

# U.P. listeners relate to Home Companion

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National Public Radio's Prairie Home Companion show and its host Garrison Keillor are having an effect on Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The U.P. is a long way from the show's home base in the World Theater in St. Paul but U.P. residents easily relate to Keillor's reports from fictional Lake Wobegon and his commercial spots for such diverse products and services as Ajua Brand Hot Sauce and Jack's Auto Repair.

Listeners here find Lake Wobegon resembles their own towns closely. To hear some tell it, Keillor might have been the mysterious person who spent a winter or a cold spring just down the street.

Letters from "the Bunsen girl" especially the L'lama Farm series have persuaded others that Keillor must have read mail from various Vegetarian Dome Communes and Makeshift Farms that rose and fell in the Upper Peninsula during the last decade.

A Prairie Home Companion first went on the air in Minnesota in 1974. It did not arrive in the U.P. till March 1980. WGGL-FM, a National Public Radio affiliate based at Michigan Technological University in Houghton (now off the air), broadcast a Prairie Home Companion show made in conjunction with a NPR conference in Kansas City. In May 1980 WGGL and WNMU-FM from Northern Michigan University in Marquette began to carry the two-hour show live via NPR satellite at 6 p.m. Saturdays.

"Youps," as U.P. residents call themselves, fall into three categories with regard to public radio. A sizable proportion ignore it, others listen intermittently, the third group are hardcore listeners. Classical or jazz and folk fans the hardcore use NPR outlets to avoid the mindless babble of commercial stations. For some a stereo tuned to NPR replaces nearly all other attempts at radio and totally eclipses TV.

Friends who listen to NPR sparingly or acquaintances who ignore public

broadcasting shouldn't drop by at 6 on Saturday night. If they are brah enough to do so they are liable to be put firmly in a chair and made to shut up and listen. This goes double if someone from the area is in the Twin Cities and attending the show.

There always seems to have been traffic between the U.P. and Minneapolis-St. Paul. Copper Country uncles, grandparents and parents still talk about going to and from by train. Friends, relatives and Lactian refugees fleeing the U.P.'s depressed economy have been known to move there. Some social workers make monthly trips there for classes and occasionally bring along wives, mothers and others whose continuing education mostly involves Byerly's, Hudsons and lately A Prairie Home Companion.

Messages written by people in one of the above categories passed to ushers and then to host Garrison Keillor and read on the air have promoted a Finnish Folk Fest in Calumet, said, "Hello to people in Ironwood" and "Hello to everyone in Houghton sitting cheek to cheek in the sauna."

A Keillor-delivered howdy to any part of the U.P. raises whoops and hollers from most of the Peninsula. Whoops and hollers aren't the only reactions. One program sent a crew of Laurium-based Norwegians in frantic search for a copy of The Lefse Song.

A Greek businessman from Ontonagon was forced to listen to a show featuring a Hellenic Ensemble. He then burned up the telephone wires to Public Radio trying to locate Greek records mentioned on the program. More than one Prairie Home Companion Anniversary Album has made the trip from St. Paul to the U.P.

The restored Calumet Theater, once a stop on the tours of Madame Modjeska, Lillian Russell, John Phillip Sousa and W.C. Handy, has regained some of its former status. The Red Clay Ramblers, Robin and Linda Williams, Sally Rogers and others have gone from the Copper Country to A Prairie Home Companion.

In the fall of 1980 there was an effort to reverse the process and bring the show, lock, stock and Garrison to the Calumet Theater. Money, distances involved and broadcast difficulties made it impossible. It still makes for interesting speculation.

Steve Dupras, manager of WNMU-FM at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, says, "A Prairie Home Companion is very popular in the area. We received only one negative reaction when we began broadcasting the show. That person has listened to the show since and now likes it."

If a Prairie Home Companion has received "positive audience reaction" from some people in the area, it has turned other people into fanatics. Saturday activities are planned with an ear toward the show and by 5:30 p.m. coffee is made or beer is cooled and the radio is carefully tuned.

After the show the weekend and the week ahead looms darkly. Fanatics get from Saturday to Saturday by playing the PHC Anniversary Album, rerunning favorite recollected spots over a beer and a bump at local versions of Lake Wobegon's Sidetrack Tap and talking about making a trip to St. Paul to attend the show.

Some U.P. residents regard outsiders and the whole lower peninsula with suspicion. According to us across the Straits of Mackinac, "below the bridge" there is nothing but a deplorable excess of roads, fences, cars, people and buildings.

Since a mall was built outside of Houghton a Keeweenaw Peninsula chauvinist here refers to anything across the Houghton-Hancock canal as below the bridge. Curmudgeon or not he listens faithfully to A Prairie Home Companion and the other day he brought up the subject of a trip to St. Paul.

Another friend lives in the U.P. but in dairy country, perilously close to Lake Michigan and the Wisconsin border. A call one night found him making an El Mutchaco Allegre Ajua Brand label for a bottle of hot sauce his wife had bought.