



Garrison Kellor, who comes to Nashville this weekend with his National Public Radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, reserves his wit for his broadcasts only.

On Radio, He's Great; In Person, He's Terribly Shy

Editor's note: Garrison Kellor will bring his *Prairie Home Companion* show to Nashville Friday and Saturday. The live radio show will be broadcast from Jackson Hall at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center.

By DOLPH HONICKER

Once upon a time, an early-morning minor music variety show, the precursor of *Amba, Minn.*, a program broadcast from Jackson Hall at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center, was breaking it in two. And that twin boys were married.

When born, they both were named Garrison Edmund Kellor.

Some 44 years later, one is a shy, chain-smoking recluse whose fierce countenance has been known to turn hardened veterans of executions, hangings, shootings, stabbings, even grisly room-pore and Rotary Club luncheons into fluffy egg whites.

The other is the beloved, avuncular host of Public Broadcast System's *A Prairie Home Companion*, or APHC, as its some 2 million fans listening in on 218 radio stations call it.

On April 3, 1984, in Columbia, S.C., thousands of miles from Lake Wobegon, the town that time forgot, my wife, Jennie, and I spent a month with Garrison Kellor one day, he was doing a gig at the University of South Carolina. We'd been invited down by William Fries, writer in residence.

"You might get yourself a damn good story, Dolph," Bill Fox had said.

"A preoccupation," said Jennie, a Presbyterian elder.

"Why not?" said I.

We were in the bar of the Town House Motel at 4 1/2 p.m. when Kellor, unshined, in a faded blue jeans, a white dress shirt, red tie, creamy jacket and brown knapsack.

At his side was Bill Fox, 5 feet 9 inches. We mumbled, ordered beers, Jennie a generic Shirley Temple—water in a wine glass.

Jennie and I devote two hours on Saturday nights to Kellor—now sitting across from us—who transports us to the days when radio was king, the days of Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Flipper Allen and Moby.

I waited for Lake Wobegon to splash merrily across the table. Nothing. Chances are, he's not.

Does Kellor share his most highly prized product, the biscuits that give shy people the strength to do what they need to be done even when they don't feel like doing it?

Driving down, my idea had been to do an article for the *Southwestern* magazine. This man was an institution. But as we sat mired in a three-way conversation, I began leaning toward *The National Enquirer*.

GARRISON KELLOR ALLELUJAH TO POWDER MILK BISCUITS

I brought up the subject of barbecue, telling Fox that shortly after our arrival we had sampled the South Carolina variety with its mustard-based sauce that he had tasted as the greatest thing since mother's milk.

"Bill, my man, so wrong on such a fundamental truth as barbecue is liable to err on minor things in life such as nibbles."

"Tomb-based barbecue sauce not only is a gastronomical atrocity and an insult to the pig, it betters on blasphemy," Fox insisted.

Kellor blew smoke at the chancelers.

Fox and I both had been bred, nurtured and deep-fried in Dixie: the Bible Belt. Bill calls it the Lard Belt. Give us all a six-pack and we could philosophize for hours on end.

But now, our beer had finished, we split for a cocktail party that would precede Kellor's university gig.

As we pulled off, I could feel the not-ready-for-primetime air pouring in. I started to say something and saw Kellor blowing smoke through the screen.

"Are you married?" Jennie asked. She's a born matchmaker.

"Yeah," Kellor said. "I've got a 14-year-old son."

"Ever been to the Grand Ole Opry?" she probed.

"Yeah, I liked it."

"Is your show a lateoff on the Opry?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I don't think so."

"You play golf, Dolph?" Bill Fox asked.

"We were driving through a very unorthodox amount of oak, dogwood and redbud. On the right was a farm. Fox has a passion for golf."

"Not in years," I said. "I'm into a service now. Especially the warm-up period when the young women are greeting, heading and heading to their lockers."

"Garrison?"

"Nope."

And thus it went throughout the night. Getting a quote out of Kellor was like plucking the motor of a nutcracker.

We arrived for the cocktail party at the home of Judge Alexander Sammons and his wife, Zoe. I welcomed a beer, a Powder Milk biscuit and said "No, thanks" to the barbecue with its mustard sauce.

Kellor piled his plate with barbecue and disappeared into the wallpaper. I didn't see him take any Powder Milk Biscuits.

I met an attractive woman named Paula who taught English.

"I'd like to meet Garrison," she said.

"He's shy," I said.

"So am I," said Paula.

"How a Powder Milk Biscuit," said Paula.

Other not-so-shy women dug Kellor out of the wallpaper and draped themselves around him.

I could see Kellor's head now and then, bobbing above the crowd and his cigarette contrails an uncertain smile on his face.

I recalled a line from an article in *Life*. "The most perfectly natural thing in the world becomes something strange when you know people are watching," Kellor had said.

Maybe he really is shy. Otherwise he would be into television and politics.

"For a shy man," I said Kellor as we were getting into the car, "you seemed to have plenty of women around you back there."

"I guess I needed somebody to lean against," he said.

I savored the quote like a Krenzelologist analyzing the latest ghost-written words of Garbarus.

At the auditorium, we went to the wing backstage.

I almost stepped on Kellor, sitting on the floor like a printer at the starting block, smoking a last cigarette. As Bill Fox introduced him, Kellor's beloved twin dashed onto the stage from nowhere.

But it was a lost cause. Sound was being piped to the auditorium, not the wings. We could make out only a word here and there.

We caught the rest of the show, standing in a nearby auditorium off a TV screen.

The fuzzy picture stunk. Hell, I was no slave to TV. So I closed my eyes.

That's when the magic transported me to the land of Lake Wobegon—the close—Amba, Minn., Chippendale, Mondak—Bertha's Kitty Boudier—the Slickback Top I went in to get a dollar changed one day and stayed a while I—

This was Saturday night on a Tuesday, and the Garrison Kellor I had remembered and revered and still do-