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## A Prairie Delight

### Caring Is Essential in Lake Wobegon

**O**n "A Prairie Home Companion" last Saturday, Garrison Keillor was talking about shy people, as he often does. Among their many fears, shy people sometimes worry about being arrested. Then they worry, he said, that the magazine they're holding over their faces will have their picture on the cover.

It was Keillor's acknowledgement that, last week, he made the cover of Time.

Not only the cover, but a 5-page paean to Lake Wobegon, the mythical town that is the setting for his weekly public radio program and his best-selling novel, "Lake Wobegon Days" (Viking, \$17.95).

Pretty heady stuff for a man who claims, "... 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."

"A Prairie Home Companion," broadcast live every Saturday night on public radio, may be "Heartland Humor," but it is the most popular program on WHY-FM here in big city Philadelphia.

In September, when Keillor came to town to promote his new novel, he appeared at the Academy of Music to read selections from the book, to answer questions about Lake Wobegon from the audience, and to lead them in song.

The performance was sold out weeks in advance. Some of the guests wore coveralls and T-shirts that advertised Powdermilk Biscuits, the show's mythical sponsor. Many more were dressed in classic suburban chic.

No matter their attire, they all were familiar with Lake Wobegon's leading citizens: Ralph of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't get it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"); Father Emil of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Catholic Church, and the Norwegian bachelor farmers, who still till the land the way they used to.

The big city audience was eager to join Keillor in an *cappella* rendition of "Tell Me Why the Stars Do Shine," and the Lord's Prayer sung to the tune of "Amazing Grace."

"I think that people like a good story," is how Keillor explained the popularity of his show among those who have never seen the prairie. "I think people are attuned to live broadcast just because it's live, which means that it's not *designed*, it's not engineered, it's not pre-mixed, edited, cleaned up, homogenized."

He speaks in a deep, hypnotic voice, unafraid of the silences between phrases. No one chatters around Garrison Keillor.

"I also believe that people feel bad about a lot of what they've been sold," he said. "People have been sold a lifestyle that, to many, is a bit too slick. The world of shopping centers, apartment buildings, and shiny new things. It does not satisfy them."

"And Lake Wobegon is a town that never bought into that. And so, many people can listen and imagine a life that is lacking in so many of our conveniences and luxuries, but a life that perhaps is more real."

What they hunger for is not a world without Golden Arches, he believes, but a world in which people still care.

It's not the architecture of a McDonald's, or even the food, that does not satisfy. In a fast-food restaurant, Keillor points out, there's a very wide separation between the person who brings you your Big Mac and the person who owns the franchise. They are of separate worlds.

"That's not true in a place like Lake Wobegon. There are people who have much more money than other people, but they all live in the same town. So you're sensitive about things like money. If you have a lot of money, you don't flaunt it. You're very careful about that. You're very generous about it, but in ways that aren't showy."

"If you own a business, you make sure that the sales clerk is earning a decent wage, because she belongs to the same church as you do. It's a system of socialism that is deeply American."

"It's the belief that, 'If I prosper, but the people whom I depend on, whom I need, do not, then what good is it?'"

"If you have something good, you don't tear it down and replace it with something newer. More important than the rustic quality of the town is the fact that people care for each other."

When you look at it that way, the big city's fascination with Lake Wobegon is not hard to figure at all.

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"A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard live Saturdays on WHY-FM at 6 p.m., repeated Sundays at 10:30 a.m. Garrison Keillor's Sept. 19 performance at the Academy of Music will be broadcast on WHY-FM on Dec. 4 at 8 p.m.

Carol Towarnicky's column appears Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.



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