

# Spend a little time at Lake Wobegon

If you've never been to Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, or tasted Powdermilk Biscuits, you've missed a rich slice of Americana.

Actually, some literalist may tell you, there is no Lake Wobegon in Minnesota — or anywhere else for that matter — and no product called Powdermilk Biscuits. But, if you've been addicted as I have, you know that Lake Wobegon is as real as the neighborhood where you grew up and Powdermilk Biscuits are every bit as tasty as Aunt Jemima Pancakes.

They come alive every Saturday night on a program called A Prairie Home Companion, performed live in St. Paul, Minn., and broadcast to an international audience through American Public Radio. In Tallahassee, the program is aired on WFSU-FM (91.5) from 6 to 8 p.m.

The genius of Prairie Home Companion is its creator, emcee and leading performer, Garrison Keillor. You never hear his name on the air because he doesn't use it. Why? "A vestige of modesty, I guess, and also I don't seem to be able to pronounce it very well. I give it to people over the phone and they always say, 'What? Could you spell that?' So I just don't bother with it on the air."

Instead, promptly at 6 p.m. each Saturday, "live from the Orpheum Theater in downtown St. Paul," you hear a few familiar notes from the instruments of the Butch Thompson Trio, then Keillor's resonant voice intoning the words of his welcoming theme song, "Hello, love."

What follows is a kind of midwestern version of Grand Ole Opry — a mixture of professional and amateur music ranging, in the words of the program's promotion material, "from jazz to ragtime, from seasonal favorites to traditional blues."

The Prairie Home Companion cult, though, has developed around Keillor, his delicious, understated wit and his weekly reports from Lake Wobegon — "the little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

I discovered Lake Wobegon by chance several years ago when I turned on the car radio and there was Keillor, in earnest, almost whispered intimacy, describing the high school prom in the little town. He evoked a scene of middle America as real as a Norman Rockwell cover on the Saturday Evening Post, filled with human emotion and sprinkled with a sparkling wit. I've been hooked ever since.

Music on the show may not be your



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Garrison Keillor

style, but it's more than worth your while to hear about the latest happenings in Lake Wobegon and to savor the humor of Keillor's "commercials" for such products as "Anchorman Hair Spray." Last Saturday's program included an announcement from the "Vanilla Producers of America," whose "new vanilla" had met resistance in the marketplace, so they were bringing back the old with a new name: "Classic Vanilla."

Keillor's news from Lake Wobegon revolves around such familiar landmarks as Chatterbox Cafe, "where the coffeepot is always on, which is why it tastes that way," Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"), and Bob's Bank, "the friendly bank in the green mobile home right on Main Street where your money is safe and the door is always open."

On one recent Saturday night, Keillor

kept his fans alternately smiling and guffawing for 10 minutes with a simple little story about a man buying a garden hose. On another he had us in stitches with a hilarious episode about a Lake Wobegon resident who dug up his septic tank, discovered it was really just an old buried car, then — in hauling it to the other side of town — got caught in the middle of the homecoming parade.

"I cannot even begin to tell you what an effect your show has on my jangled, bared nervous system," one New Jersey listener wrote Keillor. "I just have to hear your soothing voice and my whole nervous system is hypnotized to serenity, and I go back, all the way back to another way of life, long gone."

Who is Garrison Keillor? He's a writer and broadcaster who was writing frequently for New Yorker magazine when he was assigned to do a story in 1974 on the last performance of the Grand Old Opry in the old Ryman Auditorium in Nashville.

"I used to hear the show when I was a kid," Keillor is quoted in the program's promotion material. "Its liveness appealed to me then; it charged the show with excitement above and beyond the music. After writing about it, I felt appealed to again."

He came back to Minnesota, where he was doing an early morning program on Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), and presented the idea for "A Prairie Home Companion" to MPR president Bill Kling. Two months later, the program was born. The initial audience of 20 to 50 folks grew steadily as word spread, and the cult was created. Today the program draws a packed house of 1,600 to the Orpheum Theater, and tickets are sold weeks in advance. National broadcasts began in 1979, and the program is said to reach an audience of two million over 260 public radio stations.

Keillor, asked whether his listeners assume Lake Wobegon is a real place, said, "Some do . . . I imagine there are others who know it is real and so don't bother to ask. Maybe they are up there right now, sitting around in the Chatterbox Cafe, drinking coffee and thinking, 'I could have described this place a lot better than he does'."

No, Garrison, no resident could describe it better — not even the respected Father Emil of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, or the observant Harold Starr, editor of the Lake Wobegon Herald Star.