

Lake Wobegon, Minn., takes on a souvenir life

Imagine getting a mail-order catalog from Oz.

It would offer a map or puzzle of Emerald City, a book of the Wizard's favorite recipes, packets of poppy seeds, a red, quilted Tin Man's heart; a jar of candy courage, endorsed by the Cowardly Lion, and a video game in which Dorothy zaps her way through the Wicked Witch of the East.

Oz, alas, is not in the mail-order business. It lacks a savvy real-world marketing agent such as the one that serves another imaginary locale: Lake Wobegon, Minn.

That's the fictitious but familiar Minnesota town whose ebbs and flows are chronicled by Garrison Keillor on his Prairie Home Companion show to a nationwide audience via American Public Radio.

Minnesota Public Radio in St. Paul, where the program originates, recently issued its sixth and latest catalog to 350,000 "fans and friends" of the show.

Named Wireless, the catalog offers hats and jerseys bearing insignia of the Whippets, Wobegon's softball team, plus Lake Wobegon sweatshirts and audio cassettes of Keillor's monologues about the town.

The goods are not entirely Wobegon. The catalog also displays mementos of Prairie Home Companion and its tasty imaginary sponsor, Powdermilk Biscuits. There are records and books, wind socks and musical instruments, some described in whimsical fashion. Many items (such as a kazo instruction book) bear no direct connection to the show or to public radio but rather to the aura that the enterprise cultivates — gentle, often off-beat humor and homespun, neighborly, family-oriented, Midwestern values.

"We picked things that make you feel the way the show makes you feel," said Donna Avery, general manager of product marketing for MPR.

And so Wireless has offered desk lamps with a shade like a mallard's head; an iron corn dryer; musical toothbrushes; necklaces featuring



Dan Wascoe Jr.
Advertising

the little metal charms once found in Cracker Jacks boxes; a book explaining how readers can learn "more than 70 noises to make with your mouth" and other items that "only Midwesterners could be thrilled about," Avery said.

The approach has been successful enough that MPR will expand its merchandise into a larger St. Paul warehouse this year. A fulltime staff of five swells with part-time help to 40 during peak gift-buying seasons. Part of the job is to make sure that merchandise is packed with the notes and letters that customers send along to include with the ordered gifts.

The station also plans another catalog this summer that focuses on encouraging people to build a recorded library of classical music. This stems from American Public Radio's heavy doses of classical programming.

Avery said that in the beginning — three years ago — the idea was not to milk Lake Wobegon for all of its above-average worth. Indeed, Avery and public information coordinator Alison Circle consider the catalogs a restrained, carefully crafted merchandising effort.

"We don't have little paper towns. We don't have maps or dolls (of Wobegon characters)," Circle said. "We could do that very easily."

Avery agreed: "Selling products was a reality; Lake Wobegon was not. . . We tread very softly. . . It's the concept we're preserving. (Lake Wobegon) is what you think it is."



Staff Photo by Duane Brasley

MPR employee Vicki Phelps will help Prairie Home Companion fans indulge themselves with records, tapes, T-shirts, books and other souvenirs in the lobby boutique at 45 E. 8th St in St. Paul.

The catalog is produced by the MPR staff, although mailing lists sometimes are rented, Avery said. Keillor serves as a kind of consultant to the catalog effort.

"He's a writer, and he wants to communicate through the things he creates," Avery said. "He does care about how people perceive him as a writer."

But where the catalog is concerned, "I don't think he's ever issued any edicts."

(Keillor himself was out of town last week and declined a telephone interview.)

Most items in the first Wireless were related directly to Prairie Home Companion and had been offered as premiums when people

contributed to public radio. Avery credited MPR President Bill Kling with endorsing the catalog as a way to replace some of the income lost when the Corporation for Public Broadcasting cut back its support.

Sales of products through the catalog, at Prairie Home Companion's live broadcasts and at a little boutique in MPR's St. Paul lobby help support 20 to 30 percent of the show's expenses, Avery estimated.

Although the product line has expanded since the first catalog, Avery said that the top 10-selling items still are related to the radio show. She's receptive to new catalog items and said that about one-fourth of the products the station buys are submitted unsolicited by their creators. She particularly likes products that reflect a Mid-

western sense of humor.

This could help explain a \$30 clock in the shape of a rhinestone-studded cat whose eyes roll and tail wags "with each passing second."

Such proclivities also could lead to a new catalog item: "Someone suggested selling a hanging bathtub. It's made of canvas, and a fellow developed it so it would hang like a hammock. You may look for that in the future."

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■ **The Cat came back.** John Funari and Al Fadden have merged their respective agencies to spawn Funari Fadden, which employs 11 and is billing at an annual rate of \$4

million. Clients include the Auto Show, University Hospitals, Twin City Oldsmobile dealers, Land O'Lakes cottage cheese, sour cream, ice cream and other products and two ear-lowering firms: Cost Cutters and The Barbers.

Funari, 36, formerly was sales manager for WCCO-FM, while Fadden, 40, worked for several agencies before setting up his own, Fadden As In Cat. He described the title as a futile attempt to inform people that his name is pronounced with a short A. In 1982 he moved to San Francisco to work on the Levi's account for Foote, Cone and Belding. He still intends to visit there frequently, saying, "San Francisco is my cabin up north."

■ **Letture at stake.** Earlier this year Cab Foods put its advertising business up for review and moved it away from Chuck Ruhr, Minneapolis. Now Super Value is reviewing ad agencies after hitching its wagon to Grey Advertising, Minneapolis, the past three years.

The account bills about \$2 million to \$2½ million annually, and the account with Grey has about 60 days to run.

■ **Rockford file.** It was just last year that West, Gentry & Morris, a Rockford, Ill., advertising agency, opened a Minneapolis office, the better to serve three divisions of Medtronic, Inc. But now the \$1.5 million in billings serviced by that office (Medtronic plus the First Galesburg National Bank in Illinois) will become part of Harris Advertising, Minneapolis.

Ralph Harris, who started his own agency 10 years ago with five clients, said the acquisition will bring the agency's billings to about \$8 million. One reason for the merger was that Rob West, formerly CEO of West, Gentry's home office, was spending so much time in the Twin Cities that he decided to move here, Harris said.

Among Harris's other clients are Orrin Thompson Homes and Byerly's food stores.