

ALL Small towns, simpler times stuff of 'Prairie Home Companion'

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By Edward B. Fluke
New York Times

ST. PAUL, Minn. — It was Saturday afternoon, several hours before "A Prairie Home Companion" was to go on the air, and Garrison Keillor was lounging with an Oakland A's cap pulled low over his forehead and thinking out loud about waterbeds for cats.

"Someone told me that their cat liked to sleep on their waterbed," the humorist said slowly, which is the way he says most things. "The problem is that cats don't have beds the way dogs do. You have to create a need for the product." He took another puff on his cigarette, and the focus of his eyes slipped even further into the distance, and after a few moments he reported with a sense of satisfaction, "I think I'll do it through guilt."

That evening, as he stood before the studio audience holding the microphone with both hands and swinging back and forth to the rhythm of his own words, it was clear that Keillor had solved his problem.

"If I were to ask you about your cat's bed," he said with a tone of mildly affected urgency, "a lot of you would just have to hang your heads in shame and say, 'Well, gosh, our cat doesn't exactly have a bed. Our cat just sort of sleeps on our bed or on a couch someplace...'"

He then went on about how beds are "one of the most basic of all creature comforts," and suggested, "maybe it's time you dropped down to Bertha's Kitty Boutique and picked up a little Water Cat brand water bed. Cats love these beds, you know. Their gentle undulating motion attracts cats, and they are very comfortable, especially with a thermostat that brings the temperature up to your cat's comfort level. Bertha's Kitty Boutique — for persons who care about cats."

An eye for incongruities like water beds for cats and an instinct for relating them to basic human feelings like guilt are two of the reasons that Garrison Keillor, a 40-year-old native of Anoka, Minn., is building up a following that ranges from small-town Midwesterners to sophisticated urbanites.

For more than two decades, Keillor has broadcast for Minnesota Public Radio from St. Paul, where he had a successful "drive time" morning radio show and where, in 1974, he began the weekly "A Prairie Home Companion." The two-hour show, which is carried in Maine by MPBN on Saturdays at 8 p.m., consists of live music and humorous monologues. But the centerpiece each week is Keillor's report on the goings on in the imaginary town of Lake Wobegon, Minn., where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average.

The core of his followers are those who, like himself, grew up in small towns. "He brings back memories of things that happened to us all," says Mary Sue Snyder, who grew up in Kenmare, N.D., and was in the audience for a recent performance. "He takes you back to simpler times."

Two years ago, though, the show began to be beamed by satellite to what has grown to 200 other stations around the country affiliated with the American Public Radio network, and Keillor has developed a whole new constituency.

The humorist is not exactly a stranger outside Minnesota. For more than a decade he has published humorous pieces in The New Yorker; indeed, it was a New Yorker assignment to write about the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville that gave him the idea for "A Prairie Home Companion."

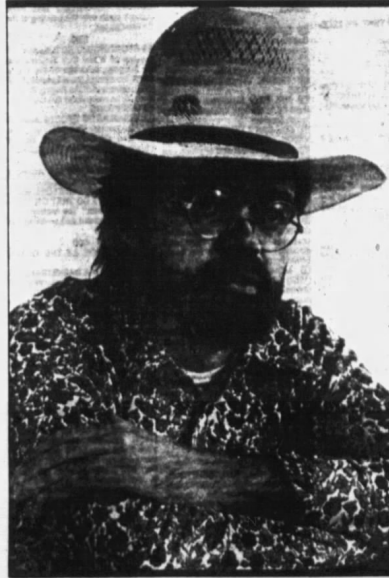
"I wanted to do something that would make the fullest use of live radio," Keillor recalls. "Because it's live there's an intimacy with a listener, and you can draw on people's imaginations. I've learned not to be terribly descriptive in my monologues. You just draw a few lines, and most listeners will fill in with details that are familiar to them. It would never work on television."

Over a period of time, listeners became familiar with the characters from Lake Wobegon that Keillor describes in his stories. There's Father Emil, the ultra-traditionalist pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, who is likely to stand up in the midst of confession and say, "Oh, you DIDN'T," and his hip young counterpart, Father Bill, who on Easter displayed a picture of Jesus on water skis with the inscription "He's up!" There's Margaret Haskins Derber, the poet laureate of Lake Wobegon, who can be counted on to record memorable events in less than memorable or even metrical verse, and Senator K. Torvallson, who never was elected to office but was named that by his mother, who "thought it had a sort of ring to it."

The music on "A Prairie Home Companion" is, to put it mildly, eclectic — ranging from bluegrass and country and Western to an occasional classical violinist or Norwegian folk singer.

The feckless sponsor of the program is Powdermilk Biscuits, manufactured, of course, in Lake Wobegon with a slogan — "Heaven, they're tasty... and expeditious." Storekeepers in Minnesota and elsewhere report that many a listener has come in looking for "those biscuits in the big blue box with the picture of a biscuit on the cover."

Other "sponsors" include Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"), Bob's Bank ("Save at the sign of the sock") and the Sidetrack Tap, the "dim little place on Main Street where the pinball



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— Garrison Keillor

machine never tilts, where love never dies, where the time is always about a half-hour slow."

Keillor is a keen social critic. On one recent show, for example, he did a commercial for Al's Singles Breakfast Cafe, "up in Minneapolis." "If you're searching for someone new, why join a singles club or go to a singles bar?" he asks solicitously. "If you want to know the truth about someone, why not meet them for breakfast at Al's about 7 or 8 in the morning. You're apt to discover all sorts of personal traits that don't come out after sunset."

Keillor's humor is largely gentle and directed at follies that everyone recognizes in himself as well as in others. "You end up laughing at your own memories, not at other people," says Mrs. Snyder.

Keillor tends to see himself as a storyteller in the tradition of Twain and Thurber and — his own modern hero — E. B. White. His stories take off from events that everyone can recognize — the opening of duck hunting season, the death of a dog which liked to chase cars and, as with them, his stories are for the most part autobiographical.

Keillor is a basically shy person. "When you first meet him," says one acquaintance, "he seems to avoid eye contact until he decides that you are not going to hurt him." Asked if it isn't somewhat incongruous for a shy person to go into show business, Keillor replied, "I didn't start out in front of a live audience. That took a lot of courage. I started out in a studio, which is a way of talking to people without being seen."

His best-known New Yorker piece, entitled "Shy Rights: Why Not Pretty Soon?" was an appeal for shy persons to affirm their dignity under the slogan "Shy is beautiful, for the most part" and the emotions associated with diffidence runs through many of his radio monologues. "A lot of people who are not shy think that those of us who are would simply like to be uninhibited," he observes. "That's not true. What a lot of shy people really dread is talking nonsense."

Keillor grew up in a strict fundamentalist Protestant home, and this may explain his sharp eye for ideologies of all kinds. It may also explain why his humor is ultimately rooted in what might be called a moral vision.

Keillor's recollections of small-town life evoke feelings of nostalgia, but the net result is quite the opposite. "I'm not talking

about the simple and pure rural life," he says, "because this never was. It does the people of Lake Wobegon a disservice to present them in simple nostalgic terms."

"Nostalgia implies that something has been lost," says Don Draker, the radio coordinator for the National Endowment for the Arts, which helps underwrite the show. "What Garrison is saying is that nothing has ever been lost. Writers like Silverwood Anderson with 'Winesburg, Ohio,' were saying that if you want corruption and dark passion and original sin, you don't have to go to the big city to find it. Garrison stands that on its head. If you are looking for transcendence and affirmation and eternal values, you don't have to go to a university or a big city to find them. You can find them in your own home town."

In the final analysis, one gets the impression that Keillor has created his mythical Lake Wobegon — and encouraged others to create their own through their own imagination — as a vehicle for making sense out of life. One day, for example, he got to thinking about the ne'er-do-wells in his own family tree and this led to an account in a monologue about the Ingqvist boys, two of the founding fathers of Lake Wobegon who, by sheer accident, ended up as the owners of the Powdermilk Biscuit Company but really spent most of their time playing with what amounted to adult toys. "They were the first in Lake Wobegon to buy a car, the first to go for a ride in an airplane," Keillor says. "They were the first to have a movie camera and shoot thousands of feet of film — mostly of people standing and watching them doing it."

"A lot of our ancestors stared down at us pretty fiercely from between those gilt frames," he adds. "But the Ingqvists look out from their photographs and give us a kind of absent look. They're not thinking about us. They're thinking of hunting squirrels or building a big rocket or learning to play the mando cello."

"People have wondered about the Ingqvist boys. What was their legacy other than their gravestones? It wasn't powdermilk biscuits. That was someone else's work. Their possessions were sold, their homes were sold. People wondered what did they leave behind?"

"Well, their foolishness. You know, when two of the founding fathers, the forefathers, the ancestors in the town, are ne'er-do-wells and spend their lives and look, it takes a lot of pressure off the rest of us."