

Waterloo Courier
Monday, May 27, 1985
Page A8

Northeast Iowa

Prairie Home humorist addresses graduates

By DES KELLER
Courier Staff Writer

DECORAH — Like the ad on his weekly national radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," Garrison Keillor was one shy person who had the courage to stand up and do what had to be done Sunday as speaker at Luther College's 118th graduation ceremony.

Amid hundreds of perspiring faces, fanning commencement programs and temperatures easing to the mid-90s, Keillor spoke for a little more than three minutes — possibly an all-time record for commencement brevity.

A speech on the pursuit of excellence had to be scrapped after the Lord gave him the message to "be brief," Keillor told his audience. "I really had a speech ready," he apologized to faculty members at the end of the ceremony.

"It was an audience that was overheating by the moment. I didn't want to take moral responsibility for standing there more than five minutes," Keillor said later in an interview.

THE WRY MINNESOTA WRITER and humorist was also presented an honorary doctor of letters degree along with the 450 graduating seniors.

Each week more than two million listeners tune in on 218 stations to Prairie Home to hear about life in folksy, fictitious Lake Wobegon, Minn., "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve."

One of the show's major highlights is the funny and often poignant 15 to 25 minute monologue, "News from Lake Wobegon," Keillor delivers about the community and its residents.

Keillor began doing the show nearly 11 years ago on Minnesota Public Radio to supplement his income as a free-lance writer. In 1980 the program became nationally syndicated. The two-hour show is performed before an audience and broadcast

live every Saturday evening from St. Paul.

"I used to think this was a stepping stone to something else but I don't think it is," he says of the weekly regimen. As is often noted, Keillor is his own worst critic. He is never satisfied with a show and is not completely satisfied with his first book about Lake Wobegon due out this fall.

"I have lost touch with my material and small towns," because of the work schedule on the show and the book during the past year, he says.

Some of the best storytellers in the world are sitting around in cafes and bars in the Midwest, Keillor says. Rather than satirize small-town Midwesterners, he believes many of his Prairie Home characters are portrayed in a good light. "Taciturn habits and long silences to me are very articulate," he says.

THERE IS A GOOD CHANCE Prairie Home will be broadcast on live television for the first time this fall when the troupe moves back into St. Paul's newly renovated World Theatre. A firm believer in the power of radio, Keillor says there will be no clamor for continued television showings exposure.

"There are a lot of people who have heard the show and are curious. They would see then that it (T.V.) wasn't worth it. They would see radio is superior to television for certain things," Keillor says. While radio is best for presenting things like news, music, drama, comedy and baseball, television is best at football and children's cartoons, he says.

Keillor recalls having lunch with an executive from ABC once to discuss making Prairie Home into a half-hour network program. "He didn't listen to the show (Prairie Home). The lunch wasn't that good and neither was the conversation. I thought he was more interested in having lunch with someone," than in doing a show, he says.

More than a few times, a Prairie Home aficionado has let Keillor

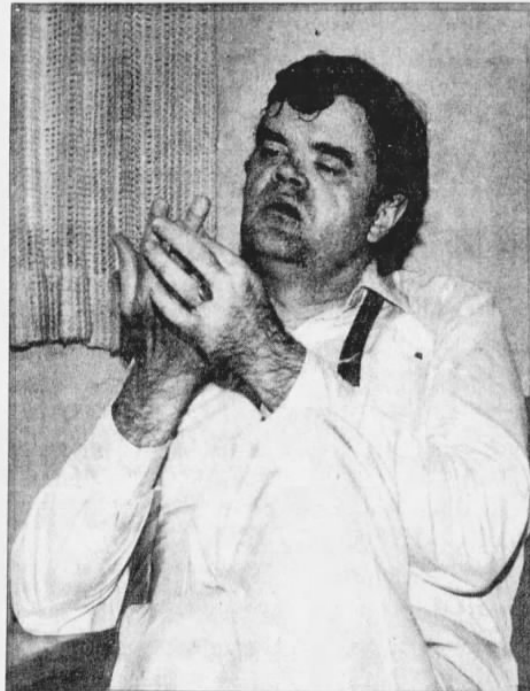
know when he has said something about Lake Wobegon that contradicts a fact presented on a previous show. "They remember that stuff better than I do," he says of his fans. "That's what a great invention radio is."

BUT THE URGE to put Lake Wobegon in print was too strong for Keillor. "Radio is very fleeting. It lasts as long as an Eskimo Pie. I suppose a person for vanity wants

something with their name on it."

"I'm not really finished with it yet," says Keillor, the perfectionist of his show. But he does worry the years and too much time in big cities will cause him to lose touch with the values and personalities he crafts in Lake Wobegon by becoming too successful.

"The danger of success is a danger you welcome. You want to talk to a lot of people if you think you have something to say."



Courier photo by Des Keller

Warmed by the sultry weather Sunday in Decorah, Prairie Home Companion host Garrison Keillor takes time out to talk about his nationally syndicated radio program.