

Garrison Keillor talks about his newspaper career

"An editor once told me the difference between reporting and writing is like the difference between hockey and figure skating, that in hockey there was a point to it. He wanted a hockey player. I like to cut figures myself." - Garrison Keillor, the Bard of Lake Wobegon.

The way I see it, anyone who can keep some 300 newspaper managing editors from all sections of the nation quiet for two hours has something extraordinary going for him.

Not only did Keillor, the Prairie Home Companion of public radio fame, keep the editors quiet, he virtually had them entranced at the restored World Theater in St. Paul, Minn.

He was one of the special attractions at the recent Associated Press Managing Editors convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul, the Twin Cities. Keillor sang a few songs, but he mostly told stories and he's a great teller of stories.

I had the feeling I imagined people who sat in on Mark Twain's performances decades ago enjoyed when Twain reeled off his stories.

Keillor, who did a six-month stint as a reporter for the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* during his early years, warmed the hearts of the editors when he said he couldn't imagine starting the day without reading his hometown newspaper and a few others.

Ray
Saul



The author and entertainer has had his problems with newspapers, particularly the *Pioneer Press*. Editors at the *Press* decided they wanted to do an in-depth series on Keillor, but he would have none of it. His private life, he said, is just that, private.

He said he was hired as a reporter to fill a temporary position and to this day doesn't know if he was fired after six months or if it really was a temporary opening.

Newspaper reporters discover, usually very early in their careers, that they have to ask some potentially embarrassing or disturbing questions when they are working on a story.

"I was an abysmal newspaper reporter on account of profound cowardice," Keillor said. "The thought of calling up somebody and asking them questions that they might not want to answer was deeply terrifying. And the thought of asking them face-to-face was simply im-

possible."

He was, as a result, usually assigned obituaries and weather stories, which, he said, he did "with a great deal of flourish."

But Keillor, nevertheless, has at least one warm memory of his brief newspaper career.

"I was a terrible reporter," he said. "My only real interest in newspaper work, I discovered in six months, was the chance to stay up late at night, and the chance to hang around with old reporters and try to smoke cigarettes and drink whiskey as expertly as they did."

Thanks to his failure as a newspaper reporter, Keillor now believes he knows more about newspapers than he does about radio despite the fact he's heard on hundreds of stations throughout the country.

"Failure," he said, "is what learning is all about."

His failure as a newspaper reporter, he believes, led to him making an excellent living in radio and as an author.

Keillor has mellowed considerably in his opinions about newspaper people over the years (he was a reporter in 1963). At one time he described journalists as a "class so richly despised that if a planeload of them crashed in flames, most people would smile from pure reflex."

Now, however, Keillor has an affection for newspapers and newspaper writers.

The University of Minnesota graduate advised editors not to give sermons and not to worry very much about editorials.

He likes stories, the types of human interest stories that are treated on television and radio in minutes or seconds, if at all.

Keillor talked about three stories that were in the St. Paul paper one particular day and how they made him think about what would happen next to the people involved.

He chided *The New York Times* for running a 4,000-word story on politics in Kenya, Africa. After he read it, he said, he couldn't recall one fact that was in the story.

He's at his best when he talks about his childhood days as a member of a strict Christian family that included five brothers and sisters, his high school and college days, and the common people of the rugged northern Midwestern United States.

Keillor is also the author of several best-seller books.

"He's a genius," said an editor from Dallas, Texas, who was seated next to me.

I agree. It was a tremendously entertaining and thrilling evening.