



Host Garrison Keillor of 'A Prairie Home Companion,' backed by the Butch Thompson Trio, greets a full house at Swarthmore College's Clothier Hall

His brand of prairie humor travels far

By Gary Ronberg
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That his little town exists in the minds of so many — even though it doesn't exist in fact — is no small tribute to Garrison Keillor. Especially when one considers that this is a professed "shy person"; a tall, bearded, prairie sage who somehow gets up the nerve each week to pacify a million listeners who want to hear still more about a mythical Midwestern hamlet "that time forgot and the decades cannot improve."

Garrison Keillor is a writer. He says he thinks best when he is alone, behind a typewriter. He has written a great deal, short stories mostly, for the New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly. However, none of his published work has been as popular as the fabric that Keillor has woven about Lake Wobegon (as in "wobegone"), Minn. — a tiny (pop. 500) town where "all the men are good-looking, all the women are strong, and all the children are above average."

His forum for this fictitious slice of folklore is "A Prairie Home Companion," a program that originates live from the old World Theater in downtown St. Paul on Minnesota Public Radio every Saturday night and is heard locally over WUHY (91 on the FM dial) at 6 p.m. Smooth and slick it is not; quite to the contrary, the increasing popularity of "Prairie Home's" blend of country and ethnic music, audience participation, Keillor humor and philosophy is rooted in the simple life and traditional values so often associated with the Midwest.

"What we're talking about here is a basic Midwestern sensibility," says Bill Stemer-

Americana

ing, WUHY's station manager, who operated a public radio station in Minnesota before coming to Philadelphia three years ago. "When we were thinking about carrying 'Prairie Home,' there was some skepticism as to whether it would translate to a large urban area. But from the reaction we've had, there's no doubt that Garrison Keillor speaks a universal language."

In large measure, Keillor's "language" is his understated, humorous discourse about the citizenry of Lake Wobegon, who include Barbara Jo Bunsen (although she's now married and living on a combination walnut farm-lama ranch in Wisconsin); Father Emil, the priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church; publisher Harold Star of the Lake Wobegon Harold Star; the entire Whippet softball team and, of course, Jack.

In fact, Jack, who operates Jack's Auto Repair ("All tracks lead to Jack's"), is one of the most consistent of "Prairie Home's" "advertisers" — a series of satirical commercials through which Keillor pokes fun at everything from social climbers to the competitiveness of people, businesses and institutions.

Most banks, for example, are in the business of lending money. But not Bob's Bank of Lake Wobegon, where the motto is "Neither a borrower or a lender be . . . so save at the sign of the sock."

Likewise, years of quality service have

earned Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery the ultimate endorsement from Keillor: "If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it."

Although the list of "sponsors" includes many others, its most popular "commercial" is for Powdermilk Biscuits (which, perhaps only coincidentally, has an urgent message for shy persons): "Heavens, they're tasty! And expeditious too! Powdermilk Biscuits, the biscuits that give a shy person the nerve to get up and do what has to be done — and we do emphasize the rise."

So convincing is Keillor's delivery, though, that on occasion "Prairie Home's" commercials are accepted as the real thing. "Every so often someone will call up or come to our offices," says production assistant Marge Wagner. "They'll ask for directions to the St. Paul Helsinki Sauna" ("The hottest in town . . . steam, not sin. If you're feeling stinky, head for the Helsinki") — "or they'll say they can't find those Powdermilk Biscuits at their grocery store. We try to be gentle with them; they're usually extremely embarrassed once we tell them they don't exist."

Now in its seventh year, "A Prairie Home Companion" was conceived by Keillor during a trip to Nashville, Tenn., where he had been sent by the New Yorker to write a piece on the Grand Ole Opry. " . . . Its liveness appealed to me. . . it charged the show with excitement above and beyond the music, the old magic of radio as a connection to distant places." Two months later,

(See KEILLOR on 13-A)



Keillor airs on 160 radio stations

His brand of prairie humor travels far

KEILLOR, from 10A

Keillor was in business. Even in Minnesota, though, it took a few years before the show really caught on. "There were times," says producer Margaret Moss, "when we had more people on stage than in the audience."

But today the show almost always fills the 69-seat World Theater in the winter and attracts upward of 800 to the Minnesota Museum of Art Sculpture Garden in the summer. And after becoming a staple of radio listeners throughout the Midwest, then winning its third Peabody Award in four years as a "low-key, entertaining variety show full of good folk humor and country music," "Prairie Home" went national via satellite in May 1980 and is carried now by 160 of National Public Radio's 240 stations.

For the last two years, "Prairie Home" occasionally has left St. Paul for brief Midwest tours. And last week it came East for the first time to tape shows in Boston and Washington and at Swarthmore College, where the ages and attire of the 850 people who filled Clothier Hall were only further proof that the show does indeed have a wide audience. The broadcast will be aired on WUHY on Nov. 14.

"We did an absolute minimum of advertising, maybe two or three spots on the air," says Siemering, "and after Garrison mentioned that they were coming to Philadelphia we got calls from people in New York and Washington who said they were desperate for tickets. Some even told us they would rearrange their vacations if we could get them in."

With about 225 pounds distributed on a 6-foot-4 frame, Keillor easily could pass for a lumberjack, especially with his heavy eyebrows and the dark beard that consumes the lower half of his face. But the rough-hewn impressions are momentary. Keillor's haunting, ministerial voice and solemn, beset-brown eyes are more those of a gentle giant with an almost soulful sense of humor. "I was born with a straight face," he has said. "That's what I was dead."

Born 39 years ago in tiny Anoka, Minn., Keillor started his own newspaper when he was in grade school, and a few years later changed his first name from Gary to Garrison because "it sounded mighty formidable, like someone not to be trifled with."

After graduating from the University of Minnesota, he was doing an early-morning show for Minnesota Public Radio from "the studio in the oats" in rural Collegeville when he sold his first piece of humor to the New Yorker. He has since written another 30 stories for that magazine and Atlantic Monthly, although the novel he has been unable to complete after years of trying has been superseded by the mythology of Lake Wobegon.

"What people hear, see and feel is much more gorgeous and beautiful than the bare-bones stories I'm telling about a little town in Minnesota," says Keillor, who that night in Swarthmore would mosey about the stage with his eyes fixed on his shoes, shyly avoiding eye contact with the audience and those on stage.

"They've gone on to paint in their minds a picture of the town and its people that is much lovelier than anything I could create myself. In Lake Wobegon, people don't invite you up to the porch to talk; they invite you to sit. You may talk if you wish, especially as the sun goes down and it gets dark on the porch.

"It's easier to talk in the dark; it's sort of like radio."

Not surprisingly, Keillor has a hearty contempt for television, and it all goes back to his childhood, when his parents would not permit a TV in

the house for religious reasons. There were many nights, he says, when he would be walking along their gravel road, see the pale blue light in their neighbors' living-room window, and wish in the worst way that his family had one too. Finally, his parents relented, but so far as Keillor was concerned, what he saw on the little screen turned him off completely.

"When six people in Los Angeles sit down and decide to appeal to a mass audience, it's nothing more than a piece of committee work," he says now. "What those six people are saying is, 'We can outsmart you, we can come up with something that we can sell you.' What they come up with has no originality or integrity whatsoever, and to me that is shameful. Dishonest."

Conversely, Keillor is so proud of his show's originality and integrity that when regular listeners wondered whether "going national" would alter the regional flavor of "Prairie Home," he nipped such worries in the bud on the very next broadcast. "I spect things to be about

the same next week," he said. "Now we've received some letters from folks concerned lest this be the ruin of us; that we'll be slick, uptown and swell. (Long pause.) Well, this show has been trying to be just that for six years and we haven't made much progress."

Still, despite the rather remarkable roles he has played in the show — writer, humorist, composer, singer and musician — Keillor seems hard-pressed to put a finger on its success. In fact, he almost appears to be waiting for the other shoe to drop. And loudly, too. He warns that "public radio is a mass medium in name only," that as loyal as the listeners are, "there aren't enough of them to make anybody fabulously wealthy," and that given the changing tides of broadcasting, "there's always the chance that people will simply get tired of us."

And when that dark moment comes, as it has for all those shows in Radio Heaven, what will be the fate of Keillor? Doubtless his first stop will be Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church for a talk with

Father Emil, then Lake Wobegon's Farmer Shop ("Serving your fears since 1972?"); after dropping into that dim little tavern, the Side Track Tap, he could consider enrolling in Jack's "program for the rehabilitation of the overeducated" (Jack's is a multimillion-dollar conglomerate by now).

But what if he grabbed a boxful of Powdermilk Biscuits, washed them down with an "artillery punch" — the long-range drink with first-strike capability, and took a mighty leap off Tentative Point on the outskirts of Lake Wobegon?

Surely, his obituary would be treated with reverence in the Harold Star. After all, Harold Star himself might write, "Garrison Edward Keillor came from a town where all the men are good-looking, all the women strong, and all the children are above average. He was a good man, but a shy person who ultimately took his own advice:

"If you can't bear watching everyone else having a good time... it's better to move away from the window."

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