



Paul Buckowski/Argus Leader
Garrison Keillor: After biscuits
and gravy at the Elmen Center.

The shy guy lets 1,000 laugh at themselves

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Garrison Keillor obviously isn't a morning person.

It's 8 a.m. Tuesday at the Augustana College Elmen Center, and the self-confessed shy guy from Minnesota is looking for a seat — and coffee.

The popular host of "A Prairie Home Companion" arrived in Sioux Falls about midnight Monday, after rainy stops in La-Crosse, Winona and St. Peter. His suit was rumpled until Loretta Hirsch, the mom of KRSD-FM news director Cara Hetland, ironed it in the wee hours Tuesday.

At 8, he's just come through the buffet line, looking a bit lost until directed to an empty chair. "You put the pot in front of the right person,"

'A deep sense of personal guilt is what motivates people to serve on committees.'

— Garrison Keillor, Radio personality

he says, noting he could easily see the bottom of the cup through the liquid. Darker would be better.

A plate of biscuits and gravy disappears with little conversation before fans looking for autographs begin lining up behind his chair.

"I've got to go to work," Keillor says, rising.

He listens to the woman from

Missouri and another with a book for her nephew. "He's my hero," John Peckham says.

Keillor heads for the stage, red tie askew. With microphone in hand, the curmudgeonly charm is on. For the next 75 minutes, he allows 1,000 Midwesterners to laugh at themselves and better understand who they are.

The Sioux Falls stop was part of a barnstorming tour in Keillor's cousin's plane that went to cities having Minnesota Public Radio stations.

This is a thank you for those who support public radio, he said. "We never realized how good public radio was until we began to attract enemies."

Keillor /See 6D

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Keillor's plea is for tolerance among a people who are prone to make impressions early and hang on to them. His message is about building community.

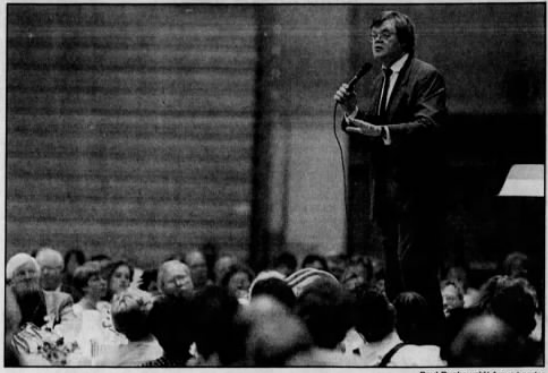
There can be powerful disadvantages to the Midwest, he said. There's the winter — "that every year makes two or three serious attempts to kill us." There's March — "to show people who don't drink what a hangover is like. And we have these scorching summers that make us wonder how God created a climate that could freeze you to death then burn you two or three months later."

The true asset in the Midwest is the people who make communities where grown-ups can live and bring up their children, Keillor said.

Even though Midwesterners have learned not to enjoy good things openly. Even though they'll always deflect a compliment with two or three good reasons that things are not as good as they should be. Even though they're a reserved people, they have their good points, Keillor said.

"We come out to things in the morning," he said. "We're a please-and-thank-you culture. We actually listen to people when they talk."

Just 150 years after their ancestors arrived, Midwesterners are still building culture, Keillor said. That's why institutions like the library, the churches, the colleges and public radio are crucial — "to



Keillor comments

"You and I did not create our own conscience. Our conscience was given to us by our families and by the people our families knew. . . . By the time people go off to high school, they have whatever conscience they will have. . . . That is our obligation. We cannot shirk it."

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"At my best, what inspires me Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday morning is the thought someone, somewhere may be listening. . . . Friday or Saturday morning what inspires me is I have to be on the radio at 5 o'clock central time. . . . The thought of being in front of other people does stimulate the imagination."

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"In our part of the country we were brought up to expect the worst."

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"That's how we live. . . . We can be good when we want to, and we need somebody to make us want to be."

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what motivates people to serve on committees."

Keillor brought his message home with rambling stories about the English teacher and the preacher, both caught with women not their wives and forced to leave town. He spun the tale of the sign man who inadvertently took down 20 miles of telephone

wire in a blizzard and was pushed by guilt to volunteer for the kids' recreation program. He told of the Catholic neighbor stalked by the Lutheran dog that didn't forget old hurts.

"We have to get over it somehow," Keillor said. "We have to be a little bit more merciful toward each other. Our self-righteousness is driving people away."

Angry talk radio does not help build community, Keillor said. "We have enough capacity in the Midwest for self-righteousness without people encouraging us whatsoever. What we need is to be a little more forgiving."

Radio is going through a phase of endless talk, he said. It's a vehicle for unhappiness and anger.

"No one calls about the great work done by the Girl Scouts. . . . That's not what talk radio is about. It's the entertainment of anger. The anger of other people is entertainment, up to a point, but it's not a great basis for life."

Justine Watson of Sioux Falls gets a laugh out of Tuesday's program.

Garrison Keillor says Midwesterners have trouble accepting compliments and have not yet learned to enjoy good things openly.

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