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'Prairie Home Companion' catching on

There's something about Lake Wobegone

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ST. PAUL — Prairie Home Companion is broadcast live each Saturday from the Orpheum Theater in St. Paul, but the tone for the music and humor program comes straight from Lake Wobegone, Minn.

That's the fictional town created by host Garrison Keillor, who describes Lake Wobegone as "the little town that time forgot, and that decades cannot improve."

Some who tune in the program on local public radio stations (WPNE in Green Bay, WUWM in Milwaukee), may first take it for a parody of the nostalgic wireless era. But the folksy humor and country-western and roadhouse blues of a by-gone era have definitely found a home in the 1980s.

Not even the show's promotion director, Cathy DeMoll, is saying what it is. "Listeners will have to use their own imagination," she says.

Whatever it is, it's catching on. When the show first debuted in 1974, the 12 people in the audience were outnumbered by musicians on stage.

The show moved into St. Paul's World Theater in 1978 when it was still a Minnesota Public Radio program. When it went national in 1980 and distributed through American Public Radio, the show's popularity extended beyond the Midwest. Later that year, it earned a George Peabody Award for broadcasting, and publicity followed

the recognition.

The last three years it has completely sold out each week. Tickets, at \$6, are now being sold for the May 25 program in the 1,700 seat Orpheum. DeMoll said from 30-50 percent of ticketholders are from out of town, and hail from New York, California and Alabama. And the show is now broadcast in Australia and Sweden.

Keillor started Prairie Home Companion when he was still doing a morning shift on MPR, and writing fiction for the New Yorker.

In between music by the Butch Thompson trio, Keillor offers stories of Lake Wobegone, Minn. The top news stories revolves around the Wobegone Whippets softball team, the death of the 14-year-old car-chasing dog, or advertisements from rural merchants.

The news is brought to you by, Keillor says, Bob's Bank, located in the green mobile home on Main, where you save at the sign of the sock, and the Chatterbox Cafe, where the soup of the day, all day, all month, is chicken soup, made from real chickens.

Keillor welcomed those in the audience and those listening at home to the recent Saturday show, and agreed those of us in the balcony might just as well watch the show from home.

Saturday night there were 20 accordions on stage, the Duluth Accordionaires, which opened with their theme song—a John Philip Sousa march. Keillor's news from Lake Wobegone

centered on long winters, tardy springs, and Minnesotans desire to ignore reality, and wear spring jackets anyway. And put away those winter coats, no matter what the forecast.

The Lake Wobegone resident decided to remove the snowplow from his pickup. If any more snow comes, he said, it'll just have to melt. Prophetic words, considering Minneapolis was dumped on by 12 inches of snow the next day.

Other typical Lake Wobegone events have been chronicled by Keillor in the last few years. It will be time again for Memorial Day opening day for the Whippets at the Wally Benson Memorial Park. And down at the Sidetrack Tap, the knucklebaler, Ernie, is practicing signals with the catcher, Roy. There's only one signal, a knuckleball, and it's done with two fingers. At the Sidetrack, that also means a beer and a shot. Either way, you get hit pretty hard, Keillor says.

Down at the Catholic Church, Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, Father Emil was on vacation. He was making his annual pilgrimage to Civil War battlefields. He was on his way to visit his brother, Father Francis, in Bowling Green, Kent., where he is a missionary among the Baptists. Keillor also likes to read stories from Lake Wobegone's own newspaper, which is named for its editor, Harold Sjar. But that's a joke that is better heard than read.



GARRISON KEILLOR, center, intones lyrics during a Prairie Home Companion public radio program along with musician Greg Brown and the Butch Thompson Trio.
Staff photo by Michael Hoeft