

Garrison Keillor (right) signs copies of "Lake Wobegon Days" for "Prairie Home Companion" fans. GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL QUAN

# Wobegon is he

In Boston, Garrison Keillor sings his love song to America

By Jack Thomas  
Globe Staff

**H**aving been on the road for three weeks to promote his book, "Lake Wobegon Days," currently the best-selling fiction in America, Garrison Keillor was bone-weary by the time he arrived in Boston this weekend.

The nights are long and the nights longer, but what's longest are the lines of folks who want first his autograph and then a chance tell him that they love his radio program.

As host of "A Prairie Home Companion," a live variety show from 6 to 8 Saturday nights on American Public Radio (in Boston on WGBH-FM), Keillor regales an audience of nearly 3 million with tales of mythical Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot and that the decades cannot improve."

Once upon a time in America, it was James Thurber, Ogden Nash, Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker who skewered pomposity. Today nobody deflates the windbags as deftly as the folk humor of Garrison Keillor.

He weaves tales about Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery Store ("Remember, if you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it") and Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church (where Father Emil has been known to stand up in the middle of a confession and say, "Oh, you didn't!") and the famous statue of the Unknown Norwegian, and of course the Sidetrack Tap ("where the old guys sit and lose some memory capacity with a glass of peppermint schnapps that Wally knows how to keep adding to so that they can go home and tell the old lady they had only one").

Keillor's nostalgic memories about about front porches and sloppy joes and English teachers have delighted farmers and yuppies alike because they remind us that life is made up of simplicities.

In Washington, one couple told him they put a

sign on their front door that says, "Do not disturb. We are listening to A Prairie Home Companion."

His stories are a love song to America, a hymn to those of us who grew up skinny and clumsy, and were too shy to raise our hands in class, or who dared not look the choral teacher in the eye, and who were terrified but also delighted by the opposite sex.

On Saturday night, having already signed about 18,000 books on this tour, and having already given autographs locally at the Coop in Harvard Square and at the Boston University Bookstore, and having participated in a poetry reading on Boston Common, and having appeared on WCBS-TV's "Today" show Friday, and having been interviewed by newspaper reporters, and having just delivered, in black tie and tails, a two-hour performance at the Opera House, Garrison Keillor changed into blue jeans, and, instead of heading back to the Parker House, he was standing backstage at the Opera House amidst his fans, signing yet more autographs.

These are not, technically, autographs. He does more than scribble his name. Keillor looks people in the eye. He wants to know how they really are, and every autograph is a personal message.

"Thank you so much for all the pleasant Saturday nights you've given my husband and me," said a middle-aged woman. "We listen to you while we're cooking dinner."


"We were sitting way up in the balcony," another woman said.

"Some people who sat closer and got a better view regretted it," Keillor answered.

The setting at the Opera House was simple. The backdrop and floor were black, and the stage was bare except for a lectern and four green potted plants. Dressed formally except for his socks of fire-engine red, Keillor stood under four spotlights and read from his book about the little Midwestern prairie town that, by his own admission, bears close  
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## Keillor brings Lake Wobegon to Boston



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resemblance to Anoka, Minn., where he was born 43 years ago.

His humor has none of the bitterness of Joan Rivers, none of the banality of Johnny Carson, none of the politics of Mort Sahl, and certainly none of the sexual obsession of Eddie Murphy. It's genial and gentle and self-effacing enough to help us laugh at our own foibles and failures without feeling self-conscious.

"Left to our own devices," Keillor said, "we Wobegonians go straight for the small potatoes. Majestic doesn't appeal to us. We like the Grand Canyon better with Clarence and Arlene parked in front of it, smiling. We feel uneasy at momentous events."

His monologues are a blend of observations and reflections, some Norwegian folk wisdom mixed with a bit of this and that.

"Whenever a bachelor farmer begins to smell himself, you know winter's over."

Lake Wobegon is the kind of town where you can stand on Main Street and not be in anybody's way. The most popular dish in Lake Wobegon, Keillor confided to the Opera House audience, is tuna casserole and cream of mushroom soup.

Folks there are sensitive about religion, he said. Lutherans drive Fords, and Catholics drive Chevises in accordance with the faith of the owners of the dealerships. Clarence, a Lutheran, sometimes drops by the rectory for a second opinion.

Keillor is, above all, a meticulous writer: "A hard frost hits in September, sometimes as early as Labor Day, and kills the tomatoes that we, being frugal, protected with straw and paper tents, which we, being sick of tomatoes, left some holes in."

Keillor bristles at the suggestion that "A Prairie Home Companion" might move to television.

"I feel strongly that live radio is the basis of our show, and not my talent, and not our coming from the Midwest," he says. "Somebody reporters will be asking television performers if they have any ideas about going into radio. Now we smile as we say that because everyone would regard going from television to radio as a demotion, as a comedown, but it is not. I think that I have something going on with the audience that people in television don't know about."

"TV is tiny. TV is a little box. It's a little piece of furniture. The picture limits television. It makes everything that happens exactly that size."

"Radio, depending on what's there, how you listen to it, how you feel about it, radio can fill up the entire room. It can be immense. Radio, as you sit and focus in on something that comes from it, isn't the size of the receiver. Your image is not limited to that. It can be as big as the world."

Keillor: self-effacing without being self-conscious.