

Life is decidedly above average for 'Prairie Home's' Garrison Keillor

By Rasmı Simhan
BEE ARTS CRITIC

Things are quiet nowadays in Lake Wobegon, Minn. People buy Powdermilk Biscuits. The women continue to be strong and the men good-looking. Children and gardens grow.

Yet there's something about Garrison Keillor's imaginary town, home of the radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," that speaks to people all over the world. What began as a 6 a.m. program on Minnesota Public Radio in 1969 now reaches about 3.9 million people over 511 public radio stations in the United States. Abroad, it's heard on America One and the Armed Forces Networks.

Here in Sacramento, Keillor's non-broadcast appearances, scheduled for Saturday and Nov. 10, have sold out. Saturday's program is part of a 16-city circuit called "The Rhubarb Tour," because, Keillor writes on the show's Web site, www.prairiehomecompanion.com, "the delicate balance between sweet and sour, between iconography and irony, between lightning and lightning bugs, is what we strive for."

He'll probably have to scratch lightning and lightning bugs off the list in this town, but the rest of the recipe just might work.

Perhaps the secret of Keillor's humorous variety show — with its down-home music and commercials for products that don't exist — is that it reflects a way of life some audience members crave.

"People are content," Keillor, 61, says of Lake Wobegon's citizens. "It's a great mystery to outsiders. All these quiet people sitting, drinking coffee, talking or not talking, enjoying the shade, enjoying their children. Outsiders think, 'Why would people live in a place like this?' Nothing happens here. After you study them for a long time, you think, 'You know, people here are just content.' That's all."

"I'm not one of those people. I've suffered all my life from restlessness, fear of boredom — like most people. But not in Lake Wobegon."

During a phone interview from New York, Keillor chats in his clear, melodious voice about everything from everyday life to being a former English major.

Although he finds today that "radio as a medium for individuals to express themselves is practically dead," it was a shining opportunity when he first got started.

"I needed a job, I had a wife and a small child, and I was an English major with a B.A. in English literature," he said. "It was a way to earn a living while I set out to write the Great American Novel."



Garrison Keillor says he's not like the contented citizens of fictional Lake Wobegon: "I've suffered all my life from restlessness, fear of boredom."
prairiehomecompanion.com

Inspired by the Grand Old Opry, the show was carried by National Public Radio in the early 1980s. Keillor won a Grammy Award in 1987 for his recording "Lake Wobegon Days."

Though he says he's a shy person, he finds it easier to talk into a microphone or to a dimly lit auditorium.

"We put aside our personal weaknesses in the interest of doing our job," he said.

When he's not on tour, Keillor lives with his wife and daughter in St. Paul. Though it isn't quite as small as Anoka, Minn. — his birthplace and the inspiration for Lake Wobegon — he finds his days there are peaceful and "pretty simple." He wakes up around 4 or 5 a.m., brews some coffee and writes for a few hours. He's now working on a CD, a book and a few screenplays.

His 5½-year-old daughter comes downstairs a few hours later. They have some yogurt for breakfast — outside if the weather is nice — and maybe play cards. Then she heads to school and he takes care of business with the show. The family often spends the evening talking and reading. Keillor's current reads include Maxine Kumin's poetry, Jacqueline Carey's "The Crossley Baby," a book about hobos and a new translation of Hans Christian Andersen's stories.

The writing hours have proved fruitful for Keillor, whose novel "Love Me" will

come out next month. It's the story of an advice columnist who gets questions like, "I am 38 years old. I have a good job. ... I am fairly good-looking, my friends say I'm fun to be with, and I haven't had a romantic date in the past six years. What's wrong with me?"

"You can't answer that question without meeting the person," says Keillor, who wrote an advice column for *Salon.com* until 2001. "You think maybe if you met the person you'd see the answer right away. It's a terribly cruel thing. You see people — sometimes you see them much too clearly."

In one real-life column, he responded to a man who wanted to know how to ask a woman out on a date. Keillor's response was simple: "You pick up a telephone and dial her number and when you reach her, you ask her to join you for the social engagement. ... If you can't bring yourself to do it, write back and I'll tell you the same thing."

Recently, he heard that a man was selling bootleg copies of "Love Me" from a card table at Broadway and 81st Street in Manhattan.

"When I'm done talking, I might walk down there and see if people are buying it," he says. "I'll probably buy a copy for myself. Then maybe I'll trail them and see if they ... read it, see if they laugh."

Among the readers and listeners out there — at least those who come to his book signings — Keillor meets certain kinds of people. He sees older people who remember the golden age of radio, transplanted Midwesterners, 12- or 13-year old boys who enjoy the show's broad humor — and "stunningly beautiful women in their mid-20s."

"They smile at me and they say, 'I was brought up listening to your show. You are like an uncle to me.' It's very sweet."

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Garrison Keillor

WHEN: 8 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Community Center Theater, 1301 L St.

TICKETS: The concert is sold out

INFORMATION: (916) 264-5181 or www.prairiehomecompanion.com