

TELEVISION & RADIO

Garrison Keillor's slices of rustic life

By Henry Kisor
Field News Service

Country boy Garrison Keillor plows his Minnesota patch with two tractors. The one you can hear far and wide is called "The Prairie Home Companion," and it's a live two-hour show beamed from St. Paul Saturday nights on National Public Radio.

From 6 to 8 p.m. (CST), Keillor plays host to a meandering mix of monologues, parodies and country music whose stage is the fictional village of Lake Wobegon, Minn., "the town that time forgot and could not improve," where "all the women are strong, all the men good-looking and all the children above average."

His "sponsors" include Powdermilk Biscuits (the biscuit with the power "to make shy people bold and make bold people sit back and listen for once"); Jack's Auto Repair ("All the tracks lead to Jack's where the bright flashing lights show you the way to complete satisfaction") and Bob's Bank (its motto: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be").

Then there is the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, not to mention the Sidetrack Tap, which features deep-fried fish lips.

Sometimes Keillor moseys along to a letter from Lake Wobegon expatriate Barbara Ann Bunsen, who moved to a combination walnut farm and llama

ranch in Wisconsin. Or he tells a story about the time the town Christmas tree was blown down and almost hit Mrs. Krebsbach, who was coming home from three beers at Wall's Tavern.

These low-key slices of rustic life, tinged with the wintry wryness of the North Country, bear only a fleeting resemblance to the cowlop comedy of "Hee Haw" and other yokel operas. And they have grown on a lot of people. A little more than a year ago "The Prairie Home Companion," a seven-year veteran of the air, was heard only over Minnesota Public Radio. These days some 140 stations air the program nationwide, and last year it won a Peabody Award.

Now for the other tractor, the one Keillor gets out of the barn less often but which turns even deeper and sharper furrows: His splendid satirical prose. He has been contributing comic pieces for 10 years to the New Yorker, and 26 of them have now been collected in "Happy to Be Here" (Atheneum, \$11.95).

Here Keillor's humor dons coat and tie. His targets in the New Yorker may wear alligator pumps more often than they do clodhoppers, but their under-shorts are cut from the same basic, trendy, pretentious, sanctimonious, status-seeking, getting-and-spending human cloth.

Keillor on Shy Rights: "He kept pretty much to himself, every psychopath's landlady is quoted as saying after the arrest, and for weeks thereafter every shy person is treated as a leper." On macho-patriotic men's magazines: "Check your backyard. See enemy troops digging foxholes in the sandbox? No? Good. Let's keep it that way."

He skewers "enlightened" liberal causes. At the St. Paul's Episcopal Drop-in Hair Center, "if you've decided to get a haircut, that's your decision, but why go to a straight barber and pay \$3.50? ... If you just want to come in and talk about haircuts, well, that's cool, too."

Joyce Brothers takes over from Casey Stengel as a baseball team undergoes group therapy: "In a simpler era, Ty Cobb came up to the plate in a mood of fierce determination, but today's players ... are more content to experience at-batness."

A lot of this is topical and therefore dated, it's true, but Keillor's well-wrought irony brings the '70s back to life in all its goofy glory. He is sometimes compared with S.J. Perelman, the New Yorker's late comic master, but while Perelman was famous for his inimitable rococo style, Keillor's genius is for mimicry, and he has perfect pitch.

□ Dick Cavett / Timothy