

Author tells UW audience Wyoming good 'escape' place

By PAUL KRZA
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LARAMIE — Wyoming is a good place to come to "escape" when your picture is on the cover of Time magazine, author, humorist and Prairie Home Companion host Garrison Keillor told a cheering audience in Laramie Friday night.

Keillor's appearances at the University of Wyoming this weekend occurred coincidentally with the Time cover story this

week, which focuses on his surprising popularity as reflected by sales of "Lake Wobegon Days," a top-selling book about the mythical town around which his live, two-hour weekly radio program is centered.

The book, which Time called the "publishing sleeper of the year," contains Keillor's reminiscences about small-town life, told in the same informal, story-telling style that has steadily increased the audiences for the 10-year old Prairie Home Companion show aired on

public radio stations. It shot quickly to near the top of best-seller lists, with 700,000 copies in print, and has brought increased national exposure to Keillor.

Although set somewhere in Minnesota, Lake Wobegon ("the little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve"), with its set of imaginary characters and places like "Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery," (where the motto is, "if we can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"), the isolated small

town and rural life there strikes familiar chords in Wyoming.

The state's travel commission slogan, "Wyoming is what America was," closely parallels and celebrates the same values outlined by Keillor in his books and radio program.

The appearances in Laramie attracted the large crowds indicative of Keillor's growing popularity. The Friday night show was a sort of dress rehearsal for the live, nationally-broadcast performance Saturday night, which was sold

out, partly due to an influx of Colorado residents whose state was bypassed in the Prairie Home Companion Western tour.

"We wanted to come West," he said. "This will be a very romantic show for someone listening in New York, Chicago or Washington."

At a press conference earlier in the day, Keillor mostly avoided talking about Wyoming.

"That's an impolite question," he responded when asked directly what he knew about the state.

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"That's a test question."

Keillor did say that he thought he had traveled through the state once as a child on a trip to Idaho with his parents, but didn't recall much because he had a tendency to sleep in moving cars.

But by performance time, he had already penned a song, based on the childhood trip, called "Daddy, can't we spend the night in Laramie?" It was a sleepy child's plea to a hard-driving father who wanted to cover as many miles as possible before stopping.

And during his monologues (Keillor writes most of the shows himself, and usually only hours before the performances), he offered his views on Wyoming as a place where people came "to run away and escape responsibility."

The early arrivals to the state left the East "where the laws were stricter and there were more people to enforce them," Keillor said.

The selection of rogues, outlaws and responsibility-dodgers "are the people the people you are descended from," he said. "It leaves you the freedom of not having much to live up to, which is good."

Wyoming became "a calm oasis where people do not aspire to reach the top," he said.

It is also, he added, a good place to be "in the week when your face appears on the cover of a national magazine ... where there are fewer copies (circulating)."

Dressed incongruously in tails and black tennis shoes, Keillor also recited "a new cowboy song I wrote today," which blended the Old West with modern, popular consciousness-raising techniques.

"Today, it's OK for a cowboy to cry," he sang. There were also lines about cowhands ordering self-improvement cassettes, "going to a seminar on being a man," and "caring and sharing at the old

Bar-N-B."

A co-performer on the radio program, Nashville guitar legend and multiple-Grammy Award winner Chet Atkins, also offered a satire on Wyomingites and their pickup trucks. He described a lavish rig, complete with red velvet seats and a refrigerator with an ice-maker.

At the press conference, Keillor downplayed and discounted his widening appeal.

"It's like Mark Twain said, 'reports of my popularity are greatly exaggerated,'" he said. Keillor suggested that that his book sales figures were inflated by the giveaway of "thousands" of copies "in hopes of stimulating sales ... priming the pump."

Pressed as to why he avoids politics as a topic in his radio shows, Keillor said he tries to give listeners "a break from doing the work of the world."

"I'd talk about the MX missile in a dark place with a beer but under the bright lights, the field of my expertise shrinks dramatically," he said.

Asked later for advice about Wyoming's current "futures" struggle over trying preserve its Lake Woebegon-like "values" in the face of boom-and-bust mineral development, Keillor said he doubted the state would have much leverage with the future.

"We can be loyal to our values and preserve them through our children," he said. "But we don't get to exercise control over the future."

Besides, he pointed out, "some are glad to get rid of (the old values)," and some rural values aren't worth preserving anyway. Among those is the view that "life was extremely limited," and "essentially tragic," he said.

"I don't buy that," Keillor said.