


Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. American negotiators have already set weapons should be counted in computing it will work. whether that hope is realistic.

## The yellow brick road to Woebegone



**Kathleen Krog**  
Editorial Board

**Garrison Keillor: Of 'Prairie Home Companion'**

*Taylor Jones*

**T**HIS COLUMN could have been about prison reform, or why I think the Environmental Protection Agency should be independent of partisan politics and Presidential appointments. But just as I was preparing to write seriously about prisons or toxic wastes, a co-worker brought to my attention an issue that positively demands instant clarification.

This co-worker happens to be a card-carrying fanatic on Garrison Keillor and his National Public Radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. He's got Keillor's resonant Midwestern twang down pretty well, I think to myself as he recaps on Monday what the homespun humorist said the previous Saturday. It isn't that I don't like Keillor and his generous tales of Lake Woebegone in Mist County, Minn. I do. I enjoy the Raw Bits commercials and the delightfully esoteric musical guests and the feel of listening to a live broadcast.

However, my Keillor-groupie co-worker is from Buffalo, N.Y., which could explain many things about him besides his enchantment with the mythical Lake Woebegone. He believes that it exists, replete with its charming idiosyncrasies, down-home truisms, and appealingly eccentric characters, outside of Keillor's creative mind. This is the issue that demands clarification. To show just how genuine Keillor's genius is, I must tell my friend that he doesn't know Lake Woebegone as I do, because I grew up in *The Real Thing*: Lake Benton, Minn.

Ah, Lake Benton. Its only claim to fame is a county park called Hole In The Mountain. That's a small claim, to be sure, since no one ever has found the hole, and the mountain is one of many glaciated, barren brown hills that surround the little farming community nestled on the shore of a lake that can't help but turn

green by Aug. 1. Lake Benton. Where all of the children are in a hurry to turn 18 so they can go live someplace else.

It's winter in Lake Benton now. At last count there was 10 inches of snow on the ground and the skies were getting more ominous by the moment. There's nothing to do in Lake Benton in winter after the daily allotment of snow has been shoveled and discussed at the Koffee Kup Kafe. The nearest movie theater is 32 miles distant. So is the nearest pizza parlor, shopping center, and car dealership. In winter, teen-agers pass the time necking in cars or driving out on the frozen lake for a cold thrill and to see which girl can scream the loudest in mock hysteria.

In the brief, lacy-green-leaved Lake Benton summer, however, the teens go to the Showboat, an old dance hall. It tilts — literally — toward the lake and is a fast five minutes by gravel road from the heart of town. The heart of town, by the way, is a four-way stop at the intersection where the grocery store faces the drugstore, which is opposite the Koffee Kup Kafe, which looks out on an empty building that was once a bank.

For as long as the townspeople can remember, the Showboat, with its blue-and-red neon arches and truly dippy dance floor, has hosted every wedding dance, class reunion, and

general Saturday night brouhaha. The Beach-boys appeared there once. So did the Everly Brothers. Now the small stage is home most frequently to Walt's Royal Combo, some local farmers and their wives with a taste for moonlighting in country-and-Western style.

Back in the '30s, according to the townspeople, the Saturday-night fights outside the Showboat were nasty. The Polish contingency from a town 13 miles away used to come up against the local Danes and Swedes, and the Scandinavians' auto tires with mean little knives that they carried strapped to their ankles. Now all the ethnics mingle benignly. Each group quietly sets a course for a certain satisfying stage of alcoholic numbness by midnight as a few couples give the beat of Walt's Combo a chance on the dance floor.

Once, perhaps, the town's list of necessary virtues included marital stability. But now Lake Benton's divorce ratio is equal to that of any large city. The children smoke marijuana when they can get their hands on it, and the businessmen who would cheat total strangers in a metropolis would do the same in Lake Benton if they thought they could get away with it. You can't in a small town, though — not and stay in business for long. The familiar signs abound: "No Credit," "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service," "Pay Before Pumping." Mistrust comes in all population sizes.

The *Prairie Home Companion* gives the beleaguered urban dweller the '80s version of a 1950s radio show of fairy tales called *Let's Pretend*. In Lake Woebegone, there's no need for prison reform, no threatening toxic waste, no indigenous ennui. To his creative credit, Garrison Keillor has constructed a wonderful place that everybody loves to visit on Saturday night but, sadly, where no one can ever live.