



ROSE-COLORED SOCKS: Minnesotaphile Garrison Keillor, addressing the Society of the Four Arts, set a dress standard unseen during appearances by former President Bush, Robert Dole, Winston Churchill, Richard Nixon, Colin Powell, Prince Albert of Monaco and, probably, all the others.

When Lake Wobegon came to Palm Beach

By RON HAYES
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Obviously, someone forgot to explain how things are done here at the venerable Esther B. O'Keefe Speaker Series at The Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach.

The guest speaker begins speaking promptly at 3 p.m. every Tuesday, in season.

The guest speaker speaks for 40 minutes, then accepts questions for 20 minutes.

The guest speaker ceases speaking promptly at 4 p.m.

And the guest speaker wears a suit and tie. Former President George Bush wore a suit and tie when he spoke, and so did former Sen. Robert Dole, Winston Churchill, Richard Nixon, Colin Powell and His Serene Highness Albert, Prince of Monaco — they all wore very nice suits and ties.

But this last guest speaker of the season, this large man making his unburied way up
See KEILLOR, 21

HE BROKE ALL THE RULES:

He wore blue jeans and red socks, he brought liberal views to a bastion of conservatism, and he made them laugh, think — and sing. It could be only one person:

Garrison Keillor, America's genteel humorist.



WRITE TO WORK: Garrison Keillor, in addition to reporting weekly on Lake Wobegon, writes books, rising before dawn each day to work. His 10th will be out this fall.

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Keillor deftly slices inflammatory topics into musings

► KEILLOR from 1/

the sidewalk toward the Walter S. Gubelmann Auditorium on a recent sunny Tuesday afternoon — he is not wearing a suit and tie.

Far from it. He is wearing a pair of blue jeans, without a belt. He is wearing a black T-shirt and a navy blue sportcoat, and he is wearing sandals and socks.

The sandals are brown and the socks are red. Bright, bright red. Fire-engine red. As red as his 60-year-old face ought to be, if he knew how things are done here.

And just who does this improbably tall, vaguely disheveled man think he is?

"I'm a journalist," Garrison Keillor says. "I do a journal of a fictitious town."

That fictitious town is Lake Wobegon, Minn., a make-believe land as full of lovable eccentrics and preposterous misadventures as well, Palm Beach.

Every Saturday evening since 1974, radio lovers have visited Lake Wobegon, courtesy of *A Prairie Home Companion* on Minnesota Public Radio. For two hours, Keillor hosts a good old-fashioned variety show, full of string bands and string quartets, opera singers and opey singers, comic sketches about "Guy Noir, Private Eye" and commercial parodies for everything from the Ketchup Advisory Council to Be-Bop-A-Re-Bop-A-Rhubarb Pie.

News is good

The heart of the show is "The News From Lake Wobegon," when Keillor's deceptively soothing voice wends its way between sentiment and satire, with just enough sermonizing slipped in to make it feel good for you.

"Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon," he begins, and for 20 minutes or so we catch up on the regulars down at the Sidetrack Tap, the goings-on at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery and the chatter at the Chatterbox Cafe. For a little while, anyway, we can almost believe in a place where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

And now Lake Wobegon has come to Palm Beach, two small towns with strong feelings about how things ought to be done.

In Palm Beach, for example, guest speakers speak from behind a dignified lec-



CONNOR SCOTT/Staff Photographer

Garrison Keillor never reads his material, but he does prepare voluminous notes on his subject matter, much of which is never presented on the radio, including physical descriptions of his characters.

tern. But Keillor has opted for a simple, stand-up microphone — the better to flout those socks, no doubt.

"I'm here in Florida on a fact-finding trip," he begins. "Minnesota has exported a great many people down here, and from time to time I need to come down and see if it's possible to lure any of them back."

And the Palm Beachers spare him a chuckle.

"In Lake Wobegon, our image of Palm Beach is that you lie in chaise lounges beside a pool and drink fruit drinks with flavoring added to them, so that after several of them you start to tell the most intimate details of your life to people whom you've only known for a few years," he draws on. "This is not our way of life back on the frozen tundra of Minnesota."

Now the Palm Beachers yield up a genuinely hearty laugh, and they're his. The T-shirt, the sandals, even the socks are forgiven. Keillor can take them wherever he wants — from the shores of Lake Wobegon to the sands of Iraq — and he does.

He tells them about the weather back home: "March is a desperate, dark month in Minnesota," he confides, "the month that God designed to show people who don't drink what a hangover is like."

He tells them about his dark Lutheran father, the worrier: "He worried about electricity. He worried that somewhere in this house there is a light burning in a room with nobody in it. He worried about electricity leaking out of the house."

He tells them about 60th birthday parties: "They bring out a birthday cake which blazes up like the

crash of the Hindenberg and they set it in front of you — all of these people who have spent the last hour telling you how good you look, which they never used to tell you back when you looked good."

Preparations, but no script

He takes them back to a summer night in 1954, when he sat on the screen porch there in Lake Wobegon, listening to the water sprinkler throw big drops on the begonias while hiding a magazine called *High School Orgies* behind the letter P of the *Collier's Encyclopedia*.

He shamelessly recites the names of Minnesota's counties in alphabetical order — all 87 of them — from Aitkin to Yellow Medicine.

And it's just like "The News From Lake Wobegon" on Saturday nights. One second you're sure every single word he says has been painstakingly planned, and a second later you'd swear he doesn't know what he'll say next. The truth, as so often in life, is somewhere in between.

"I don't read anything, no," Keillor explained in an interview before his appearance. "I don't memorize anything. (But) I've always written notes for whatever I'm going to talk about. . . . I would like to have 10 or 15 pages of notes to work from."

He has prepared detailed descriptions of his characters, he said, but never used them on the air, simply because his audience has its own ideas of what Pastor Ingvovist and Clarence Bunsen look like, more vivid than any he could provide.

"You want to have a

A Lake Wobegonian's thoughts on Palm Beach

In his recent appearance before *The Society of the Four Arts*, humorist Garrison Keillor began by describing what Wobegonians imagine when they imagine Palm Beach.

I saw a classmate before I came down here who told me she had a fantasy about Palm Beach.

She said she's sitting in a summer dress in a bar with a porch open to the weather, as so much of Florida is so much of the year. She's drinking a martini, although she is a pillar of the Lutheran church, and she is lighting a cigarette.

Actually, she's holding a cigarette in her hand, and the man who is sitting next to her, to whom she is not married, is lighting the cigarette for her.

This is her fantasy of Palm Beach — the martini, the cigarette, the man, and the sum-

On air, but where?

A Prairie Home Companion is not carried by WXLN-FM 90.7, the local public radio station in Palm Beach County.

However, it can be heard on WLRN-FM 91.3 in Miami or WQCS-FM 88.9 in Fort Pierce, Saturdays at 6 p.m. It's repeated Sundays at 11 a.m. on WLRN and at 3 p.m. on WQCS.

The fantasy depends on how she is getting on with her husband, Roger.

If she's getting on with him pretty well, the man who is lighting her cigarette is one of those gay men who are so

much fun for women to talk to and flirt with, without fear.

But if she's not getting along with Roger, the man is an old classmate whom she used to go out with in high school, and who told her at the last reunion, "If you're ever down in Palm Beach, look me up."

So she's done that, she's looked him up.

And if she's really not getting along with Roger, she's a widow in Palm Beach and this old classmate is trying to help her through her period of grief — which she plans will not be so long.

So that's what we think of Palm Beach.

It's a place where, if we play our cards right, we might be able to go and be happier than we have any right to be.

whole long arc of the story, because you never know which part of it is actually going to be the story," he said. "But you would never want to read it." The very idea made him pause. "It's like cheating in a way," he decided.

In person, Keillor's voice is even softer, even more thoughtful than on the air. He speaks slowly, choosing his words carefully, as good writers do. He is also much taller than he looks on the radio.

"I don't really keep up with fiction, and I'm becoming very intolerant of it," he said. "I have a much shorter piece of rope that I allow a writer before I pull the chain."

He re-reads John Updike, "because he comes from Lutherans in eastern Pennsylvania and he writes beautifully about small-town life," and, of course, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis, two fellow Minnesotans.

"Fitzgerald is a great stylist, and he wrote beautifully about New York, a city he loved much more than he loved Minnesota," Keillor said.

He still rises before dawn to write, and his 10th book will appear this fall, a novel about a young man from the Midwest who moves to New York and writes for *The New Yorker*.

"So it uses a little bit of my experience, but uses it to

tell a fiction story," he said. "I'm not sure about the title. I think it's called *Love Me*, but we'll see. We'll see."

If Keillor has literary ancestors, they are clearly Mark Twain and Will Rogers. But unlike Twain, his satire never slips over the line into cynicism, and unlike Rogers, he is seldom overtly political, unless you count an ongoing wrangle with Jesse "The Body" Ventura, Minnesota's former professional wrestler-turned-governor, who was lambasted regularly on *A Prairie Home Companion*.

No wrestling with that

"But he was a joke," Keillor said, dismissively. In general, he tries to avoid the sort of topical commentary that fuels so much late-night comedy, he said.

"I used to talk very constantly about all sorts of things that now I hesitate to touch because they lie outside my experience, and when you comment on things you have not yourself experienced, you are . . ." He paused, searching for the right word. "Wrong, more often than not."

But the U.S. has invaded Iraq, and onstage later, Keillor talks about the war bluntly.

"I am part of the 20 percent, or maybe we're down to 15 percent now, who are in disagreement," he says. "I am an old, museum-quality, bleeding-heart, tax-and-

spend northern liberal, and I make no bones about it. And you may very well be staunch, hands-over-your-heart Republicans."

The Palm Beachers do not smile. They do not laugh. "We cannot make the world conform to our wishes," Keillor goes on, "and if, God forbid, we should find ourselves in a religious war, which we have no experience in this country . . . this to me would be one of the darkest things that could happen in my lifetime."

There would be more laughs, and more gentle musings, but in the end Keillor returned to the war.

"My imagination, which I come by honestly, makes me fear dark, dark things in our future," he said, "but it's such a pleasure to be in the company of all of you on this brilliant summer afternoon in Palm Beach, in the company of people who I assume disagree with me heartily. I'm so pleased, I think we should close by singing a song."

And so they did. Without an orchestra, without any hymnals, the bleeding-heart liberal from Lake Wobegon and the hands-on-their-heart Republicans from Palm Beach sang a song together.

O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain

...

When they were done, it was 4:10 p.m., but nobody seemed to mind.

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