listeners waiting for something to happen. "I listened to it once and I liked it, but it wasn't as exciting as I thought it would be," says Ann Stookey, a program planner at National Public Radio.

One lover of classical music in Los Angeles wrote to station KUSC urging it to "leave Garrison Keillor to the moose" in Minnesota. Russel Hamnett, assistant station manager at public station WQED in Pittsburgh, which primarily carries classical music, adds, "The program has played to mixed reactions here. I personally enjoy it, but other people have said it doesn't belong here."

But carrying the offbeat pro-

gram "is a way of helping to modify the elitist charge often hurled at public radio" and of drawing listeners who don't tune in for high-brow music, notes Smith, the public-radio-station manager in Los Angeles.

### Guaranteed sponsor

Since the Minnesota station began offering "Prairie Home" to other National Public Radio outlets via NPR's new satellite transmission system, more than 100 of the 240 or so stations have picked it up. That makes it by far the most popular locally produced regular program on the NPR system, and in the Twin Cities "Prairie Home" beats 17 of its 20 commercial competitors during its slot of 5 to 7 p.m.

Still, the show's national audience is small by commercial standards. Exact figures aren't available, but the total is probably no more than 100,000 listeners at best, says David Giovannoni, an audience-research consultant for National Public Radio.

No matter what its audience is, "A Prairie Home Companion" needn't fear losing its main "sponsor," Powdermilk Biscuits. Keillor, who used to suffer from shyness, touts the imaginary product as one with the power "to make shy people bold and made bold people sit back and listen for once."

It is a typical line from the gentle parodist. As Keillor puts it, "Besides being funny, to talk about our fears and exaggerate them is helpful to people who share them and may not be able to see the humor of it."

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## News brings woe to Wobegon

(Listeners, from Page 1B)

"I was astonished to read the audience estimate," Mankiewicz wrote. "In fact, we have no solid information to base such an estimate."

"That number means we have only 743 listeners per station," said Sally Pope, MPR vice president for community relations. "And that doesn't make any sense. We've got 650 just sitting in the World Theater."

Pope said public radio's traditional indicators of audience size, such as the number of pledges phoned in during the program, show "Companion" with a "substantial" audience. Kling said he thinks the show's audience makes "quite a good comparison with 'All Things Considered,' which we think is somewhere around 5 million."

Said NPR consultant Giovannoni: "I can't comment."

Larry Ingrassia, who wrote the article for *The Journal*, said he asked MPR for audience figures "and they said they didn't know."

Cargill, however, had been led to believe the audience was larger than 100,000. But Pope, Kling and Kris Johnson of Cargill's corporate relations department all denied a report from within MPR that the nation's largest privately owned business was reassessing its association with the program in light of *The Journal* article. Cargill spokesman Stuart Baird said Cargill is making its annual re-evaluation of all gifts.

"Everybody's happy with the show," he said. Pope said she would show Mankiewicz's letter to Cargill.

To add insult to alleged injury, the article in *The Journal*, the nation's premiere business publication, contained no mention of Cargill.

"The fact that Cargill underwrites them didn't have anything to do with the story," Ingrassia said. "The point of the story is: Here is an unusual public radio program that has a loyal group of followers."

Baird said: "As far as any official reaction, there just wasn't any. I think everybody would've been pleasantly surprised had Cargill been mentioned." Baird said Cargill has given MPR more than \$153,000 for "Companion" since 1974, including a \$100,000 grant for national transmission last year.

Said Pope: "Yes, there's money in it. But Cargill has always had some real pride in that program."