

COVER STORIES

## Lonesome Whistle Blowing

*Lake Wobegon's tall tale teller is tickling the radio dial and best-seller list*

"When I was a boy," says the yarn-spinning champion of St. Paul, Minn., "the storyteller in our family was my uncle Lew Powell, who was my great uncle, my grandma's brother, who died only a couple of years ago, at the age of 93. In a family that tended to be a little withdrawn, taciturn, my uncle Lew was the friendliest. He had been a salesman, and he liked to drive around and drop in on people. He would converse, ask how we were doing in school, but there would be a point when he would get launched, and we would try to launch him. There were two different house-burning stories. I worked in a little bit of one in the book, the one where Great Grandpa came back from the Colorado gold fields, is the legend, and the gold dust was all lost in the blaze.

"My parents would be in the living room, and my aunt Ada and my brothers and sisters. We would be eating popcorn. As it got later, I remember



Garrison Keillor, age 9

lying on the floor so my mother wouldn't see me. Uncle Lew would stop for a while, and then someone else would spell him, my dad or my aunt Ruth. And then Uncle Lew would come back. The period he talked about so well was about ten years on either side of the turn of the century. A beautiful time, I still think so. And I just wanted him to tell more and more and more. I wanted to know everything. What it looked and smelled like, what they ate and what they wore.

"I remember Uncle Lew's stories not as coming to a point, really, but to a point of rest, a point of contemplation. As I got older, of course, life was becoming strange. I just looked to those stories of his, and to the history of the family, as giving a person some sense of place, that we were not just chips floating on the waves, that in some way we were meant to be here, and had a history. That we had standing."

Just standing there in front of the microphone, Garrison Keillor has standing. Boy, does he. He is a big, weedy fellow, 6 ft. 4 in. tall, with horn-rims and a big shock of dark brown hair, snazzy in black tie and tails, red socks and galluses, and black sneakers with white stripes. When he is feeling rueful and self-mocking, which is fairly often because he is a shy man, he calls himself "America's tallest radio humorist." This, the listener is meant to understand, is the kind of hick distinction that small-town Midwesterners cherish, and Keillor is splendidly and defiantly a small-town Minnesot'n. (The *a* missing here, Easterners and Westerners, is not pronounced, and neither, of course, is the apostrophe.)

As everyone here in the Riverside Theater in Milwaukee is aware, this singular citizen—unprecedented and unlikely to be repeated—is the inventor, host, chief writer and principal song-and-dance man of an astonishing radio show called *A Prairie Home Companion*, broadcast by Minnesota Public Radio each Saturday at 5 p.m. Midwestern time. Usually it originates from the World Theater in St. Paul, but during renovations there, the program is on the road, tonight in Milwaukee. It is now 4:57½, and Keillor is cranking up to do his first live broadcast

in five weeks. He flaps about looking distracted, claiming that he has forgotten the words to his theme song, the Hank Snow tune *Hello Love*. People in the audience call out the words. He waves an extravagant thanks, grins a froggy grin and rumbles into "Well, look who's comin' through that door, / I think we've met somewhere before, / hello love."

This is parlor harmonizing, nothing more, but Keillor's pleasant, summer-weight baritone carries well. It bounces off a satellite into the electronic ears of more than 260 U.S. public radio stations—plus, antipodally enough, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation—and householders across the land shush one another the way people did decades ago when Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, or *Fibber McGee and Molly* came on the air. The theater audience settles back.

What follows, listeners know, will be two hours of Keillor and his friends, which is to say of honky-tonk piano, jazz, mournful old Protestant hymns and country music, much of it from some fairly strange countries. This flow of funk is interrupted by loopy commercials for the Deep Valley Bed, the kind with the old-time mattress that sags in the middle, making prolonged marital discord impossible; Bertha's Kitty

Boutique, where doting and guilt-ridden cat owners can find, among other cossets, a special cat ice cream called Gatto Gelato to cool kitty's tongue on hot days; and, of course, the celebrated Powdermilk Biscuits ("Heavens, they're tasty!"), which "give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

The centerpiece of *A Prairie Home Companion* is a very long monologue, or out-of-body experience, in which Keillor, his low, breathy voice achieving sonorities like those of a train whistle in the distance at midnight, gives the news from a tiny, some say imaginary, Minnesota farm hamlet called Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve." The same sturdy but hard-to-find settlement is the subject of Keillor's new book, *Lake Wobegon Days* (Viking; \$17.95), a pack of beguiling lies that has been on the New York Times best-seller list for ten weeks and, with some 700,000 copies in print, is the publishing sleeper of the year. Keillor has written memorable humor pieces that have nothing to do with rural Minnesota, including a lovely, raunchy story that ran in *The New Yorker* a few weeks ago, about the troubles of the first woman major-league baseball player. (Twenty-seven of his magazine pieces were collected in





Life in the slow lane: the inventor and host of *A Prairie Home Companion* during a visit to his hometown of Anoka this month

JIM BRANDENBURG

1982's *Happy to Be Here*, which sold 210,000 copies.) But it is the Lake Wobegon imaginings that raise comparisons with the Midwestern bedfalls and dog-clysms of James Thurber and, further east, with the work of the late E.B. White, the essayist of *The New Yorker* who wrote so memorably of rural Maine. This is high company, but one additional comparison is beginning to be made. Keillor has sometimes performed in a white suit, perhaps with comparison aforethought, and so, of course, did that illustrious Midwestern yarn spinner and lecture-hall tiger Mark Twain. What some say now is that another major humorist is loose in the nation's ticklish midsection and that Keillor's storytelling approaches the quality of Twain's.

Keillor always starts out his radio monologue by apologizing: "Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my hometown." He always ends on a diminuendo, with the formula "That's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong and all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average." In between, for 20 minutes or so, he discourses wonderingly, without notes, on a place where a dog lying

asleep in the middle of Main Street will live out his days. In eleven years of talking about Lake Wobegon on *A Prairie Home Companion*, he has not run out of material, nor does he seem likely to. He begins, on a recent show, to reflect in a misty way about married love, then cuts the mush short of flood stage with a rambling, funny story about how a middle-age Wobegonian and his wife were getting set to spend a night in their camper. But he had parked on a slight incline, and his wife asked him to move the camper to a level spot, and he said she could do it herself, he was not about to go outside in his underwear, and she stomped out, and just as he took off his underpants and reached for his pajama bottoms, she threw the truck into first and popped the clutch, and out the back door

and onto the gravel he rolled, clothed only in his astonishment, and she did not stop but kept right on driving.

If it is hot in the hall where the show happens to be playing, he may drift in reverie to legendary hot summers past and recall that his parents, God-fearing Protestant Fundamentalists, "believed there was a verse in the Bible, they couldn't find it, but it was there, maybe in *Leviticus* somewhere, that forbade air conditioning." Thinking of religion may turn his mind to Father Emil, pastor of Lake Wobegon's Catholic congregation at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, and his annual sermon on birth control, based on the precept "If you didn't want to go to Minneapolis, why did you get on the train?"

Summer brings to mind the town's old Norwegian bachelor farmers, stolidly harvesting wheat with their antiquated, clattering six-foot combines. The Norwegian bachelors were not impressed by modern 20-footers. Sure, you got done faster, but that just meant waiting longer till it was time to go to bed. This is a good laugh line, as close to a knee slapper as Keillor lets himself get in the monologues. But like his uncle Lew, he tells sto-

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ries, not jokes, and he goes on to say that "the clatter brings back memories of old days of glory in the field when I was a boy among giants. My uncle lifted me up and put me on the seat so I could ride alongside him. The harness jingled on Brownie and Pete and Queenie and Scout, and we bumped along in the racket, row by row. Now all the giants are gone; everybody's about my size or smaller. Few people could lift me up, and I don't know that I'm even interested. It's sad to be so old." He is only 43, but he can work himself up to feeling old at moments like this.

Keillor's friend and admirer Roy Blount Jr., who plows a similar well-mannered field in such down-home humor books as *Crackers* and *One Fell Soup*, turns up on *A Prairie Home Companion* from time to time to demonstrate by example the need for an outfit he founded called the League of the Singing Impaired. He marvels at the nerve it takes for Keillor to wander through his monologues so confidently, assuming that the audience will follow. "He has the courage of his whimsy," Blount says. He also has the courage not to be funny. Years ago, Keillor may say, it was not unusual "to see old people weep for Norway or hear about old men so sad they took a bottle of whisky up to the cemetery and lay down on the family grave and talked to the dead about home."

The veteran *Prairie Home Companion* audience is used to such moments of sweet gloom, and seasoned listeners will nod and say "Yup, yup" to themselves. Keillor speaks slowly, and there is plenty of time after a meaty sentence to get in two yups and a nod. But talk of homesick, drunk old people lying on graves can unsettle newcomers. Those who treasure the program become proselytizers, but converts are not always easy to find. You recommend *A Prairie Home Companion* to some special friend who votes right and deplores acid rain, and the friend looks puzzled and irritable when you see him a couple of days later. "Yeah, well, this guy was talking about guilt and death, and he went on and on," the friend might say, "and then there was some music, people from Lapland or someplace singing about I guess it was reindeer milking."

Minnesota Public Radio estimates that more than 2 million people listen to *P.H.C.*, though Keillor says that nobody is really sure. The figure could be low, because if it is correct, it suggests that



Cheerleaders from his high school celebrate Minnesota's best-known shy person

about one listener in three has bought a hardcover copy of *Lake Wobegon Days*, which is a lot of loyalty. Powdermilk Biscuits, the show's main sponsor, does not seem interested in paying for elaborate polls. Another sponsor, the maker of an alarming breakfast cereal called Raw Bits, made from oat hulls and wheat chaff, is positively standoffish. "By invitation only," its commercials say. "Send two references with your résumé, and we'll let you know if you qualify."

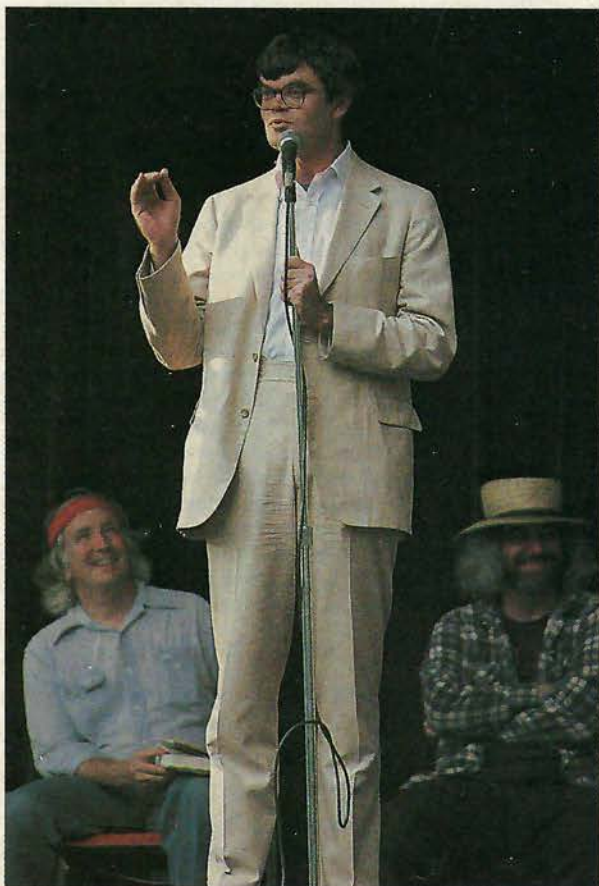
At any rate, though there are other ways to pass the time Saturday evenings, *P.H.C.* fans in considerable numbers say they plan their weekends around the show. Nutritionist Leslie Cordella-Simon and her husband drive from their home in

hear it live. Tom Brokaw denies the rumor that he will not admit dinner guests to his house during the Lake Wobegon segment of the show. "I just don't pay much attention to them," the NBC anchor explains reasonably.

**K**eillor clearly has touched people with something more than a deft comedian's cleverness. Maybe they are transplanted Midwesterners, hoping sentimentally that the small towns are still there. Maybe they think that even if the nation is curling up and turning brown at the edges, the great Heartland still endures and is strong. Whatever the case, to be a Midwesterner, or to know someone who is, suddenly is almost fashionable.

When Keillor appeared at the Boston University bookstore last month, a long line wound through the foreign-language and dictionary sections, and each soul in it carried one or two or half a dozen copies of *Lake Wobegon Days*. (Half the book's royalties, says Keillor, go to Minnesota Public Radio.) The old joke about the Midwest in Boston, the Hub of the Universe, used to go "Ohio? Here we pronounce it Iowa." No more. A small woman at the head of the line, wearing an ALL THIS & BRAINS, TOO! T shirt, held her book up for Keillor to sign. He was standing bent over because he is nearsighted and because he was 14 inches taller than she. He chatted amiably as he wrote something on the title page, asking where the woman was from in a way that made it sound as if her answer would be very important to him. "Well, uh, Beacon Hill," she said humbly. Then she brightened. "But my aunt lives in Minneapolis!" Keillor gave the disadvantaged woman a reassuring pat on the shoulder, conferring honorary Midwestern citizenship.

Keillor was raised in Anoka, Minn., a town of about 15,000 that is now a suburb of Minneapolis but was not then. As far as he knows, Anoka people do not see carica-



Extemporizing while in Boston to push his book and show  
The "tallest radio humorist" rarely tries knee slappers.



tures of themselves in Lake Wobegon's sound burghers, possibly, he thinks, because they do not listen to his show, which suggests that they *are* like Lake Wobegonians, who would be the last people in the world to listen to *A Prairie Home Companion*. So he says. The small town of Isle, Minn., on a lake called Mille Lacs, suggested some of the physical characteristics of Lake Wobegon, but he says that except for his aunt Eleanor Johnson, who is Aunt Flo in the book, he did not really know the people who lived there. Lake Wobegon is elusive. The early surveyors mapped Minnesota in quadrants, he explains in his book, beginning at the edges of the state and working toward the center, where it turned out there was some overlap. The state legislature dealt with this by canceling the overlap, which happened to include Lake Wobegon.

His family, descended from Scots on both sides, belonged to a tiny, strict Fundamentalist sect called Plymouth Brethren, or simply Brethren. They abhorred dancing, disapproved of clergymen and so did not have any, and went to church twice on Sundays. The Keillors did not shun the world rigidly, however, as some Brethren do, and their children were allowed to play with neighborhood children outside the faith. Gary was a quiet boy, recalls his father John, a retired postal worker. The elder Keillors, who

now live in Orlando, listen to the program, recognize the germs of a few stories and think that "some of it's good and some of it isn't."

Movies and television were not part of the family's lives, although radio was allowed. But Gary says that no, he never heard the great Sunday-evening radio comedies: "We were at prayer meeting." He has rebelled against the narrow sectarianism of his upbringing, but although

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he has no church affiliation, religion is serious and real to him. As his friend Roy Blount says, "He's been off to college, gotten divorced, learned to drink. But he hasn't severed his roots." Keillor likes the old hymns, he says, because "they express faith, which I lean towards as the basis of the good life."

There is a long pause after he says this. The gaps in his discourse are so chasmic that even friends who are accustomed to them are unsettled. An interviewer won-

ders, "Have I just said something that sets the North American record for stupidity?" No, Keillor is just doing a monologue, only this one is going on silently, in his head. Eventually he returns to the here and now and speaks. In this case it is to say, without explanation, "If you believe in the existence of a loving and merciful God, then life is a comedy."

Keillor was not a natural performer as a boy, says his older brother Philip, 48, an engineer whose field is shoreline erosion and flooding. At the University of Minnesota, Gary edited the literary magazine and wrote a noisy, satirical column called "Broad-sides," in which he slashed at student radicals, the college president and any other targets that seemed pompous or pretentious. But the storytelling gifts did not immediately appear. In 1966, after he finished college, Keillor "felt a slight urge to head out"

from the Midwest, and on a job-hunting swing through the East he applied at half a dozen publications. No takers.

Transplanted Midwesterners do much of the heavy lifting for the big Eastern magazines and newspapers, but Keillor was not to be one of them. Back he went to Minnesota, where, among other things, he began a five-day-a-week early morning classical-music show for a public radio station at St. John's University in Collegeville. *The Prairie Home Morning*

Along with Lake Wobegon, the show offers a mixed bag of music by the likes of Country Fiddler Gimble and Guitarist Ostroushko

KEVIN HORAN





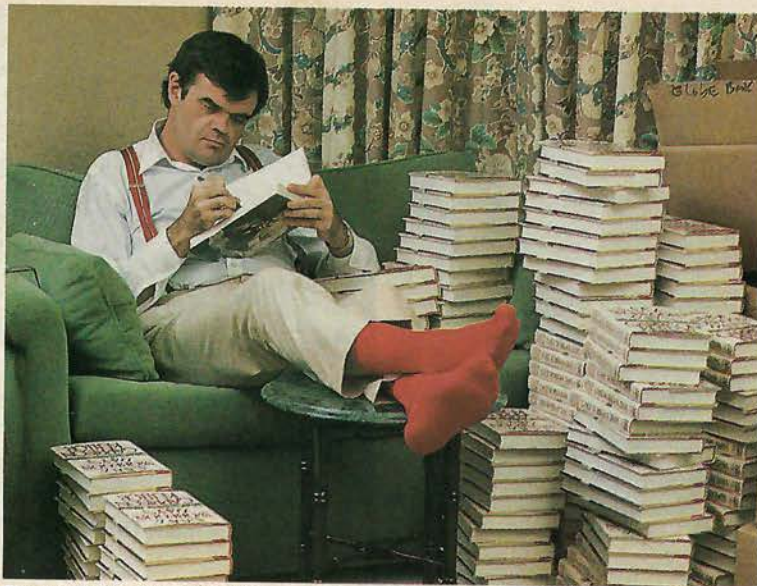
## Show Business

Show, as it came to be called, moved to the Twin Cities, where it broadened and loosened to include jazz, country music, fake commercials and references to an obscure place called Lake Wobegon. (He stopped doing that show only three years ago.) "I think he started the show—well, who knows," says his brother. "He has said he was scared. A lot of people deliberately do things that they are afraid of." He had always written a lot ("Writing is so dignified," he says, rolling his eyes and dragging out the *so* like a saxophonist playing *Blue Moon*). In 1970 *The New Yorker* printed one piece out of a batch he had sent in, a small, eerily funny sketch, "Local Family Keeps Son Happy." It was written in the plonking style of a country newspaper, and it reported that two householders, hoping to shield their teenage son from the dangers of fast driving and foolish companions, had acquired a live-in prostitute for him.

It was in 1974, after he traveled to Nashville to write a piece for *The New Yorker* on the Grand Ole Opry, that he hit on the notion for the live evening show that shortly became *A Prairie Home Companion*. Years later the great country guitarist Chet Atkins heard from his agent, who said that "somebody in St. Paul wants you to work on a radio show for \$300." Atkins was not thrilled, but then his daughter mentioned Keillor's show, and so did another musician. "I decided to tune in," he says. "That man's voice just mesmerizes people. I called my agent and told him to book me." Their first meeting was not electric. "He was backstage wearing a ball cap and casual clothes," Atkins goes on, "and I told him right off how much I enjoyed his show. He just looked at me and then walked away. You can't compliment him, as I learned. He's quiet, very introverted and shy. I am too. Maybe that's why we became friends."

Keillor learned to harmonize when he was a boy singing hymns with his family, and he does a lot of singing on the show. Butch Thompson, who plays clarinet and barroom piano, and Peter Ostroushko, who plays fiddle, guitar and mandolin, are regulars on the show, and Atkins, Emmylou Harris, Scottish Folk Singer Jean Redpath, Fiddler Johnny Gimble and a great many others are irregulars. Keillor's tastes are dizzily eclectic, though he cherishes what he calls "an irrational distaste for banjos and a normal dislike of operatic sopranos."

Until last year, Keillor wrote almost



The publishing sleeper of the year keeps him up signing books

Unable to accept a compliment, but waiting to be named Sun God.

the entire show, parody songs, phony commercials and all. Now Writer Howard Mohr pitches in on the Raw Bits and the Minnesota Language Systems ads, which peddle cassettes that teach visitors to answer "You bet" for approval, and "That's different" for confusion or doubt, like real Minnesot'ns. But the wondrous, spooky monologues that carry the show are Keillor's. He works without a net. On Wednesday or Thursday he will have started to think seriously about the piece, and by Saturday, most weeks, he will have written out a fairly complete narrative. If he has been rushed, he may have only a few sentences of notes, but he carries no paper onstage. He does not memorize what he has written, though he knows most of the distance he wants to travel. "I think in telling a story, a person is supposed to be carried away," he says. Part of

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the process, he admits, involves "learning to talk until you think of something to say, which is something that I and others in the ministerial profession sometimes do." Out of curiosity, he follows where the unexpected turns in his stories take him. "You get tired of being afraid of embarrassing yourself," he says. "And so rather than draw back and going in a direction you're sure of, I think as a person gets older, you get reckless. I think you're supposed to get reckless."

For all of its informality, the show is precisely planned, a reflection of its cre-

ator. He is an inward man, tightly wound. Divorced in 1976 after eleven years of marriage to Mary Guntzel (whom he met at the University of Minnesota), Keillor lives with their 16-year-old son Jason in St. Paul and, according to friends, spends most of his time working. Even when he is not working, he is working. He wanders away from a Christmas party at Roy Blount's house, and walks for a while alone through the snowy streets of Mill River, Mass. That Saturday his monologue turns an unexpected corner, and there one of his characters is, walking alone through the snowy streets of Lake Wobegon.

There is a bitter quality to some of his recollections of Lake Wobegon, only partly softened by humor. In his book he claims that an angry son returned to the town intending to nail 95 complaints about his repressive parents to the door of the Lutheran church. The 34th of these accusations is that the parents made it impossible for him to accept a compliment. It is Keillor talking, no question. Someone says, "Good speech," and he mumbles, "Oh, it was way too long. I didn't know what I was talking about. I was just blathering." Actually, he confesses, "good" is not good enough. "Under this thin veneer of modesty lies a monster of greed. I drive away faint praise, beating my little chest, waiting to be named Sun God, King of America, Idol of Millions. I don't want to say 'Thanks, glad you liked it.' I want to say 'Rise, my people.'"

Part of him does want to say that. The rest of him knows he does, and knows also how to turn this unworthy greed into a story. But the stream that fills Lake Wobegon, in Mist County, on no map, in central Minnesota, flows from another source. A story told by a master about his long-gone childhood is a marvelous kind of time machine, and listeners really can learn how those folks talked who are vanished now, and what they wore, what they did when the great snowstorms came. Keillor knows that childhood is the small town everyone came from. He talks again of his uncle Lew: "It seems to me that the presence of children is the redeeming feature in storytelling, his and mine too. Without them, it's all pleasant enough, but it's just nostalgic. And I'm not really very interested in that. For children, who have a great deal of curiosity about what happened before they came along, I'm willing to work hard." —By John Skow. Reported by Jack E. White/Chicago