

Atlantans get the news from Lake Wobegon

By Phil Kloer

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Business at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery was pretty good Friday night.

The Powdermilk Biscuit T-shirts were doing a brisk little business, as were the softball caps, aprons, books and cassettes, all promoting, in one way or the other, the little town of Lake Wobegon, Minn.

Most of the time, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, like the environs it serves, exists only in the mind of Garrison Keillor, host of "A Prairie Home Companion," and of the three million people who listen each week to the syndicated National Public Radio program.

But Friday night, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If You Can't Find It Here, You Can Probably Get Along Without It") was as real as cardboard, which it was, right in the lobby of Symphony Hall at the Woodruff Arts Center. And for a fortunate few "Prairie" fanatics, Keillor and his crew were not just a voice on the radio on Saturday night, but as real as Ralph's itself.

The Friday night show was billed as a dress rehearsal to the main event, the first live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" from Atlanta, Saturday at 6 p.m. Tickets for both shows were sold out long ago to supporters of WABE-FM, the Atlanta station sponsoring the event.

But it's unlikely that the show Friday night will bear much resemblance to Saturday night's broadcast. "We have to work tomorrow," Keillor told the audience as he ambled onstage, "but tonight is for fun."

Of course, Keillor appears to have smudged the line between work and fun as well as anyone. Relaxed in front of a stand-up microphone, hands shoved into his tuxedo pants pockets and one sneakered foot always keeping time to the music, he told a few stories in his languorous baritone about the good folk of Lake Wobegon, let his band play a few tunes and swapped stories with Atlanta native humorist Roy Blount Jr.

The news from Lake Wobegon is good these days. The news from Ralph's is profitable.