

'Prairie Home Companion's' Keillor Brings Lake Wobegon to Nashville

By TOM ROGERS

ST. PAUL, Minn.—Lake Wobegon, Minn., Garrison Keillor's mythical town in central Minnesota, is as real as your innocence.

Talk with Keillor about it, and you quickly see his mind's eye slip from here to there, to Main Street and townspeople like Clarence and Arlene Bunsen, Father Emil, Pastor Ingqvist, stores like Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery.

"It is a quiet town," he writes in his new book on Lake Wobegon, to be published in September by Viking-Penguin, Inc., and excerpted in the August issue of "Atlantic," "where much of the day you could stand in the middle of Main Street and not be in anyone's way—not forever, but for as long as a person would want to stand in the middle of a street. It's a wide street; the early Yankee promoters thought they would need it wide to handle the crush of traffic. The double white stripe is far show, as are the two parking meters. Two was all they could afford. They meant to buy more meters with the revenue, but nobody puts nickels in them because parking nearby is free. Parking is diagonal."

Or, "Left to our own devices, we Wobegonians go straight for small potatoes. Majestic doesn't appeal to us; we like the Grand Canyon better with Clarence and Arlene parked in front of it, smiling. We feel uneasy at momentous events."

Lake Wobegon has grown famous through Keillor's Minnesota Public Radio program "A Prairie Home Companion"—named for the Lake Wobegon cemetery—and the tapes, T-shirts and other trappings spun off from the show like toys from "Sesame Street."

The show comes to Nashville for performances Friday and Saturday at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center. Regulars Butch Thompson and Peter Ostroskusko will be along, plus special guests Emmylou Harris and The Masters Five. Saturday's show will be broadcast live to more than 260 stations across the U.S.

Since APHC took to the air in 1974, Keillor's weekly monologues—"the news from Lake Wobegon"—have matured from 10-minute news reports to nearly 30-minute set pieces laced with ever-more-developed characters and the wit of Keillor's wry humor.

Always, they are strung together with the laces of Minnesota culture: Germans and Norwegians, Catholics and Lutherans, long cold, dark winters, small town businessmen and small town women whose offspring will not return home except for funerals and holidays.

Wobegonians are the settled side of O.E. Rolvaag's *Giants In The Earth*. They are the shy small town Minnesotans who stayed put instead of heading west, shaped and finished through Keillor's memories and imagination. Keillor is descended from Scotch-Irish forebears who left New England for Canada at the time of the American Revolution. His grandfather returned to the U.S., to Minnesota, late in the last century. Keillor himself grew up in the truck farming country north of Minneapolis. Bob Dylan was a classmate at the University of Minnesota.

Today, Keillor's wit and Lake Wobegonians are condensations of what he feels and knows. "There is something pessimistic in the Norwegian character, something Lutheranism has not erased," he explains of his choice of Norwegian Lutherans and German Catholics to people his monologues. Shades of Norway's ancient Valhalla, the heaven that eventually will be destroyed.

His view of APHC's life is similar. "I don't claim divine guidance on that," he says. "I can see the day it might be all over, and I would have had a terrific time. For a shy person, there's nothing better than this."



—Staff photo by Tom Rogers

Fans of "A Prairie Home Companion" fill the 1,600-seat Orpheum Theater each Saturday to see the radio show performed as it is broadcast live to 260 stations across the U.S. The theater, in a pedestrian mall of downtown St. Paul, is a temporary home for the show. APHC hopes to return to its permanent home at the World Theater, also in downtown St. Paul, this fall.

Keillor's skill makes the particular universal.

"The genius of the monologues lies in the utter conviction with which Keillor delivers them," according to Minneapolis Star and Tribune television writer Nick Coleman.

"It is an awesome sight to watch him talk about Lake Wobegon," Coleman wrote last year to mark APHC's 10th anniversary.

"Eyes closed as if in meditation, script pushed off to the side, Keillor stands in a trance, breathing deeply, reaching deep down inside himself in a process of creation and entertainment that is spell-binding."

"Even filtered through radio, Keillor's voice is magical and has been known to stop many families at the dinner table in mid-meal as they listen to his words."

Keillor's voice has the timbre of low wind bussing prairie grass. It is high yet mellow,

thin yet substantial. When he talks, the flow of words seems close to song, and when he sings its like melodic talk. Words, make no mistake, are his medium.

Pushed, Keillor gives his myth-making short shrift. "I'm a working writer; [storytelling] is one thing I do," he says.

Indeed, APHC publicists distribute a sheet tallying Keillor's writing output at 33 New Yorker articles, four Atlantic pieces, a pair of New York Times stories and two books, the most recent to be published this year.

More people know Keillor for his radio show than his writings, however. By listening, they learn of the man:

● In recent monologues Keillor has dealt with cigaret smoking; long a heavy smoker, he stopped smoking last Feb. 16.

● Divorced since 1970, Keillor has a son, Peter, by 16, who lives with him. Peter and his father have performed together on

APHC. Recently on the show Keillor sang "Jason's Song," which he wrote when Jason was nearly 8. "It's still a good song," he told listeners.

"It's just a song I wrote for you in April. "Knowing you'd be 8 the first of May. "To tell you again how much I love you... "Child, when you were born I was a young man."

"I thought of all the things I'd never do... "There's nothing so sweet as having you." "Do you have a child?" Keillor asked me as we returned to his office.

"Yes. One," I answered. "I wish I'd had more," he said, the words barely a murmur. "I wish I had one coming up. That's one of the costs of being cautious."

Keillor can't separate from Minnesota any more than the state can cancel winter. "I'm not in favor of losing my sense of place" is his answer to accusations he may take APHC out of Minnesota.

"It's awfully hard to do a show you love in a theater you hate." That's his measure of APHC's temporary home at the 1,600-seat Orpheum Theater. To him, APHC's "place" is its former longtime home, the nearby, 1,000-seat World Theater, now condemned and the subject of a \$3.3 million drive for renovation. He expects APHC to move back there this fall.

A chat with Keillor turns to Lake Wobegon as if by fate. The word windows that illuminate Lake Wobegon for listeners are the voices of Keillor's mind's eye view of the town. Lake Wobegon and its people's lives wash his thinking like incoming tide.

"It takes a while to learn to talk about these people," he explained. "They're not all lovable. And they're not all easy to figure out."

"I've been thinking of gifts I'd like to give people at Lake Wobegon. I'd love to give them trips and have them see the world. And the idea of travel is to shake ourselves loose of old habits, our habitual ways of thinking."

"But they don't really want that. "They go away for short periods, short periods of time. But that's about enough, and they want to go back."

His mind's eye focused more sharply: "I wonder if Pastor Ingqvist [of Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church] for instance, will leave the ministry. And if he did, would he have to leave town..."

"The congregation is split. The danger is that it might split into two congregations, an agonizing thing. It would be a major defeat for the church."

"So what he thinks is that perhaps by him leaving, if he could prevent that... "I could have him—he'll have spent the week in Minneapolis taking classes in Minneapolis, taking classes in insurance underwriting."

On the show the next night, Keillor reported that Pastor Ingqvist had been in St. Paul taking a course called "Introduction To Insurance Writing As A Career."

A new minister might reverse the trend, heal the church, maybe help invigorate the town. Lake Wobegon is not growing. "People have left," Keillor said. "About one half of the children have left. Some come back, for visits."

"Perhaps it would be impossible for me to go back and live there. Because the show has really changed my life in ways that might make it impossible for me to live there."

Lake Wobegon, however, has its own life. "I don't have a script that I've memorized," Keillor said of his news reports from the only slightly mythical town. "And I don't work from cue cards. Personalities and characters emerge very slowly. One of the reasons for this is that in writing the show is that I'm really curious about what happens."

THE TENNESSEAN SHOWCASE, Sunday, July 21, 1985