

Midwest companion

Garrison Keillor touches down with his gentle brand of humor in tow



KURT WILSON/Missoulian

Garrison Keillor, host of National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," greets a small group of journalists Friday afternoon during what he describes as his most painful time — the 24 hours leading up to his weekly live performance. Then the fun begins, he says.

Popular National Public Radio show on the air from UM today

'Prairie' live, on air

The live performance of "A Prairie Home Companion" is from 3:45 to 6 p.m. Saturday at the Adams Center on the University of Montana campus. The show will be broadcast on Montana Public Radio at 6:05 p.m. Saturday, with an encore performance on Sunday at 11 a.m.

By PERRY BACKUS
of the Missoulian

"Such an interesting approach into Missoula in a 737. A steep bank turn, low altitude. I'm so glad my wife wasn't with me. She would have cut a groove in my forearm. She has a vivid imagination — a rich dream life that I don't have. I could do a whole radio show, but it wouldn't be 'A Prairie Home Companion.' It would be a

'Twilight Zone.'

And so begins Missoula's introduction to humorist Garrison Keillor.

For half an hour Friday afternoon, a small crowd gathered in the foyer of the University of Montana's Adams Center leans in close to listen to the masterful storyteller and humorist talk about his show the next day, memories of Missoula and a host of other delightful tangents.

Keillor brings his particular

Midwestern view of the world to Missoula on Saturday to a capacity crowd of about 4,800 that will pack into the Adams Center beginning sometime around 2 p.m. Faithful fans from around the state and beyond will be showing up early to claim their seats for the two-hour adventure into the world of Lake Wobegon, the Minnesota town where "the women are strong, the men are good looking

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and all the children are above average," and other pieces and parts manufactured over the last day or so in Keillor's mind.

On Saturday evening, more than 4 million listeners around the world will get a taste of Missoula – albeit it could be a somewhat skewed morsel.

Keillor said he was in the midst of writing a trio of tunes for the program, including a flatlander's view of living in the mountains with its ditchlike views and the threatening rocks perched above – "It's an anti-mountain song," he said – and then there's a jingle about a pair of politicians named Clinton Nimrod and Florence Lolo running for the prestigious state dam inspector's post – "She's got photographs. She going negative. It has to do with fishing."

The show may also feature a brand-new serial featuring Ellen and her faithful dog, which apparently has a taste for Keillor's manuscript.

"I lost a manuscript once – in Portland, Oregon, Spring 1974,"

Keillor said. "It was a painful, painful thing. I've never written about it. It was too painful. It was a beautiful manuscript. It became more beautiful as time went by."

Stored in a briefcase, the manuscript was apparently left behind in a restroom at the train station. Keillor said he was helping his 5-year-old son zip up his pants when it slipped his mind.

This is Keillor's first official visit to Missoula, although he's been this way before.

As a child, Keillor said, he traveled with his family almost every summer on a long road trip beginning in St. Paul, Minn., and ending in St. Maries, Idaho. The family made the journey to attend an annual Bible conference and to visit a cousin or two. Back then, Keillor said, the roads were two-lane byways and coursed right through the heart of towns along the way.

He still remembers leaving Missoula and the feeling of the mountains closing in on the road. Missoula was also the last relatively large town before the family landed in Idaho with its church camp filled with young people singing gospel songs.

"Missoula was kind of the last stop in the secular world," he said.

Keillor talked about the recent film "A Prairie Home Companion." He enjoyed his brief journey into the movie world enough to consider another venture. Although this time he doesn't plan on acting.

"I have the director's bug now. The acting bug is for teenage girls," he said.

Keillor has also been working on a screenplay about a story set in Lake Wobegon, although he's found it's not easy to find a town these days complete with a lake, a grain elevator and at least two intact blocks of an old fashioned Main Street.

He's also a bit worried about finding actors who can pull off the subtle Midwestern twang of an accent so prevalent among his relatives. Actors can all do Southern draws, but they're not so good with the Midwestern accents, he said.

Keillor offered this glimpse into his screenplay: The scene's set with the residents of Lake Wobegon trooping across the ice-covered lake, carrying a green bowling ball that holds the ashes a prominent businessman.

His last wish had been to have his ashes encased in his bowling ball dropped through a hole in the ice.

About halfway to the hole, the deceased man's high-spirited daughter decides to roll the ball across ice, and it hits the hole and disappears.

"That may take more than one take," Keillor said, with a smile.

Reporter Perry Backus can be reached at 523-5259 or at pbackus@missoulian.com.

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