

“My humor is affection — what makes us pay attention in the first place”



A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION

By PEGGY MORGAN
Of the Courier-Post

Garrison Keillor is a man all America can love — at least so long as he does not run for political office and stays on the radio spinning stories.

Listener B.W., a traveling Kansas gospel singer and part-time preacher, likes Keillor's National Public Radio variety show, "The Prairie Home Companion," because it is clean — no sex and smutty stories.

M.M.W., a South Jersey sophisticate, laughs at the Head Stop, where intellectuals can learn to like bowling. The Head Stop is a program at Jack's School of Thought, part of Jack's Auto Repair, once a mere two-pump grease pit, now a multistore conglomerate in Lake Wobegon (pronounced Woebegone), Minn.

JACK BECAME a big wheel and sponsor of the Prairie Home Companion, along with Powdermilk Biscuits, which are made from whole wheat grown by Norwegian bachelor farmers.

St. Paul, Minn., is where the Prairie Home Companion comes from, live every Saturday night (except for the occasional tour), and where the 39-year-old humorist has always lived, lately with visits by the likes of Time magazine and the Wall Street Journal.

Lake Wobegon is not real and neither are its inhabitants or Prairie Home's commercials. Not real but awfully true. Keillor's people, products and places are so close to life that folks call Minnesota Public Radio for directions to the St. Paul Helsinki Sauna, full of hot steam (not hot sin) to wash away that stinky feeling.

BOB'S BANK with the motto "neither a

lender nor a borrower be" sure sounds real to anybody turned down for a loan, a timely banking practice.

The confusion probably stems from the nature of the variety show and Keillor's humor. Famous and local live musicians play for the live audience, all sorts of music — a lot of folk and bluegrass, an occasional tenor singing the Minneapolis Yellow Pages, mouth musicians playing cheeks and teeth and Roy Blount Jr. (author of "Crackers"), singing "I'm Just A Bug on the Windshield of Life" in a voice lugubrious enough to damage the control of an old dog's bladder.

Keillor created the commercials to slide from one act to another on non-commercial radio. In the late 1960s, Keillor upset classical-music programming by inserting "Help Me, Rhonda" into Ravel's "Bolero" and by following the Beach Boys with Vivaldi.

KEILLOR'S humor is a wit as warm and dry as a stale, toasted Powder Milk Biscuit, powerful rolls that can make a shy person bold enough to say what he means — insofar as that is possible — and that can make a bold person sit down and listen for once.

So far, nobody has inquired about the authentic address for the Sidetrack Tap, which sells fried fish lips. Or for the Fearmonger's Shop, where a parent can buy a baseball bat with which to smack out the deadly bed snakes lying coiled at the foot of children's beds, where the snakes winter.

The Fearmonger's Shop may be the store closest to Keillor's great but garrisoned heart. His anxiety over his first big East Coast tour (Boston, Washington and Swarthmore, Pa.) was such that he took up



Courier-Post photo by Curt Hudson

The man behind the radio voice: Minnesotan Garrison Keillor, who spins yarns weekly on public radio.

A friend on the air steps out

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cigarettes again. Why did he never storm New York, where the New Yorker has published his short humor pieces since 1969, when he was three years out of the University of Minnesota, an English and journalism major with the ambition of publishing just once in the New Yorker, a magazine that had been part of his attire, under his arm, since ninth grade?

"I'M NOT equipped to storm anything," Kellner says in his sepulchrally slow FM public-radio voice. In person, the humorist is as tall as his tall tales: 6-foot-6. He stares out the WTHY studio glass so that you can see his concave silhouette. Occasionally, as if testing the limits of your abysses, he'll fix you with a long, full look from eyes made greener by an emerald crew-neck sweater.

After graduation, he rode buses and trains down the East Coast from Boston seeking magazine and radio employment. Nobody offered him a job, maybe because he appeared to have washed and changed clothes in public restrooms, which he had. So he returned to Minnesota and stayed.

"When you live in one area all your life, every thing and every place has some significance to you. You walk down a certain street and remember when you were young and impoverished. Years ago you stood there with a woman and said goodbye. You can walk around the city and remember your whole life.

"RESIDES, if I moved someplace else, I wouldn't know anybody. . . . Nobody would admit he's afraid of change. If anybody would, it would probably be me."

The rejection he still receives from the New Yorker only increases his writer's block. However, he has published enough for a book that should be available in December, "Happy to Be Here" (Atheneum).

First, he's a writer, even without the living wage. He began with private poems, at a single-digit age, his response to the mystery — maybe just life, maybe an invading infant brother — that turned his sunny, happy disposition to that of an outcast and loner. He changed his name from Gary to Garrison to feel less besieged. He published a junior-high newspaper. He is the middle child of six, "the most depressed, the most misunderstood, the one with the shortest childhood." His oldest brother is a marine scientist. Another is an unemployed law lawyer, the third raises sheep. Younger sister is a railroad publicist.

HIS FATHER worked for the railway mail service, "before they did away with it," he says, his voice dropping beyond the sepulcher and into the hard, cold ground. His parents ran away to Florida in their dotage. His oldest sister scandalized the family by marrying a Baptist, "off to the right of our tiny sect, the Plymouth Brethren. . . . No, it's not indigenous to Lake Wobegon. It's real."

One reason he created Lake Wobegon for the hometown which sounds like all our hometowns was because his own cornfields had become suburbanized.

Divorces don't happen while people live in Lake Wobegon, although Kellner was divorced from his wife and mother of 12-year-old Jason Kellner five years ago.

Does he always regard small-town life with such humorous equanimity? Doesn't he ever get mad? "Cruelty, especially that done in the name of the Christian faith, makes me angry. . . . and what I've seen of television people — pushy aggressive, just (pause, utter quiet, long intake of nose breath and whisper) . . ."

His humor does not depend on burlesque, ridiculous banana peels. He squinches his ski nose over an apt description: "My uncle — he's still living and 94 — used to come over every other Saturday night and tell wonderful, long stories. They were very funny but also very affectionate towards people's frailties and eccentricities. The real basis of my humor is affection. Affection is what makes us pay attention in the first place.

"We all fascinating and anatomically correct, yes, we are."

(Prairie Home Companion, six years old but broadcast nationally only since May, 1980, comes over WTHY, 91 FM, Saturday night from 6 to 8.)