

## Those quiet weeks in Lake Wobegon never get old

By Dan Kening  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon.

Since 1974, those words, uttered by Garrison Keillor in his whimsical baritone on "A Prairie Home Companion," have lured listeners to public radio stations nationwide for two of the most unusual hours of radio in America.

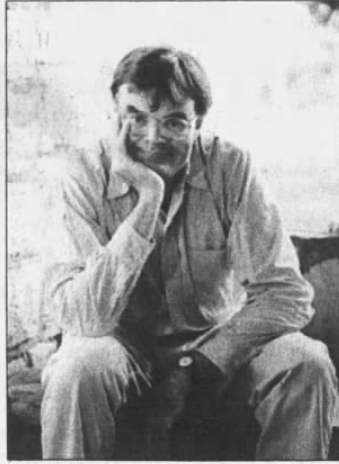
Through monologues, music, commercial parodies and—above all—stories, Minnesota native Keillor continues to mine his distinctly Midwestern view of the absurdities of modern life while incorporating elements borrowed from radio's bygone days. About 275 public radio stations broadcast the show to an audience of nearly 2 million.

In Chicago the program airs from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturdays on WBEZ-FM 91.5 and is rebroadcast at 10 a.m. Sundays. On Nov. 13, it was broadcast live from Chicago's Medinah Temple as part of Keillor's practice of occasionally taking the show on the road.

The Chicago show was rife with knowing references to the city's cuisine, architecture, politics, culture and weather. Still, Keillor, ever the perfectionist, said he remains dissatisfied with "Prairie Home."

"Our show may be a little too slick for its own good right now," he said recently from Baltimore, a stop on an interview tour to promote his new collection of short stories, "The Book of Guys." "In some ways I'm tempted to go back to something much more amateurish. We did things years ago that we felt we grew out of—things like inviting people from the audience to get up and perform. I'm torn about which way to go."

In a way, Keillor has gone back to the essence of "Prairie Home," which, occasional road trips aside, is broadcast live each Saturday from the



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### Radio

World Theatre in St. Paul. After a two-year hiatus in which he concentrated on his writing career ("Guys" is his sixth book), Keillor moved the show to New York in 1989 and renamed it "The American Radio Company." The name confused some longtime listeners, as the show was essentially still "A Prairie Home Com-

panion."

"In changing the name we seemed to be making some kind of point," Keillor said of the show, which in 1992 returned to its Minnesota base and in October reclaimed its original name. "And I really had no point to make. 'A Prairie Home Companion' was really the true name of the show and was what people thought of it as."

The recent show in Chicago found Keillor in fine form, along with an ensemble that included music director Rob Fisher, sound effects and voice whiz Tom Keith, singer Kate MacKenzie and musical guests Paul Cebal and the Milwaukeeans. Keillor sang his "Gee I Love Chicago, But Remind Me Why I Live Here Blues," joked about Shriners ("the party wing of the Masonic order"), warbled a paean to O'Hare International Airport and, of course, brought listeners up to date on the doings in Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average."

Growing up in a fundamentalist family in Anoka, Minn., Keillor hardly imagined himself as an entertainer.

"The performing part of it has been the biggest surprise to me," he said. "It's almost as if I'm living somebody else's life. I grew up in a family where the entertainment world was looked down upon as a world of inequity and hypocrisy. That I should be trotting across stages and making people laugh is still a surprise to me."

A homespun anomaly in an increasingly slick public-radio landscape, Keillor sees encouraging signs that his style of radio has other proponents.

"Every so often on public radio in little out-of-the-way places I hear people who are trying to tell stories," he said. "That's really what I'm interested in and what I think radio is best suited for—telling stories."