

8 Part VI / Monday, May 11, 1981

'LITTLE TOWN THAT TIME FORGOT'

FROM THE FOLKS AT LAKE WOBEGON

Roger Dougherty is a Duluth-based journalist. We have not been able to locate Lake Wobegon in any map or gazetteer, so we can't vouch for the accuracy of the dateline.

By ROGER DOUGHTRY, Independent News Alliance

LAKE WOBEGON, Minn.—Would you like to spend some time in a town where the crime rate is zero and where the most pressing problem is preventing the pigeons from divebombing the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian? Would you like to have that feeling of security that comes from having your hard-earned cash locked away in Bob's Bank, whose motto is "Neither a borrower or a lender be"?

Wouldn't you love to have your breadbox stuffed with biscuits whose secret ingredient will give you the courage to tell your boss what you really think of his latest harebrained idea?

All this, and much more, can be yours just by visiting Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve." In most areas of the country, all you need to get there is a radio and a good imagination.

Lake Wobegon is the product of the fertile mind of writer-humorist-autoharpist Garrison Keillor, who brings the town to life Saturdays on his two-hour public radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion"—for which Minnesota Public Radio in St. Paul has just won a 1980 George E. Peabody Award. The annual Peabody Awards are the highest honors in broadcasting. (The programs air in Los Angeles on alternate Saturdays at 6 p.m. on KUSC-FM 91.5.)

The show is a blend of folksy and semi-serious music, news updates from the mythical village and ads from myriad "sponsors" that the super-casual Keillor invented to liven things up. Keillor, a free-lance writer and longtime classical DJ for public radio, came up with the concept for "A Prairie Home Companion" a few years ago while doing an article on the Grand Ole Opry for The New Yorker.

Keillor guesses that about 600,000 people tune in. That may not be much by commercial standards, but when Keillor and friends started to broadcast on KSJN in St. Paul in July, 1974, their only real listeners were some startled classical music buffs who stumbled across the show while looking for a Mahler concert—so you'd have to say that "A Prairie Home Companion" has been doing all right at picking up an audience.

Until last May, you had to be smack in the middle of the Midwest to hear the show, with its tales of Father Emil, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"), the aforementioned Bob's Bank, and that chief sponsor, Powdermilk Biscuits—"The whole-wheat biscuit in the big blue box that gives shy people the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

Then National Public Radio—which found Keillor's humor a refreshing change of pace from classical music and the public affairs broadcasts—made the show available through its satellite service. Suddenly "A Prairie Home Companion" began to bounce out of the sky in New York, Los Angeles, Boston and Chicago. Keillor rapidly has become something of a cult here ever since, much to his amazement.

More than 100 public radio stations now carry the program, often hailed as "the last live radio show." Not all, however, have the courage to live up to the show's billing. "The idea of opening up their airways to a show that hasn't been screened is frightening to some people," Keillor sighs, "but there's something very special about live broadcasting."

"A Prairie Home Companion" always has been something very special to its Midwestern listeners. Despite the show's growing popularity, Keillor, a slim, 6-foot-4, 39-year-old Minnesota farmboy, refuses to change the format of the broadcast, which is loaded with jokes about happenings in Minneapolis and St. Paul. He won't explain them, either, on the grounds that it would take too long.

"We get letters from all over the country now," the bearded broadcaster says, "and most people are more curious about local references than they are frustrated by them. They want to know if people really drive their cars out on the ice on lakes when they go fishing, and they ask if some of the cars don't occasionally fall through, and isn't that a rather silly thing to do. Things like that."

"Besides, local references are a part of this kind of radio. Everything has to come from someplace, and we happen to come from here."

"Here," in Keillor's case, is most often The World Theater, an old 650-seat movie house. Keillor and his friends at Minnesota Public Radio saved the place from the wrecker's ball by convincing the owner that having a nice place for live music and happy audiences was more important than having another parking lot. The show moves outdoors during the summer.

"A Prairie Home Companion" usually is sold out long before the 4:30 p.m. warmup gets going, with a mixed-bag audience ranging from young folks in jeans to well-dressed older types and family groups gathering to munch popcorn and generally enjoy themselves. When the show is done outdoors, people sit on blankets, drink wine and pop (as soft drinks are called hereabouts) and consume picnic lunches. It's a scene right out of Lake Wobegon.

What the people see and hear is a very low-budget

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production. Keillor took the show on tour a few years ago, doing 13 different shows in as many days in 13 different towns, with the cast sleeping in tents and doing its own outdoor cooking.

Things have improved a bit since then, but with little money to spend on frills, most of the weekly guest stars either live in the area or are passing through on their way to or from more lucrative engagements. The result is a lineup of highly talented but nationally unknown performers.

You're likely to hear the Butch Thompson Trio and the New Prairie Ramblers (more or less regulars), or an operatic version of the St. Paul Yellow Pages done by a tenor from the Minnesota Opera Company, or a Scandinavian group singing folk songs in their native language—or a guy who uses his cheeks and tongue to make what Keillor calls "mouth music." In addition, there's the more predictable blues, bluegrass and gospel music. The quality of the music is always good, even if a lot of it is sung in Croatian.

There's audience participation, too, with people sending up notes for Keillor to read on the air. At a recent show, a couple celebrating their 32nd wedding anniversary wanted to assure the audience, through Keillor, that "we would have divorced years ago but neither of us would take the kids."

And there are always the weekly reports about life in Lake Wobegon, where, Keillor says, "all the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

Keillor's tales of small-town life often lack a punch line. That's OK, because he doesn't think he's funny anyway. "One of the reasons we were put on earth was to entertain each other, and some of us can walk out and do that without any talent at all," he says.

More and more stations each Saturday are joining what's called the Powdermilk Biscuit Network. Keillor was delighted a few weeks ago to announce that the public radio station in Nashville had just come on board. "We only have 8½ listeners down there," he deadpanned, "but even if Marty Robbins isn't listening, it's nice to know we're floating around in the air in his home."

All the recent success is almost too good to be true for Keillor, who grew up loving radio and with a burning ambition to be a radio star. He's finally making it at a time when radio is supposed to be dead. "I'm a man in the wrong place at the wrong time," he says, "and I love every minute of it."

But there's trouble in paradise for Keillor and everyone else associated with National Public Radio, which is due to be slashed drastically by President Reagan's budget cuts. How drastically is the only question.

"Minnesota Public Radio estimates it will lose about \$300,000 a year," Keillor says, "and the cost would be devastating to National Public Radio, which operates the satellite service which enables our show to be sent out around the country."

Typically, Keillor is trying to make the best of a bad situation. He recently dedicated a ballad, "Stockman, Spare That Grant" (referring to the \$40,000 grant "A Prairie Home Companion" currently receives from the National Endowment for the Arts), to Budget Director David Stockman. If Stockman heard it (and he could have, on Washington's WETA-FM), he didn't bother to reply.