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Garrison Keillor with the Butch Thompson group in NPR's 'A Prairie Home Companion.'

Just folksy . . .

Keillor brings Lake Wobegon to Western

By JOHN WHEATON
Messenger-Inquirer



GARRISON KEILLOR
The subtle humorist

BOWLING GREEN — This story should really be datelined Lake Wobegon, because wherever Garrison Keillor goes, that little town is sure to follow.

But Keillor, who created and hosts "A Prairie Home Companion," a National Public Radio variety show, was at Western Kentucky University's NPR affiliate, WKYU-FM, Monday, so the dateline given is still accurate.

Besides, there is some debate whether Lake Wobegon really exists.

Keillor, who broadcasts his show live from St. Paul every Saturday, says Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and the children are above average," is in Minnesota.

But Lake Wobegon is not identified on any map as a town or as a body of water anywhere, least of all Minnesota.

Real or imaginary, Keillor's reminiscences and news of his boyhood home ring true for most of his theatre audience in St. Paul and for those listening to about 100 NPR stations.

WKYU carries the two-hour show each Saturday at 5 p.m., but many Owensboro residents may not be able to hear the show because WKYU's signal on 88.9 mhz doesn't reach the whole city.

But Keillor has many fans in Bowling Green, some of whom kept him on his feet for two hours at an open house at the WKYU studios Monday afternoon. He started that day with an early morning radio show and ended it with a speech before the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce. On Tuesday, he repeated the radio appearance.

Through it all, he maintained the soft-spoken, relaxed tone that's one of the trademarks of his show.

Keillor's show is one of the few live variety programs left on radio or television. The content is hard to describe, but the show's nearest cousin may be the Grand Old Opry radio show because it has the same old-timey flavor.

Its musical offerings run from folk and bluegrass to New Orleans jazz and Gilbert & Sullivan operettas. Keillor calls the music eclectic.

Prairie Home Companion fans are devoted. They drop whatever they are doing on Saturday afternoon, put their feet up and listen to Keillor's show. Some even use Keillor as a broadcast bulletin board: he reads messages from one fan to another over the air.

The humor of the show revolves around the semi-mythical town of Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot

and the decades cannot improve." Keillor (pronounced keeler) says he grew up there, and every week he relates news from home and from other expatriates to his radio audience.

Lake Wobegon is the home of Keillor's "spoons," Bertha's Kitty Boutique (which offers kitty air hockey sets), Jack's Auto Repair and Correspondence School of Thought, the Chatterbox Cafe, the Powdermilk Biscuit plant.

Powdermilk Biscuits. They make shy people get up and do what needs to be done.

It's also the home of the local fraternal group, the Sons of Knute, two Lutheran pastors who try to close down the Siderack Tap — the town's only watering hole — at least on Sunday, and an assortment of eccentric citizens.

"It (Lake Wobegon) touches a nerve in a lot of people," Keillor said in an interview Monday. "There are a lot of people in St. Paul who have moved to the big city from the country."

"In some, it strikes a raw nerve, because they want to forget all that, and would rather not be reminded of it," he added.

Lake Wobegon and news of it is a vehicle for Keillor's observations of human nature, but he added it after "A Prairie Home Companion" got its start as a local St. Paul radio program.

"I always felt something was missing, because the beauty of this town is that you can put into it anybody you've ever known from a small town," he said.

"Without it, the show would be a formal essay."

News of the town, then, does carry a message, despite the laughs. "Humor is only funny if it has a message," Keillor said. "It's funnier if it's not too obvious — you have to slip it to people."

The message of his humor, as with all humor, is simple. "It's always preached a sort of tolerance and a sort of acceptance," Keillor said. As silly as Lake Wobegonian antics are, the audience can see themselves in Keillor's stories.

Despite its popularity, Lake Wobegon is not a microcosm of Minnesota or the United States, "because you can't generalize," said the Minnesota-born Keillor. "But it is a microcosm of the midwestern towns that I know."

Even then, "They're much more varied than what I'm able to talk about," he added.

"Of course, all I've said doesn't mean it (Lake Wobegon) isn't all true," Keillor said with the hint of a smile.

And there's the great mystery about "A Prairie Home Companion." People are waiting for Keillor to do a live show from Lake Wobegon to prove it really exists.