

# 'Prairie Home Companion:'

*Radio show is doing its best to bring back the good old days*

By RICHARD McFARLAND

ST. PAUL, Minn. (UPI) — In an old vaudeville theater, a tall young cracker-barrel philosopher stands at a microphone, joking about life, introducing musicians and reporting the news from Lake Wobegon, Minn.

Two million people huddle around radios across the country to listen — like the old days of Jack Benny and Fred Allen. It's Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion," broadcast live Saturday evenings on 193 National Public Radio stations.

Keillor, 39, who says he's shy, stands up there 6-foot-4 in his beige suit, doing an easy-going two-hour radio variety show in the midst of the television era, and is one of the hottest things around.

His thoughts drift each week to Lake Wobegon (woe-be-gone), his mythical little home town "time forgot and the decades cannot improve ... where the women are strong, the men good looking and the children above average."

The town is famous, although not on the map, and the show has won the prestigious Peabody Award.

Keillor talks about Father Emil, priest of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, who hasn't paid much attention to Vatican II, figuring one Vatican is enough, and Sen. Thorvaldsen, who doesn't work much but "makes a big fuss over you."

Powdermilk Biscuits is the prime sponsor. They come in the big blue box or the brown bag with "stains that indicate freshness."

"Heavens, they're tasty, and expeditious." They give shy people "the power to get up and do what needs to be done."

Bertha's Kitty Boutique encourages cat ranching; the Fearmonger Shop serves paranoids and offers a safety toilet seat a yard high to be out of the reach of snakes; the Chatterbox Cafe serves a strawberry cream pie that "makes grown men cry and lose all ambition in life."

There's the Open Clothes Shop; Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you probably can get along without it."); Bob's Bank, which says "Never a borrower or lender be ... Save at the sign of the sock."

And there's the St. Paul Helsinki Sauna. "If you're feeling stinky, head for the Helsinki."

Some compare Keillor to Will Rogers, some to Fred Allen. But he's an original. No other show is quite like it. Keillor's make-believe stories are loaded with humor and the audience roars, but he also cuts through to a lot of real life.

Keillor has been interested in radio since he grew up shy in Anoka, Minn. He used to skip swimming classes at the YMCA rather than swim

*"A Prairie Home Companion" airs weekly in Muncie on Public Radio WBST at 8 p.m. Saturdays. WBST-Radio is at 92.1 FM on your dial.*

in the nude and went to WCCO's live "Good Neighbor" show.

He went to the University of Minnesota, got a job announcing for Minnesota Public Radio and wrote for New Yorker magazine. He got the idea for the "Companion" show when he went to Nashville to do an article for the New Yorker on the Grand Old Opry. The "liveness" excited him.

Two months later he started his show.

In July, 1974, "Companion" went on the air with a guitar duo, a tenor and a jazz piano player, and an audience of 20 curious onlookers. In May, 1980, the show went on National Public Radio. The number of stations and audience have boomed.

At 5 p.m., central time, usually in the old World Theater in downtown St. Paul, there are a few guitar notes, and Keillor begins singing in his easy-going voice:

"Well, look who's coming through the door.

"I think we've met somewhere before.

"Hello, Love ... ah ... Hello, Love ..."

Chet Atkins dropped in the other night to play guitar.

And there is Dr. Tom Weaver, who can tap out the William Tell Overture and Winter Wonderland on his teeth.

Through the show the tall host reads dozens of "Happy Birthday" and "Happy Anniversary" messages to listeners from coast-to-coast. One Sunday evening he did part of the job with a song:

"Happy birthday to Larry from all your dependents,

"Who hope that your earnings are on the

ascendance.

"Happy birthday to Joe Litko, with much love from Sue,

"Who thanks Sam and Carolyn for producing you."

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This spring Keillor told about the high school seniors being released.

"Graduation is a week away," he said, "and there did not seem to be any point in keeping those children any longer ... It was discouraging for the teachers to look at them and realize how much they had to learn and how little time remained ...

"Oh, children, children, children," he said. "What can we do? What can we do but love you. It's important to do well in school. School helps develop intelligence. Nine-tenths of intelligence is just paying attention ... an attitude of wakefulness."

Then he told about the class party at the gravel pit. The seniors were drinking beer and smoking and talking about life, and the Ingqvist boy was telling the Tollerud girl, "I think we'll have nuclear war in two or three years. I said two or three years."

The rock 'n' roll noise had gotten pretty loud and woke up the Christianson sisters, Sarah and Tina, who lived over the hill and across the pasture. Tina got up, loaded the 12-gauge, marched over the hill in her nightgown and raccoon cap.

The Ingqvist boy was just telling the Tollerud girl, "Yes, I don't think any of us have long to live," when Tina let fly with both barrels at the Milky Way.

"Oh, there was some intelligence then," Keillor said. "There was a real attitude of alertness."

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Keillor has all kinds of enthusiastic fans — in the cities, on farms, the Midwest, the East, the West — and many of them write to him.

One fan wrote:

"This city of Washington, I suspect, could use a good bit of Lake Wobegon."

The writer: Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun.