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'A Prairie Home' Is Best Companion To Saturday Night

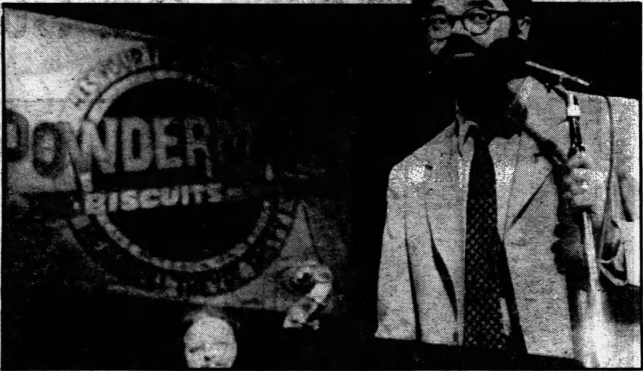
By DAVE BITTAN

Swarthmore College's ivy-covered campus would seem an unlikely place to stage a live broadcast of a radio variety show its creator regards as a modern Minnesota version of "Grand Ole Opry."

But then prairie humorist Garrison Keillor, whose wit has a Will Rogers flair, (with touches of Fred Allen and Jean Shepherd), is not your common ordinary garden variety of variety show host. A writer, he hatched his idea for "A Prairie Home Companion" seven years ago after visiting Nashville to do a story on the country radio show and music hall for the New Yorker, the most sophisticated of magazines. No hick, he was a college English major, also writes for the Atlantic Monthly, and started as a classical music deejay.

His visit to Swarthmore gave him an opportunity to lead into a seriously comic (no contradiction in terms) remembrance of religion in his beloved Lake Wobegon, Minn. It's a fictional small town based on the one in which he grew up. The town, and its people, businesses and churches, have become immortalized in the weekly show broadcast before a live audience from a St. Paul theater. Since July 1980, it has been heard coast-to-coast Saturday nights.

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Garrison Keillor: Powdermilk Biscuits helped him overcome his shyness

Shy Man Stars on Radio

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by satellite over a National Public Radio chain that has grown to 140 stations.

Keillor philosophized from the stage of Swarthmore's Clothier Hall last month while taping an episode of "A Prairie Home Companion" that will air tomorrow night at 6 on Philadelphia's WUHY (FM-91). From Garrison Keillor's viewpoint, the hall looked more like an ornate church than an auditorium built by Quakers, a spot known for its simple tastes.

But Keillor's wit, like Keillor, is soft, gentle and intelligent. So he offended few of the 850 fans who quickly bought up all the tickets for the show, although there was little advance publicity.

He talked about Father Emil and the other pastors who filled the pulpits of Lake Wobegon churches.

There is only one way to repeat a Keillor monologue — to tell it as he told it, so here goes, and it's the way you can hear it tomorrow night.

"Lake Wobegon has seen a lot of preachers come and go. And as I squint and look at that stage or altar, I can imagine some of them that were up there. I think of Father Bill, who filled in for Father Emil on Sunday morning Mass and did it on Easter and wore a T-shirt. He had a picture of Our Lord on water skis. Underneath it said, 'He's up.' He didn't last long.

"I think of powerful revival preachers... who thundered at us so people wouldn't sit in the first five or six rows."

Keillor recalled giggling when Pastor Torboltzen (most Lake Wobegoners have odd German or Scandinavian names) spoke of the need to repent.

"He gave me a stare that made me almost wish I was going to where he said some of us were gonna. And he looked me straight down in the eye and he said that he had known of young men the age of some men in this audience who had come and heard the sound of the gospel and



Keillor: no hick

who had laughed. And they had left that church without coming forward and accepting Christ as their Saviour. And they'd gone home in the car and they'd come across a railroad crossing and a train had come down and killed them. Well, I didn't have much choice after that. I went up. I wasn't happy about it, but I went up."

With hushed voice, he remembered that much of his youth was spent quietly just sitting in church. "I could hear horns honking blocks away when my friends were wheeling around town. And we sat and we waited. And I'm glad I did. I'm glad we went. I'll always remember."

That put him in the mood to sing. In years past, he and his fellow parishioners had sung "for the purpose of drowning out the television set next door." Now, in a soft, solemn, yet pleasant and melodious voice, came "Sweet Hour of Prayer." In the background was the Fats Wallerish jazz piano of Butch Thompson who, with a drummer and bassist, are regulars on the show. Music is an important part of "A Prairie Home

Companion." But it's not the kind of music you hear from Nashville — or on WMMR. Keillor features offbeat music: bluegrass, folk, western swing, ethnic groups, plus jazz by the Thompson Trio. Keillor features fiddles but not rock because, "I don't like electronic music."

TOMORROW'S SHOW features Philadelphia talent, including Irish musicians Mike Moloney and Eugene O'Donnell, banjo player/guitarist/folk singer Bob Corbin, and the clear soprano voice of Patricia Herdman.

Don't get the idea that much of Keillor's humor is religious-based. It's low-key, whimsical wit that has made "A Prairie Home Companion" a hit national variety radio program in a day when there are no other hit variety national radio — or television — programs. He is a humorist who really isn't funny. He doesn't look or dress like a comic. Yet people laugh at him (or with him) and he has developed a relatively small but select group of fans with his music, his droll stories about the mythical Minnesota town, its off-the-wall residents, and its make-believe businesses. His show has fictional sponsors, including a "national" one for Powdermilk Biscuits "that gives shy persons the courage to do what needs to be done."

A shy person who considers himself "a story teller," he insists the show is not a satire — "It's a continuation of the old live radio shows that ended for the most part in the early 1950s — the 'Saturday Night Barn Dance'-type shows and 'Grand Ole Opry.'" But his humor does have kindly, gentle satire.

Keillor, a bespectacled, bearded 64, 225-pound bear of a man, writes much of his material in advance, but ad libs most of it when he goes on-stage.

If the Keillor fans who saw him at Swarthmore were disappointed in his appearance, they masked their feelings. At a reception following the concert, he was hailed as if he were royalty. But he says he doesn't think he fits the image people have of him.

"People are too polite to say they are surprised," he says. "Some are surprised I have a beard. People think I'm older than I really am. Some are surprised I wear a suit. Some imagine me standing on stage in bib overalls and L.L. Abner boots."

KEILLOR is 39 and he does wear boots, over-ankle ones crafted by a St. Paul bootmaker. He wears a conservatively-cut white three-button suit, with tie. He didn't look out of place at Swarthmore, where there were people wearing jeans, people wearing coats and ties, and people with jeans and coats and ties.

He is tied to living in Minnesota, and has no ambition other than to continue his "Saturday night show as long as people seem to want it." He has been working on a novel about old-time radio, that has been under his bed for years.

Since he has "a strong bias against television," he can't see "A Prairie Home Companion" as a TV show. "The picture that people make in their own minds about Lake Wobegon," he says, "is much more gorgeous and interesting than any television show I can think about."

But we soon will be able to see "A Prairie Home Companion" on local TV. Channel 6 cameras were at Swarthmore, and the station plans to air it on its Saturday night "Prime Time" show.

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