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Tempo

Show's success hasn't changed life in Lake Wobegon

By Roger Dougherty

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 defacing 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 at Bob's Bank, where the motto is "Neither a borrower or a lender be"? Wouldn't you love to have your breadbox stuffed with biscuits made with a secret ingredient that gives you the courage to tell your boss what you really think of his latest brainstorm?

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, and satirist Garrison Keillor, who brings the town to life at 6 p.m. Chicago time each Saturday on his live, two-hour public radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion"—for which Minnesota Public Radio in St. Paul won a 1980 George F. Peabody Award. The annual Peabody awards are the highest honors in broadcasting.

The show, heard in Chicago on WBEZ (91.5 FM), is a blend of folksy and semiserious music, news updates from the mythical village, and ads from myriad "sponsors" that the casual Keillor invented to liven things up. Keillor, a free lance writer and longtime classical disk jockey 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 estimates that about 600,000 people tune in each Saturday. That may not be much by commercial standards, but when Keillor and friends started to broadcast on KSNJ 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.

UN'TIL LAST MAY you had to be pretty near St. Paul to hear the show, with its tales of Father Emil, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church; Ralph's Fretty Good Grocery ("if you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"); the aforementioned Bob's Bank; and the chief sponsor, Powdermill 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 from classical music and public affairs broadcasts, made the show available through its satellite service. Suddenly "A Prairie Home Companion" began to bounce out of the sky in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Boston. Much to his surprise, Keillor quickly became something of a cult hero.

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 (frustrating to some people)," Keillor sighs, "but there's something very special about live broadcasting."

DESPITE THE SHOW'S growing popularity, Keillor, a slim, 6-foot-4, 38-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," Keillor 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 somewhere, and we happen to come from here."

"**H**ERE," IN KEILLOR'S case, is most often the World Theater, an old 60-seat movie house. Keillor and his friends at Minnesota Public Radio saved the place from the wrecker's ball by persuading the owner that having a nice place for live music and happy audiences was more important than having another parking lot.

"A Prairie Home Companion" usually is sold out, with the show moves outdoors during the summer. The show moves outdoors during the summer. The show moves outdoors during the summer. The show moves outdoors during the summer.

What the people see and hear is a low-budget production. Keillor took the show on tour a few years ago, doing 13 different shows in 13 different towns in as many days.

THINGS HAVE IMPROVED a bit since then, but with little money to spend on frills, most of the weekly guest stars either are locals 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.

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 324 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 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 talents at all," he says.

MORE AND MORE people are making that escape each Saturday as new stations join what's called

Powdermill 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 desponded, "but even if Marty Robbins isn't listening, it's nice to know we're floating around in the air in his home."

But there's trouble in paradise for Keillor and everyone else associated with National Public Radio, which is due to have its budget reduced substantially by the Reagan administration. "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 that 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, Spins That Gram" (referring to the \$60,000 grant "A Prairie Home Companion" receives from the National Employment for the Arts) to David Stockman, director of the Office of Management and Budget. If Stockman heard it (and he could have, on Washington's WETA-FM), he didn't bother to reply.

Despite the uncertainty of the situation, Margaret Moon, the show's producer, thinks the mythical residents of Lake Wobegon will go on making new friends for years to come.

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