

Small-town talent comes to the 'Prairie'

By Noel Holston/Staff Writer

Little towns harbor big talents. That was the assumption from which little Lake Wobegon's town tattler, Garrison Keillor, proceeded.

On Saturday night's broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion," 2 million listeners nationwide will find out if he's right about a mortician from Albany, Minn. (pop. 1,548), who fronts a polka band; a yodeling farmer from Fisher, Minn. (pop. 413); a singing social worker from Arkansaw, Wis. (pop. 210), and three other performers who made it to the finals of his Minnesota Public Radio show's first "Talent from Towns Under 2,000" contest.

The studio audience at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul will cast ballots after the six acts have done their thing, and the top three vote-getters will receive cash prizes. The first-place winner will also take home a trophy sculpted to look like

one of those spaceship-on-stilts water towers that identify small towns all over America.

"Since there's a small town at the heart of the show," Keillor said, "we thought a show made up of people from small towns was a bright idea — though it's not easy to draw these lines. Two thousand is an arbitrary distinction. But life is unfair, we know, so I drew it there."

The call for contestants went out in mid-February. To maintain a Midwestern feel and keep the number of submissions manageable, the competition was touted only by MPR stations serving Minnesota and neighboring states. Almost 200 performers applied. With Keillor consulting, associate producer and former "Prairie Home" regular Stevie Beck narrowed the field to six:



Staff Photo by Tom Sweeney

'U' student William Munson, a classical pianist, will appear on Garrison Keillor's small-town talent contest.

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■ Classical pianist William Munson, a University of Minnesota student from Howard Lake, Minn. (pop. 1,343).

■ Sometimes 8, an a cappella group of eight fellows who live around Lewiston, Minn. (pop. 1,298).

■ Harmonica player Larry (Coop) Cooper, a Minnesota Department of Transportation bridge worker who lives between Pemberton (pop. 228) and St. Clair (pop. 633), Minn.

■ Singer-songwriter Yata Peinovich, a mental-health social worker in PePIN County, Wis.

■ Yodeler Jane Sorenson, who farms near Fisher.

■ The Bob Brenny Polka Band, led by concertina player Brenny, who operates funeral homes in Albany and Holdingford, Minn., and is Albany's mayor.

"We wanted a range of types, but it turned out that the contestants by default provided a good balance," said Beck. "The main consideration was what was good."

Beck said the six finalists are comparable to the performers featured on "A Prairie Home Companion" in its early years. "A lot of these people have played professionally," she said. "Maybe all of them. Janet Sorenson has played at Iron World and opened for Larry Gatlin or somebody."

Actually it was the Oak Ridge Boys for whom Sorenson opened — twice. And she regularly performs at weddings, funerals, private parties and such. Sorenson said she has been so busy with singing jobs that she hadn't entered a competition since she won the national yodeling championship eight years ago. "When this came up, I thought, 'Well, I don't have anything for that weekend.'"

You can tell she's really intimidated.

Peinovich has been on "Prairie Home" before, though neither Keillor nor the producers remembered him. He was in a Minnesota Music Award-winning folk band, Artesian Dreams, that made one appearance in 1980.

Brenny's polka band auditioned with its latest CD/cassette release, "Greet the Folks at Home," the band's fourth recording stocked by the Musicland in nearby St. Cloud, Minn. "It's a little awesome when you figure you're live on public radio and there's probably a couple of million people listening," said Brenny, who started playing polka music with his father's band 38 years ago. "But we talked about it, the band members and myself, and once we hit those first notes, then we're back in the groove, then we're back doing what we do best."

The band is not likely to be put off by the theater crowd during the live broadcast. "At some of these polka fests we go to in the Midwest, there's as high as 4,000 or 5,000 people there," Brenny said.