
A PRAIRIE CULT COMPANION : Is Garrison Keillor as Good as Sweet Corn?

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Cults are perishable. Like a ripe peach on a hot day. Like the Garrison Keillor cult. There was a time when you didn't have to tell people he was on the radio and made up Lake Wobegon somewhere in Minnesota and would marvel over the mystical powers of Powdermilk Biscuits.

I was there in the beginning in the last decade. There were the first few of us. Then the few grew to a bunch. Then a bunch grew to lots. Then lots grew to lots and lots.

Now he's a big number. He's got another piece in the New Yorker. He's on the cover of Atlantic Monthly with a big excerpt from another book, "Lake Wobegon Days."

He was just in Washington the other day, meeting with the Minnesota congressmen and posing for pictures with Tip O'Neill!

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But you can't really have a cult unless you can keep a few people out of it.

There is a *real* Keillor cult. It's composed of people who really understand Garrison.

(I can first-name drop because I met Garrison first in the 1960s when he was interning on a newspaper back there. He sat facing me and was intent on being serious. Bright fellow, as I recall, but he wanted everybody else to be serious, too.)

**Los Angeles Times**

Like last week he was talking about the dogged days around Lake Wobegon, people sitting on porches and sweating. And how nowadays people in the big cities go from air-conditioning to air-conditioning and it damages their brains.

Then he waxed delicious over sweet corn and how in his youth they could get sweet corn from the stalk to the boiling pot to the table within 10 minutes.

". . . And, friends, that is as good as it gets. People have looked for something better than that but they haven't found it. There's nothing better. Sex is not better than that. . . .

"Now I'm talking about *fresh* sweet corn right out of the garden. The stuff in stores, yes, sex is a *lot* better than that. . . ."

But I digress.

We who comprise a more sincere cult have a deeper comprehension. We have lived and loved and left the Lake Wobegons of the world. We understand that Garrison is more the keen-eyed recorder. He isn't making this stuff up; he just looking around and writing it down.

We remember the kid's pain of being locked in Lake Wobegon with nothing happening and nowhere to go. It was especially grim this time of year. It was stinky and hot and everybody was dumb and didn't understand you and all of a sudden you realized that the mosquitoes and grasshoppers were going to get worse and God knows what else icky was lurking in the deepening grass.

You had to mow the grass every week and it used to grow thick like a jungle. That was before they invented fertilizers that seem to help the grass *not* grow. And we had things called lawnmowers that a little boy could barely nudge along as the blades took gaping bites out of the yard. And a lot of insects got all over you.

But I digress.

We wanted to be formidable and not to be trifled with. If we could get out of town, we could be clever.

I remember hearing my first sophisticated witticism, via a friend of a friend from San Francisco: "Cable cars are an anachronism," she wrote on a postcard. "I ride an anachronism to work every day."

I chuckled about that a long time.

Later I moved into verbal twists, like this testimonial to a drug company: "I was deaf for 20 years, and after using your pills only three weeks, I heard from my brother in South

Dakota.”

In my last college year, our humor was the belabored obvious: “It takes a big dog to weigh a thousand pounds.”

But I digress.

When Garrison reports on the quiet weeks in Lake Wobegon, I see a lovely little town that the decades cannot improve. Old Ralph’s, the Chatterbox, the Sons of Knute Hall. But I also empathize with the anguish of the boy figuring out that all the opportunity was somewhere else. Or seemed to be somewhere else. A lot of those kids still never get to the opportunity.

We surmounted Lake Wobegon and went away to glorious places and became clever.

We made our own opportunities. I bet it was one of us who came out from Lake Wobegon a long time ago who got the idea of blacktopping whole yards at a time.

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