

**7**  
DAYS OF OPENING NIGHTS

# A return to Wobegon

*Local songstress Velma Frye  
will perform once again  
with Garrison Keillor*

**By Kati Schardl**  
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

The Midwestern hamlet of Lake Wobegon may be a mythical speck on the map of the wintry state of Minnesota.

But its boundaries are so elastic it's a truly global village. In this ever-expanding world of swift and often bewildering change, Lake Wobegon has become our town, a communal hearth of humor and fellowship at which we warm ourselves and refresh our belief in the fundamental goodness of humanity.


The burg was born in 1974 on the first "Prairie Home Companion" show hosted by creator Garrison Keillor. There were 12 people in the audience. Nowadays, more than 4 million listeners tune in to National Public Radio each Saturday evening to get the latest bulletin on the goings-on in the town where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

Keillor performs his heralded show "Lake Wobegon Days" on Wednesday at Ruby Diamond Auditorium as part of Seven Days of Opening Nights. The performance, which is based on material from Keillor's book of the same name, is sold out.

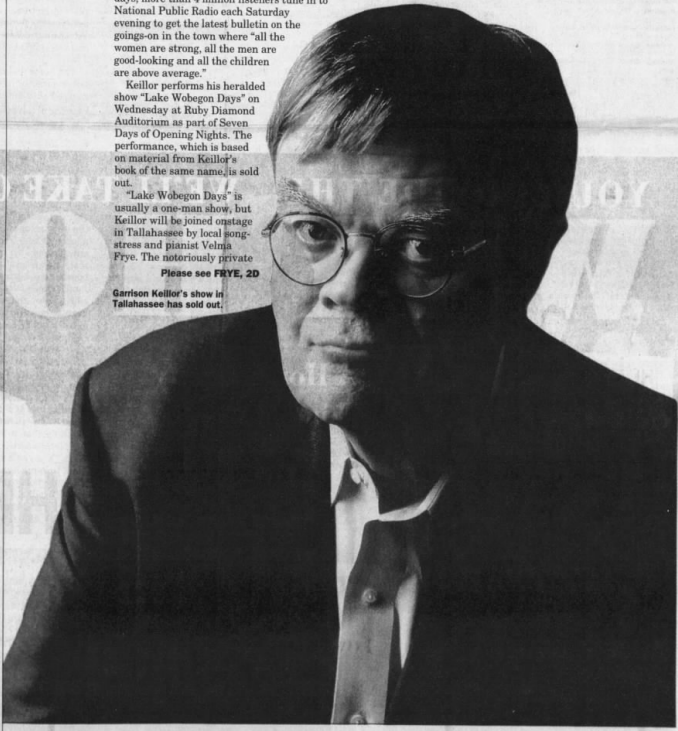
"Lake Wobegon Days" is usually a one-man show, but Keillor will be joined onstage in Tallahassee by local songstress and pianist Velma Frye. The notoriously private

**Please see FRYE, 2D**

Garrison Keillor's show in Tallahassee has sold out.



Special to the Democrat  
Velma Frye met Garrison Keillor in 1986 at a local benefit. She later performed on "Prairie Home Companion."



Special to the Democrat

## FRYE

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Keillor wasn't available for a pre-Seven Days interview, but Frye was happy to reminisce about her friendship with the sage of the heartland.

Frye met Keillor in 1986 when he was invited to perform at a local benefit.

"(Now-retired Lutheran minister) Emory Hingt was organizing a benefit for Habitat for Humanity," Frye recalled. "He called it 'Tallahome Compassion.' Somehow, he got Garrison to come down and do it. I was one of the musicians on the bill.

"When I was doing my sound check at Ruby Diamond Auditorium, he walked in."

Keillor listened to Frye

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play for a minute, remarked that the two should perform something together and promptly went in search of a typewriter.

By showtime, Keillor had reworked the campfire tune "Tell Me Why the Ivy Twines" to reflect the airplane ride he'd just taken to Tallahassee.

"We did it as a duet, and at the end of the show, he asked me to sing a closing song," Frye said. "A month or so later, I got up my courage, went down to St. George Island and sat in the sun to compose a letter to him. About a month after that, I got a letter from someone at 'Prairie Home Companion' inviting me to come on the show."

Frye flew up to Minnesota and plunged into the fictional world of covered-dish suppers, private gumshoe Guy Noir, feuding Lutherans and sponsors

such as Powdermilk Biscuits ("If your family's tried 'em, you know they've satisfied 'em. They're the real hot item, Powdermilk.")

"I was very nervous before that first show, but eight of my friends flew up and cheered for me and whooped and hollered," Frye said.

Frye clocked a total of eight appearances on "Prairie Home Companion."

"Sometimes they would call a couple of weeks in advance to ask me up there, and a couple of times they called on a Thursday night and ask me what I was doing the next day," Frye said. "The last time I was on was Valentine's Day in 1987."

After that show, life intervened for both Frye and Keillor. The latter put the show on hiatus to concentrate on family and private life. Frye married Glen

### THE SHOW

- **What:** "Lake Wobegon Days," with Garrison Keillor and special guest Velma Frye
- **When:** 8 p.m. Wednesday
- **Where:** Ruby Diamond Auditorium
- **Cost:** Show is sold out.
- **Phone:** 644-6500

Sharron and had two children, Zoe and Luka. The two kept in touch for the first few years, and after that, Frye kept track of Keillor through the radio. He resumed broadcasting in 1989 in New York, then moved back to Minnesota and picked up the "Prairie Home Companion" banner in 1993.

Frye got back in touch with Keillor in 2003, when she heard he was coming to Jacksonville to do a "Prairie Home" broadcast.

"The Sunday before that show, I e-mailed him and

said I'd love to sing with him on the show," she said. "Someone from his staff called right before the show and told me, 'Sure, come on over.'"

That was her last appearance on the program. Frye's musical focus was shifting more toward choral music and, although Keillor invited her back after 2003, she felt that what she was doing wouldn't really fit on the show.

Frye isn't the only local musician to grace a "Prairie Home" broadcast. Jazz songbird Inga Swearingen was a frequent guest both before coming to study at FSU and while a student here.

So what's it like to work with a man some have called the supreme storyteller of our age?

"In the office, he was always very on-task and fairly serious," Frye said.

"You could tell there were a lot of things going on in his mind, because, obviously, he's so imaginative. When he closes his eyes in the middle of a meeting, you just wait patiently. He's not sleeping — he's creating."

"But after the show at parties, he'd be just like anybody else. If the party was at his house, he'd be even more outgoing."

Frye isn't sure what she and Keillor will do for his Seven Days appearance.

"I e-mailed him 30 song suggestions," she laughed. "I'm picking him up at the airport and taking him to Ruby Diamond for sound check, and then we'll have about half an hour to rehearse."

It'll be just like old times.

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