

A chat with Garrison Keillor: Happy to be there

OF ALL THE thousands of stories Garrison Keillor has told about Lake Wobegon via his books, stage productions and radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," one important piece of information always seems to be missing. So when I had a chance to talk to the man whose writing is partly responsible for leading me down the somewhat disreputable path to becoming a humor columnist, I had to pop the question.

"On Lake Wobegon — how's the surf? Is there any at all?" I asked.

No, he said. There's no surfing on Lake Wobegon.

"We have ice on our water," he said in that quiet Minnesota voice almost devoid of inflection. "We can do things on our water you can't. We can drive trucks on them."

True enough. You rarely see trucks out in Waimea Bay.

There was a longish pause.



CHARLEY!

Honolulu Lite. Extra.

By Charles Memminger

There'd be a few of those during my conversation with Keillor, mainly because when you are talking with someone with a rather, well, leisurely pace of speaking, you're never quite sure if the gentleman has completed his thought or is simply

taking a breath before proceeding. And I was nervous. Keillor is one of those writers whose work I read over and over again, trying to figure out how they can be so funny with so little apparent effort. Everyone knows the eccentric characters and stories from his book "Lake Wobegon Days," but it was an essay in his book "Happy to Be Here" that made me want to try writing humor.

It was the story of how he used to travel around Minnesota, with five musicians putting on shows; they'd play music, he'd tell jokes and sing. At a junior college he jumped up onto the plywood stage to start the show, plowing into a low, concrete overhang, almost breaking his neck. He managed to get to his feet, stumble toward the microphone and say, "I'm happy to be here!" while the crowd laughed uproariously, thinking his collision with the concrete ceiling had been a trick.

"But it wasn't funny," he wrote. "My neck hurt. I hurt all over. But on the other hand, to see a tall man in a white suit jump directly into a ceiling and then fall down — how often does a person get to see that? I'm the only man in show business who takes a good run and jumps Straight Up Into Solid Concrete Using Only His Bare Head. Amazing!"

He then goes on to describe the event in slow motion and exquisite detail. I tell Keillor, "Man, I was laughing so hard it brought tears to my eyes."

"It brought tears to my eyes," he said, recalling the obviously true incident.

IRONICALLY, Keillor is calling me from a small college in Kansas where he is about to address the student body. The college, according to its Web site, is "20 miles from Salinas,

Please see *Lite*, D4

Lite: No surfing, but folks can drive on Lake Wobegon

Continued From D1

70 miles north of Wichita and 200 miles west of Kansas City." I've been to Kansas and, trust me, at those coordinates there's nothing there.

What I really want to find out from Keillor is why a successful radio personality, performer and writer for such magazines as the New Yorker would stoop this late in his career to writing a newspaper column. He has recently become a syndicated columnist whose pieces appear in papers across the country, including this one. I worked up to being a columnist, but Keillor's the only person I've met who's worked down to being one.

"I love columns," he said. "And I love newspapers. I'm somebody who feels naked if I don't find a newspaper in the morning. I love the form (of column writing) ... 750 words. I can't give you a fancier answer than that."

But he's learned what Mark Twain pointed out, writing short is a lot harder than writing long. He "sits down with it" on Sunday, then continues to "mess" with his weekly column on Monday and Tuesday before shipping it off to editors.



COURTESY OF GARRISON KEILLOR

Garrison Keillor said being funny is the hardest part of being a columnist.

"The hard part is being funny," he said. "I don't come from funny people. I come from preachers." That's vintage Keillor self-deprecating humor, a trick I've yet to master. My self-deprecation comes off more like whining.

SOME newspapers that bought Keillor's column, thinking it would be a humorous romp through Garrisonworld, have learned he has a tendency to forget that they are expecting him to be funny.

"It's more natural for me to light out after the president," he said. He calls George Bush "the worst president in the history of the United States,"

adding "it's hard to pass up the chance to take a crack at him." Putting aside the observation that most historians think Warren Harding was the worst president in U.S. history (my vote goes to Woodrow Wilson, who couldn't even catch Pancho

Villa), Keillor's column is at times more Woe-to-Bush than Wobegon. And that has caused some newspaper editors to move him to the editorial page.

"I don't belong wherever they put me," he said. "They put me in Lifestyle — that's where Dave Barry went — and they get upset when I write about the president. So they put me on the editorial page, and I write about my daughter."

So column-writing isn't exactly the frolic he thought it might be. "It's fun but steadily hard," he said. "I get this sharp feeling of failure, but I'm still plugging away."

I sense in the tone of this comment not self-deprecating humor, but genuine self-deprecation. Having been at this column-writing game for several years, I try to cheer him up: "Garrison, it's only the first two

or three hundred columns that are the hardest."

We move on to other writers who have tried their hand at humor and both agree that legendary New Yorker humorist S.J. Perelman was one of the best. And Keillor actually got to meet Perelman, who died in 1975.

"I was supposed to introduce him at a reading in Minneapolis," he said. "He was obliged to have dinner with me and somebody from the committee. I felt sorry for him on one hand. On

the other hand, I wanted to meet him. Then this yahoo eating dinner with us had to jump up and down and point out to Mr. Perelman that I had been writing for the New Yorker for a few years. He was a little taken aback, embarrassed. 'Oh, I see,' he said. 'Who's your editor?' I told him. He said, 'I hear he's really hard to get along with.' Then he asked me how much they were paying me, and I told him. He said, 'That's outrageous. They should be paying you twice that.' And he launched into a long diatribe against the New Yorker." Keillor added that from that dinner developed a sort of camaraderie between him and Perelman.

I sensed no such camaraderie between myself and Keillor. I think the "first two or three hundred columns" thing put him off. Or maybe it was when I called him Garrison instead of Mr. Keillor. In any event, another longish pause ensued before I brought up the reason for the phone call in the first place.

KEILLOR IS bringing his "A Prairie Home Companion" show to Hawaii, hosted by Hawaii Public Radio. He will do two shows on Saturday at the Neil Blaisdell Center, one of which will be broadcast live. He seems surprised when I tell him both shows are sold out. Another pause while I assume he's thinking, "So, why am I talking to this yahoo in Hawaii all the way from Kansas if there is no need for additional publicity?"

I'm about to press him on why doesn't he add a surfing character to the Lake Wobegon tales. After all, it's a fictional lake near a fictional town. Couldn't there be sweet point break within view of the Chatterbox Café or Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery? But it's about time for his college speaking gig in Somewhere, Kan., and he tells me, "I have to iron a shirt and do a show."

He rings off before I can say, "Watch out for the concrete ceilings."

A few "rush" tickets will be available at 9 a.m. Saturday for that day's shows of "A Prairie Home Companion." The \$25 tickets will be sold at the Blaisdell box office only. Shows are at 12:45 and 7:30 p.m.

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