

some of St. Cloud's finest folk are still... within two blocks of the...
Prairie Home Companion radio show
Keeping live radio alive in a bubblegum era

By KATE PERRIER
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Broadcasting from high atop the Birch Room at the Germain Hotel in beautiful downtown St. Cloud Wednesday night, Garrison Keillor brought old-time radio back to the people.

Keillor, a writer and star of Minnesota Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," along with his back-up group, The Powdermilk Biscuit Band, tape their

down-home show in front of live and very lively audiences around the state.

"A Prairie Home Companion" is a radio fossil, the last descendent of the big broadcasts of yesteryear when performers worked in front of a live audience.

Outside of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn., Keillor is single-handedly keeping radio live and homey in an era when bubblegum disc jockeys talk faster than the speed of sound and weather

reports are taped for future broadcast.

Keillor's philosophy of radio can be summed up in a song he wrote and sings, "When We Get Older, We Learn to go Slower." Radio is slow and mellow.

During the banter between songs, he admitted that his ambitions are to "stay on the radio, play the autoharp and talk about Jack's Auto Repair and Powdermilk Biscuits, heavens, they are tasty."

These two businesses are located in Lake Wobegone, Minn., which is somewhere between here and there.

Like Fibber McGee's closet and Jack's Henry's Maxwell, Lake Wobegone supplies Keillor with endless comedy material.

For example, the town was founded by stubborn Norwegians who were retreating from the Dakotas when they stumbled on the spot by Divine Providence and by equally stubborn Germans who

misread their map, but refused to admit it, he said.

Keillor has first-hand information on those Germans, having lived in Freeport and St. Cloud several years ago when he was a radio announcer for KSJR at St. John's University, the school otherwise known as "the center of rehabilitation for the overeducated," he said.

When he is not performing on the radio, Keillor writes more material for his show.

His songs are a combination of country-folk-western-bluegrass-truck drivin'-mountain-and-Midwestern music, always with an autoharp accompaniment.

Keillor said he is the fastest, hottest, slickest, sweetest autoharpist in the world, a title which should not be diminished by the fact that anyone can learn to play the instrument in five days and five nights.

His two other running jokes are his fictitious sponsor Powdermilk Biscuits "in the blue box with a biscuit on the front or the brown box with the stains to indicate freshness" and Jack's Auto Repair, "all roads lead to Jack's where the bright lights shine on complete satisfaction."

In addition to the guitar-pickin', banjo-strummin' and fast fiddlin' music from his band, Keillor invited three local talents to join him for his St. Cloud show.



Mike and Gale Nelson of St. Cloud played the guitar and autoharp respectively and sang folk songs and hymns.

Robin Gottfried of St. Joseph sang mountain music while he accompanied himself on the dulcimer, a wire-stringed instrument played with light hammers held in the hands.

Keillor said he was surprised to see so many young people at the fermented radio broadcast.

"They can't remember old time radio, so they must just want to have a good time," he said.

"People entertain themselves," he told the audience at the close of the show. "Whatever good feelings are here, you brought them in with you."

Times photos by Myron Hall
 Garrison Keillor, left, joins in a song with the Powdermilk Biscuit Band, from left, Rod Belville, Sean Blackburn, Rudy Darling and Dakota Dave Hall.