

## THE NEWS FROM LAKE WOBEGON

**By MICHAEL KILGORE**  
Assistant Features Editor

MIAMI — There's plenty of good news this week from Lake Wobegon (pop. 942), Garrison Keillor's home town.

• Keillor, 41, the soft-spoken humorist best and star of the "Prairie Home Companion" radio show, is now a certified cultural icon, just last week his face graced the cover of *Time* magazine.

• A four-cassette package of Keillor's humor excerpted from the program tops the books-and-cassettes market.

• "Lake Wobegon Days," based on his musings about the fictional town, is the No. 2 best seller — bumping off Jack Collins and eating dust only from James Michener's "Tales."

• Finally, Keillor will marry a former high school foreign exchange student from Denmark whom he met again at his 25th high school reunion in August.

But if you listen to Keillor's program — as a million listeners across the country do every Saturday — you already may know about Keillor falling in love.

"A Prairie Home Companion" is two hours of music, talk and lake commentaries including those of its "sponsors" Powdermill Biscuits, for instance, give my people the strength to get up and do what needs to be done, even if it's just to sit down and sleep up," and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery. "If you can't find it at Ralph's, you probably can't get along without it."

But the highlight of every week's show is Keillor's news report about the doings in Lake Wobegon, Minn. No home news.

He almost always begins each story with "It's been a slow week in Lake Wobegon, my home town. No, women, an always finds something to talk about: the sleepwalking linguist; the Catholic priest at Our Lady of Purgatorial Resurrection; sometimes about the woman he fell in love with at his high school reunion.

Blending his own biographical details from growing up in Anoka, Minn., with imagination and exaggeration, Keillor (pronounced "KEE-ler") has created a whole town. That town forgets and the decades can't improve" — along with its characters and its cultural, social and religious history.

While he says his characters are loosely based on real people he has known, Keillor admits that the people they're based on probably would say they are wholly inaccurate. They're probably right," he says. He doesn't even agree that he's exactly the way

he appears on stage.

"What I do on the air is who I really am, but it's who I am at select moments, leaving out all the other moments."

His stories are told in conspiratorial one-liners — mesmerizing, captivating, soothing — electronically amplified so we can hear his intakes of breath, accenting the drama.

It is the voice of the ages, peering on wisdom. It is the voice of a storyteller beside a fire. It is, not incidentally, the voice of a trained radio announcer.

♦ ♦ ♦

Garrison Keillor worked at KUOM, the college radio station, at the University of Minnesota, and at various other jobs in the late '60s before coming up with the format for "A Prairie Home Companion."

He'd never early that he wanted to be a writer, changing his name from Gary to Garrison to sound more literary.

Strangely enough, a trip to the literary Grand Ole Opry in 1974 proved to be the catalyst for the show. After watching the comedian he decided he could do a different kind of radio program, mixing his love of music and writing.

He put together the first broadcast that same year, and the rest is pop culture history.

Bill Morris, now program director at WUSF (89.3 FM) in Tampa, worked with Keillor at KUOM and remembers always being impressed with his writing, and with his newscasts.

"I always considered Garrison a genius the only one I ever met," Morris said.

And although Keillor once moved away from Minnesota, he thinks he's now probably there for the duration.

"I'm from Minnesota, and I can't do much about that," Keillor said, taking at least a partially true story and turning it into a joke. "I tried to leave. I went far away, and they wouldn't cash my checks."

♦ ♦ ♦

When speaking, not reading, to an audience, Keillor screws up his face like a misaligned bulldog, staring off into the distance to a place he made up, but which others can see.

In the highlight of a heavyweight work of writers at the Miami book fair, Keillor spoke Tuesday night at Miami-Dade Community College.

One thousand people showed up — and about half had to sit outside the hall and watch on a large closed-circuit television screen.

At 6:04-4, Keillor approached the stage with a kind of awkward grace, slide-stepping three paces to a single board, moving more quickly than his steezy voice might indicate.

He read from "Lake Wobegon Days," including excerpts on smoking for the first time to impress a girl and on the grisly tale of a premature burial that was worthy of Poe.

And he answered questions on everything from why he came up with Lake Wobegon ("I needed a place to put those people I wanted to write about"), compared now to Mark Twain ("I just he would not have approved"), to his distinctive drawl style.

"I have a Midwestern style of speech," Keillor told his Miami audience. "Story-

telling cut down to absolute minimum." Years ago, I used to try to put literary touches in my stories to prove I had gotten my college — to try to talk like John Updike writes... and I got in the way of my stories.

"All I do is talk simply enough so in not to distract them and leave long enough pauses for them to fill in the details."

When he finished speaking, the slight ending with a group singing, a long line formed for book signing.

Standing at the end of it, a woman said she had listened to Keillor for so long she he'd been on the air in Miami — since 1968.

"I used to listen to his show while I folded my laundry on Saturday evenings," she said. "He's made me laugh, he's made me cry — and he's worth waiting in line for. Lake Wobegon is everybody's home town."

♦ ♦ ♦

Lake Wobegon isn't everyone's home town, of course. *Time's* cover article (more correctly stated, that childhood idyll everyone's home town. And Keillor certainly likes to play off childhood fears, dreams and impressions (see example #2). But even when he's dealing with more adult matters, Keillor never enough to the imagination of his listeners so that they fill in their own details from their memories.

The canvas is only partially filled in. The listeners provide the missing parts.

"All I do is distract them from their own recollections so they could remember their Keillor said in Miami. "If you look away from something, you can see it more clearly."

Keillor came by his storytelling ability naturally enough, he grew credit to his uncle Lew Powell, whom God gave a powerful attraction for humorism, and the gift of gab."

Keillor has both, too.

During his monologues he works in a few one-liners he says his family was dirt-poor because they had a bad racism.

But mostly, these are meandering, meandering, on unpredictable but satisfying renewal of emotion, reads with twists and turns that you can't see coming, that sometimes double back, but always get you from one place to another. And the only road map is in Keillor's mind.

He speaks without notes, usually with just an outline and a notion of where he wants to go, hand-written ahead of time and then left backstage.

See KEILLOR, Page 48

## Keillor

• From Page 1D

Each story is just a vehicle, he has said, and the point is not the ride, but what you see outside; that's the listener's responsibility.

Sometimes the stories end with homilies, but in his voice they somehow sound not insincere, not maudlin, but right.

In one classic monologue preserved on cassette, Keillor plays his audience members like a master, them up and down with each sentence. It ends with a young boy figuring out that having his injured father finally home for Christmas is what's really important, not getting a model train set. It's not that the lesson is unusual or hard; it's what you see on the way.

"Of course they all realized he was the real gift. He was the gift ... Christmas was what was in that house. Whatever they did in that house, that was Christmas, and all of the other things that he thought were Christmas were not really.

Christmas was in that house, and as long as they were all there together that would be all that they would need."

Because his stories are rooted in basic, traditional values sometimes ascribed to, but certainly not confined to, areas outside the cities, Keillor is sometimes referred to as a "rural" comic. It's not a label he likes.

But Lake Wobegon is a way to promote a gentler way of life. "One of the themes of the stories is the theme of small pleasures," he told The New York Times. "And one thing I've tried to give myself over to in the course of telling these stories is to stand in praise of common and modest things. And that really is at the heart of Lake Wobegon — the pleasure of porches, and small conversation, and fresh vegetables, the pleasure of winter, the pleasure of the familiar, every year, coming around and around."

And those who misread what he's about and look to Keillor as a sort of cornpone comic will be disappointed.

His stories are simple, but not

simplistic. (He has, after all, also written for the New Yorker.)

"If I strive for anything in my writing, whether it's for the show or for print," he once told a writer for the Los Angeles Times, "far more than I would strive for 'rural effects,' I would strive for grace and elegance. If people don't hear that in the show, and if they imagine we are playing to them in front of a red barn backdrop with bales of hay on stage and are dressed in hib overalls, then that's their problem."

Whenever an author's life is turned into performance, those around him must feel uneasy. But whatever fun Keillor makes of the Lake Wobegon residents, it's still obvious that he likes them.

He said he had learned from others that comedy must have a moral basis.

"When I first started writing satire, putting the coals to the feet of my relatives who grew up on the farm and my friends in the Sanctified Brethren, I realized I didn't have this," Keillor said.

But now that he does, it doesn't

mean he doesn't still make fun of them.

For example, he said in Miami, his family believed that the Second Coming was — here he put his left hand up, his fingers spread like a preacher's during a heated sermon — 15 seconds away.

And since he so often strayed with his impure thoughts, he said, he did consider rescuing his family from the certain fate that awaited him.

"I thought sometimes ... I should get out of the car and let my family cross the railroad tracks without me so they could live." He squinted, puckered his lips and cocked his head to one side. "But I didn't do it." Pause. "I didn't do it."

And he said one section in the book, a young man's 95 complaints against the town and his family, had led to some discussion.

"My mother, father and I had a conversation about (it) ..." he said. "They didn't like 'em much. Can't blame 'em ..."

Later, he added, "I say a lot of things on my show that I mean for my family that I would be unable to

tell them looking at them from four feet away."

The cover of Time, an adoring audience and hours of book signing don't mean you're a celebrity to everyone. Keillor, as a radio star, still is seldom recognized.

And after his triumphant evening in Miami, a chance encounter showed how nearsighted fate can be.

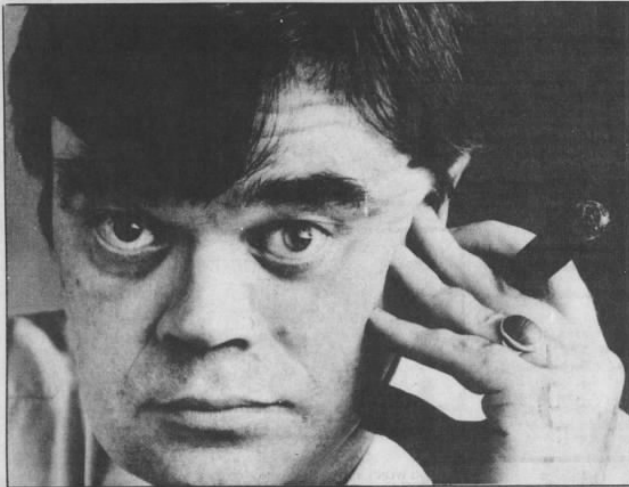
Shortly before 2 a.m. in a Holiday Inn bar, as Keillor autographed still more copies of "Lake Wobegon Days," a barmaid asked him: "Are you a writer?"

"Sometimes," he replied honestly.

"Is that your book?" Keillor looked at it with wide eyes as if he'd never seen it before. "Oh my God, it is. It has my name on it."

That's the news from Lake Wobegon this week, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average.

"A Prairie Home Companion" airs live on WUSF (89.7 FM) from 6-8 p.m. Saturdays and repeats on Sundays at the same time.



Garrison Keillor, host of "A Prairie Home Companion"

### Excerpt from 'Storm Home' By Garrison Keillor

"... They said you put your tongue on that pump handle and it'll stick there and they'll have to pull you off and it could rip your whole tongue right out of your mouth. Otherwise, they'd have to leave you there 'til spring. Put a tent up over you. Of course, you wouldn't be able to eat or anything ... and you know how it is when you're a little kid. You believe that danger and evil have a power over you to lure you towards them. And to draw you in. And we were afraid if we went back there, maybe that pump handle'd talk to us and focus in on us and it'd say: 'Hey kid, c'mere. Stick your tongue out.' Suddenly, the pump handle'd start to look like a long licorice whip there. Suddenly we'd feel very tired. We'd walk towards it. Put out tongues on it. The last words we'd say in this life would be: wo-agh, wo-agh. We'd never be able to talk again, only be able to hum ..."

© 1983 Minnesota Public Radio