

SECTION B

Garrison Keillor



Garrison Keillor (left) will be joined by the New Prairie Ramblers, guitarist Tim Hennessey, bassist Barb Montoro, fiddler Peter Ostroushko and mandolinist Bob Douglas in a free performance at 8 p.m. Monday at St. Cloud State University.

Prairie Home Companion comes to area live from Lake Wobegon

By BOB EPSTEIN
Times Staff Writer

He is the closest person we have to a living Minnesota folk hero. He has written a fetching song for likeable Minnesota Twins outfielder Bombo Rivera. As host of the *Prairie Home Companion* Show on Minnesota Public Radio (KJSR-FM, 90.1, Collegeville), he has spawned the engaging tales of the fictional town of Lake Wobegon. And he plays host to one of Minnesota's most popular live radio shows, the *Prairie Home Companion*, on MPR.

Homespun Garrison Keillor will bring his *Prairie Home Companion* musical variety show for a free 8 p.m. performance Monday at the St. Cloud State University Stewart Hall.

Keillor will be joined by the show's resident ensemble, the New Prairie Ramblers, with singer and guitarist Tim Hennessey, mandolinist Bob Douglas, fiddler Peter Ostroushko and bassist Barb Montoro. Also on the bill is jazz pianist and clarinetist Butch Thompson.

But it is Keillor, with his easygoing manner and homey stories, who is the main attraction of the *Prairie Home Companion*. The show airs at 8 p.m. Saturdays and is scheduled to go nationwide on National Public Radio in a few months.

For several years now, early morning MPR listeners throughout Minnesota have been regaled with stories of Lake Wobegon (which by the way, is in the exact geographic center of Minnesota, Keillor says).

In his deadpan Minnesota twang, Keillor calls Lake Wobegon on the air "the little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve, where the men are good looking, the women are strong and the children are all above average."

The town came about when Keillor invented some fictitious sponsors and discovered he needed a place for them to be. During the show, Keillor gives little time slots to the industries of Lake Wobegon, especially Jack's Auto Repair ("all trucks lead to Jack's, where the bright, flashing lights show the way to complete satisfaction") and Powdermilk Biscuits ("heavens, they're tasty"). A fairly recent addition has been Bertha's Kitty Boutique ("in the Dales; Mondak, Chippendale and Clydesdale.")

Perhaps some of Keillor's affinity for small town life traces back to his growing up in Anoka. When Keillor, 37, was raised there, it was in fact, more of a small town than the suburb it is now.

But as to where Keillor received his sense of humor, he is predictably understated. "Everybody has ideas. I don't know how I get mine. I was born with it, the same as we all were. It comes from the family I grew up with. I certainly didn't get it from watching television."

Keillor graduated from the University of Minnesota with a bachelor's degree in English. He edited the campus literary magazine, "Tory Tower" and broadcast on the university radio station. He started working for MPR at KJSR in 1967 where he broadcast classical music and began his *Prairie Home Morning Show*. Keillor has been doing the Saturday live variety show since 1974.

Both shows helped re-establish live radio in Minnesota. Keillor acknowledged that listening to the radio as a child had a strong influence on him.

"We had a radio which pulled in very distant stations, from all over the country, except the West Coast. We could get Detroit, Cincinnati, occasionally from New York, Nashville, Little Rock, Salt Lake City. All of the shows were different from each other. Shows were much more designed on personality. Shows that came from Chicago did not sound like ones from Minneapolis. There were wonderful network shows — "Fiber McGee and Molly," "Town Hall Tonight" with Fred Allen. Most of the shows were based on simple characterizations and simple shtick that worked every week."

"What I try to do on radio today was done by a great many people 30 years ago and longer. It is not attempted by so many people today and that is why it seems unusual and sticks out. But it would not seem unusual back then."

Few things change in Lake Wobegon, Keillor says. Very few people are moving into town. Most people, he says, are moving out. But that means there's all the more to discover about those who are still there, he thinks.

His favorite people in Lake Wobegon are definitely the Brunsons, he admits. "They're among the very few islanded people who live there. They exert a calming influence on people and have a sense of humor also."

What do the Brunsons do in Lake Wobegon? Pretty much what other folks do, Keillor says. They raise gardens, raise children and do a lot of fishing. They don't watch much television because the reception is poor.

Keillor has received letters at MPR from people who believe Lake Wobegon exists. People ask him how to get there. The more Keillor does the show and builds on the characters, the more he even believes they exist.

Keillor/2B

