

Radio ruling

Rights dispute ends with cancellation of 'Prairie'

By Elise Gibson
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Austin fans of *A Prairie Home Companion*, the Saturday evening radio variety show hosted by Garrison Keillor, have heard the last installment of the news from Lake Wobegon. Because of a broadcast rights dispute with the show's producers and distributors, the show was canceled this week on Austin public radio station KUT-FM.

The cancellation ends a contract dispute that began in late February when American Public Radio network, which distributes the show, increased the carriage fee for *A Prairie Home Companion* by 50 percent and tightened its fund-raising restrictions. But the real snag was a new requirement that would force every station that carries the show to broadcast it no later than 6 p.m. local time, said Leonora Siedo, operations manager of KUT-FM.

A Prairie Home Companion is broadcast live from St. Paul, Minn., from 5-7 p.m. CDT. Since picking up the show in January 1982, KUT-FM has tape delayed the show until 9 p.m., after *Twine Time*, a popular local rhythm and blues show with Paul Ray as host.

KUT-FM began trying in March to secure a waiver from American Public Radio, but the last word given to the station Tuesday was that the waiver was denied and that effective immediately KUT could no longer broadcast the show. The new contract was to have begun July 1. Temporarily substituting for *A Prairie Home Companion* this week will be a taped live folk music show which originates in Chicago.

Station managers at KUT unanimously decided in mid-June that if American Public Radio did not grant KUT an exemption from the time requirement that they would cancel the show, rather than re-schedule to accommodate the new hours, Siedo said.

"It would completely change our Saturday night line-up, which we've found to be very successful," Siedo said. The Saturday schedule includes *Folkways* from 5 a.m. to 1 p.m., opera from 1-5 p.m., *All Things Considered* from 5-6 p.m., *Twine Time* from 6-9 p.m., followed by *PHC*.

Also at issue is KUT's desire to defend local scheduling flexibility and to continue to emphasize locally produced shows, such as *Twine Time*, said Betsy Pilkington, development director at KUT.

"It's local programming that is so often what people like about KUT," she said. "And to have someone at Minnesota Public Radio (which produces *A Prairie Home Companion*) try to program our Saturday nights just isn't fair."

KUT is not alone in objecting to the new requirements. Its written protests to American Public Radio have been joined by 80 stations that comprise Public Radio in Mid-America, 27 member stations of

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the Southern Educational Communication Association, 15 public radio stations in Alaska, five stations in Virginia, and other individual stations.

Of 66 public radio stations that carry *PHC*, only two stations, KUT and a station in Kalamazoo, Mich., decided to drop the show, said Rhoda Marx, manager of American Public Radio in Minnesota. Exceptions were granted to four radio stations, including one Nebraska station affiliated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which requires that no secular programs be broadcast before sundown on the Saturday sabbath day.

The timing of American Public Radio's broadcast requirement for *A Prairie Home Companion* is tied to the upcoming release of host Garrison Keillor's new book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, said Rhoda Marx, manager of American Public Radio in Minnesota. The network is anticipating significant national media attention surrounding Keillor's book, Marx said, which, in turn, could provide national exposure for the show.

"We want the national press to be able to say that the show is carried on local public radio stations no later than 6 p.m.," Marx said.

"What's very important to Garrison is that people hear his show. Unless we do something to build our audience, there would be very little reason for Garrison Keillor to stay with public radio," Marx said. "Surveys show that every station that has moved the show to an earlier time has broadened its audience."

Donna Endres, advertising manager of Whole Earth Provision Co., which underwrites *A Prairie Home Companion* on KUT, said she hasn't given up hope that some compromise will be reached.

"I expect there will be a disappointed audience out there," she said. "I think it would be appropriate for people who are disappointed in MPR to write to them and express their thoughts."

Local fans with good radios or cable television won't have to do without their weekly Powdermilk Biscuit fix, though. *A Prairie Home Companion* is carried from 5 to 7 p.m. on KNCT-FM (91.3) in Killdeer. For those whose radios won't pull in KNCT, the signal is carried on Austin CableVision's stereo FM service.