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Garrison Keillor playing to full house

By PERRY BACKUS
of the Missoulian

The last time Garrison Keillor came to Montana, the restaurants in Butte ran out of food.

So take note, Missoula restaurateurs - Keillor is back in the Big Sky State this Saturday with a sold-out broadcast of his popular "A Prairie Home Companion" at the University of Montana's Adams Center.

Keillor's last journey to Montana took him to Richest Hill on Earth in 1999 where he played to two packed houses in Butte's Mother Lode Theater. Both Kay Wilson and Linda Talbott of Montana Public Radio were there.

"Butte isn't quite as big as Missoula and there aren't as many restaurants there," Talbott remembers. "There was so much interest that we offered two shows. We didn't know it at the time, but it caused a bit of dining crisis there in town that afternoon."

In between programs, Butte's eating establishments were overrun. By the time the rush was over, refrigerators were emptied and there wasn't a good piece of pie left in town.

Or so the story goes. Montana's love affair with Keillor's down-home humor and lively musical interludes hasn't slowed one iota since then.

When Montana Public Radio announced Keillor planned a live broadcast in Missoula, it took five hours to sell the 4,800 available tickets to the show.

"Apparently there so many



Sold out, but ...

Going to the show or just want to listen? Don't pay attention to what your tickets say. The doors at the Adams Center will likely not open until 2:30 p.m. The show will run from 3:45 to 6 p.m. It will be broadcast on Montana Public Radio from 6 to 8 p.m. Saturday, with an encore performance on Sunday, Oct. 1 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

people lined up at Worden's Market that morning that they had to give people numbers," Wilson said. "This was the biggest thing that had come to Missoula in a long time."

"Then came the Rolling Stones," Talbott sighed. "That sort of stole our thunder a bit."

Keillor's program will likely bring in a different crowd than the Stones.

"His show has just been a part of so many people's family lives," Talbott said. "There are a lot of us who grew up on 'A Prairie Home Companion.' We're expecting an audience to cross generations. ...

"Short of going to the Grand

Ole Opry, there's nothing like it anywhere else. There just aren't that many old fashioned variety shows left anymore."

"It has that safe, almost small-town feel to it that a lot of us can remember from growing up in a place like that," Wilson said.

This week's show will feature Montana Singer-Songwriter Stephanie Davis and the Manhattan Maestro Andy Stein.

Keillor began his radio career in 1969 on an early morning program called "A Prairie Home Companion" - named after the Prairie Home cemetery in Moorhead, Minn. The idea for the now-famous

variety radio show with musical guests and commercials for imaginary products came to Keillor while writing an article on the Grand Ole Opry for New Yorker magazine.

The first live broadcast on July 6, 1974 at the Janet Wallace Auditorium in Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minn., had an audience of 12 and a total gate of something less than \$8.

Keillor writes each show a day or two before the program airs. With his talented cast, the program comes together in what both Wilson and Talbott remember as remarkable.

"Garrison came into Butte

on Thursday night suffering from a bad cold," Talbott said. "He didn't feel well at all. He locked himself into his room and he had the show written by midday Friday."

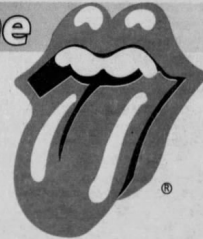
The crew at Montana Public Radio put together all sorts of information about Missoula and the history of the area. Beth Judy edited that info down and sent it along the Keillor.

"He wrote back and said it was perfect," Talbott said. "We had a bit of everything thrown in there from Lake Missoula to the present. There's just so many interesting facts about the history of this place."

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