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'A Prairie Home Companion'

Radio show put Lake Wobegon on the map

Garrison Keillor reigns as the folk hero of the upper Midwest. If you missed the recent features about Lake Wobegon, Minnesota in Newsweek and Time you may not know that Garrison Keillor is the hottest name on radio in the country.

Keillor is the creator of "A Prairie Home Companion," a variety show broadcast live coast-to-coast from St. Paul, Minn. between 3:00 and 7:00 p.m. Saturdays on National Public Radio including WGTB-FM 91.1 here.

On each program 30-year-old Keillor adds a few chapters to his continuing saga of Lake Wobegon (pronounced woe-be-gone).

You won't find Lake Wobegon on a Minnesota map. Legend has it that a surveying error omitted "the town that time forgot and the decades could not improve."

But to fans who follow the fortunes of the Whippets softball team and Dorothy's latest culinary creation at the Chatterbox Cafe, Lake Wobegon is as real as anywhere they've lived.

Keillor's storytelling binds an odd assortment of ragtime pianists, guitar pickers, banjo strummers, and nearly every other

style of musician into a coherent show. In his soft, slow speech he describes people and situations familiar to us all, gently poking fun at human foibles. Each week he describes another agony of shyness we know he's experienced firsthand, then prescribes "A Prairie Home Companion's" main "sponsor," Powdermilk Biscuits, which "give shy people the courage to do what needs to be done." Keillor takes up an autoharp to accompany the musicians on stage in the Powdermilk theme song:

Has your family tried 'em?

Powdermilk, Powdermilk . . .

Has your family tried 'em?

Powdermilk . . .

If your family's tried 'em,

You'll be sure you've satisfied

'em.

They're a real hot item

Powdermilk.

Every business in Lake Wobegon "advertises" on this program on public radio . . . Jack's Auto Repair ("All roads lead to Jack's"), Earl's "As You Like It" Barbershop, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, the Sidetrack Tap. But theirs aren't hard-sell



GARRISON KEILLOR
Creator of
'A Prairie Home Companion'

"commercials." Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery proclaims, "If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it."

Besides the merchants, the cast of characters includes Father Emil of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, Barbara Ann Bunsen (the hometown girl who writes back about life in the big city), and assorted other citizens of the

town "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

Usually dressed in an ill-fitting white suit, the lanky Keillor stands before 'A Prairie Home Companion's' studio audience of 650 people and weaves elaborate plots without glancing at a script. Is it all ad libbed? No, the monologues are in Keillor's mind, embedded there the day before not through memorization, but through the act of writing. "Once I write something, I remember it," Keillor says. He doesn't revise; Saturday's show results from a single draft scripted on Friday.

Keillor's reading of messages from the studio audience enhances the show's air of spontaneity. "George in Green Bay wishes a happy anniversary to his parents in DeKalb. Diane reminds her husband back home in Wausau that the chicken pot pie should bake only 30 minutes."

Four or five musical acts perform on each show. The music is mostly acoustic folk and country, a bit of blues and jazz, occasion-

ally light opera and even yodeling and "mouth music" from cheek slappers, tooth tappers, and whistlers.

Keillor conceived "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1974, when writing a story for The New Yorker about the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. Within two months he created an opry for the upper Midwest, though Lake Wobegon, he reminds audiences from coast to coast, "is not very far from where you are." A Prairie Home Companion has been broadcast nationally since May 1980 by National Public Radio.

Growing up in Anoka, Minnesota (1981 population: 13,288, Keillor wanted to be a writer, and, looking toward the day when his byline would grace magazine articles, he changed his name from Gary to Garrison in junior high school because "I wanted something more distinguished." He majored in English and journalism at the University of Minnesota. He thinks of himself as a writer and is a contributor to The New Yorker. Atheneum Press will release a collection of his New Yorker articles soon.