

The Modesto Bee

viewpoints

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1982

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Public radio offers a remarkable show

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THERE IS A VILLAGE, an imaginary place in America's heartland, that started out as one man's vision and has become a real place for a very large number of people.

The place exists anywhere and almost everywhere. It has schools, churches and stores, people you recognize, who have real problems.

Things that happen in this place are mostly amusing. At least they illustrate the human condition. Sometimes, a story will be so sad you brush your eyes.

Every Saturday afternoon this place comes alive, magically, in homes all over America. Even the medium is nostalgic. It's radio.

Radio? Who listens to radio? Except for the news, or a game, or the weather, nobody except teenagers listens to radio anymore, really sits down to listen as they did in the Thirties. Of course, radios are on all the time, playing music in the background, while we work or relax, or drive our cars, but who actually sits down at home to listen?

Radio as a dramatic medium, as an instrument for the imagination, died long ago. It was done in by television.

But millions do listen to radio on Saturday afternoons, for two hours. The program they tune in, and stay with for the whole 120 minutes, is "A Prairie Home Companion." People go out of their way to avoid late afternoon conflicts, plan their weekends, so they will be free to listen.

It comes to us live, from the World Theater in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. And it's wonderful.

The magician is Garrison Keillor, a former radio announcer in Minneapolis. All these years, he has been writing little pieces about America. He has been writing about this place of his soul—the town where he grew up—and which he calls (with a twist of humor) Lake Wobegon.

On this radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," he tells these little stories. He tells one the first hour, another the second hour. Often he starts out with, "Well, it's been a quiet week in my little home town..." and then constructs a vision of America as it always was and always will be, an America that is not plastic and fast and violent and immoral, beset by joblessness and, for some, hopelessness, but an America like we always knew it was, peaceful and warm with shared humanity.

There is Father Emil and his church, Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. There is Bertha, who owns a shop called The Kitty Boutique, and who is a regular pretend advertiser. There is the

Sidetrack Tap, where the old boys sit around and pass the time. There is Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, that advertises "if you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it." There is a cafe where the cooking really is done by someone out in the kitchen. There is Bob's Bank, in a house trailer so the owner can take it south with him on his winter vacation. There is the Fearmonger's Shop, which sells all sorts of things for insecure people.

The No. 1 advertiser is Powdermilk Biscuits, a product that has been developed on the show to such a point that real product, if one were produced by this name, would enjoy enormous and instant sales.

Keillor's slogans and jingles are not offensive, as much of commercial radio's are. They are, in fact, part of the joy.

One of Garrison Keillor's on-going themes has to do with "shy persons," and he professes to be very shy himself, even though he is out there on the stage week after week, and on tour around the country before enormous audiences. His definition of what makes a shy person is inclusive. We all have the feelings he expresses, that the world is almost too much to cope with at times. Keillor finds this raw nerve and gives it gentle unguent.

Not all the long program is about Lake Wobegon, not at all. The mythic village gets only 10 minutes or so. The rest of "A Prairie Home Companion" is lively music and patter, with a regular



'Prairie Home Companion' host Garrison Keillor as a 'shy person'

group on hand, the Butch Thompson Trio. The music is the kind you seldom hear on radio. There are echoes of the

Grand Ol' Opry before it got slick. There are elements of Major Bowes' Amateur Hour and people who make music by thumping their teeth and popping their cheeks. Mostly the music is down home. Blue Grass, Dixieland, or ethnic music from all over, such as fiddle players and Irish harpists. The music is at least top-lapping, and sometimes you may feel like getting up and dancing yourself, right there in your own home.

It's old time radio, but it is new and sensitive, too.

It is almost too good to be true. In fact, a shy person comes to fear it will not last, that it is too good, too unspoiled to survive.

How long can quality and sensitivity endure in mass media? How long can Garrison Keillor live with one foot in the hectic present and one in the simplified past? Listeners may be insecure about it continuing, and so they hate to miss even one episode of "A Prairie Home Companion."

...but it appears to be lost for central Valley listeners

Unless there is a change of heart, and soon, there will be no "Prairie Home Companion" in the central San Joaquin Valley, except for those who still have rooftop antennas powerful enough to get San Francisco, or unless it is picked up on a cable. The Stockton station, at the University of the Pacific, has cancelled the show effective the end of this month.

Three other FM stations in this area carry "A Prairie Home Companion" each Saturday from 6 to 8 p.m. They are KQED, San Francisco, 88.3; KXTR, Sacramento, 90.7; and KVPR, Fresno, 89.3. Two stations broadcast the program at 3 p.m. They are KUOP, Stockton, 91.3; and KALW, Berkeley, 91.7.

Cablecom of Modesto carries the Stockton station. The manager, Bob Versace, was not aware KUOP had cancelled the show, and said he was not familiar with it or with its following, but would consider adding a public radio affiliate to the cable if there were enough demand from subscribers.

For KUOP Manager Richard Terry, it was "a very difficult decision" to make. The decision was reached by the seven professional members of the station staff and himself, because it will cost more, "but it has also become a matter of ethics in the public broadcasting community."

Terry's cancellation followed that of KSUR in Ashland, Oregon, for basically the same reasons.

There are, however, 225 radio stations in the United States that will continue to carry the show because they remain members of American Public Radio Associates Inc. This new consortium was organized to provide an alternative source of programming in addition to National Public Radio, which is the public-funded backbone of public radio.

APR was organized in March by four big public radio stations, including KQED in San Francisco and KUSC in Los Angeles, and Minnesota Public Radio, which produces "A Prairie Home Companion."

The APR consortium offers 55 pro-

grams on a growing list, programs which are available only to their affiliates. And this year, they have told affiliate stations they must help pay the costs.

For Stockton's KUOP to continue in APR, it would have to pay an \$800 annual fee plus \$20 per week for "A Prairie Home Companion," and Manager Terry feels that is too much. Also, because facilities for the Minnesota headliner were developed to some extent through the use of public funds, via the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, he maintains it is not right that stations pay additionally. And he objects to paying a membership fee without sharing the management of APR.

Rhoda Marx, director of marketing for APR in Minneapolis, hopes Stockton will return to the fold. She also said she regrets KUOP's many listeners will be the victims of "some perceived politics" and will not get to hear the "other side" to the APR story. All are non-profit stations, she noted out, and the fees merely offset production costs.

"A Prairie Home Companion," she said, has very high costs that are still not fully offset. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, she continued, endorses the APR concept, and she said CBP President Edward Pfister has welcomed APR's diversity in programming.

Nancy Cook, promotion director of KQED-FM in San Francisco, made the point of the uncertainty of federal financing, following initial cutbacks by the Reagan administration. "APR was established as a result of the changing financial situation to preserve the integrity of the stations and productions," she said.

Rhoda Marx, of the APR office, said she hopes the KUOP staff will change its mind. "They could go on the air and ask the listeners if 63 of them would be willing to pay \$30 each to cover the added costs, and they could stay on," she said.

So one of the finest programs in public radio is a question mark at year's end for many listeners in the central San Joaquin Valley.