

Garrison Keillor: live and unpredictable

By BILL KEVENEY
Courant Staff Writer

With tales of stolid Swedes, late-arriving springs and the intricacies of the Lutheran faithful, Garrison Keillor has turned his native Minnesota into one of the nation's top humor-exporting states.

But it may give local readers a lift to know Hartford played a role in shaping the renowned host of public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion." In 1966, despite "a heartfelt letter" seeking employment, the new college graduate was rejected for a job at The Courant.

Keillor ranks that painful memory with two earlier events: the time he was cut from the football team in the eighth grade and the time, as a high school junior, when he couldn't get a date with the homecoming queen's attendant.

"These things always hurt. We never get over these early disappointments," he said in a somber tone, with just a hint of melancholy.

He was being humorous. No, he was serious. That's the thing with Keillor. You start out laughing; then you find yourself thinking.

"These three rejections go a long way toward explaining the dark end of my comedy," the 52-year-old writer and father of two said during a telephone interview this week.

What all this leads up to is that Keillor is bringing his variety show to the Bushnell Memorial for a live radio performance Saturday. Connecticut Public Radio is hosting the show, which is produced by Minnesota Public Radio.

Each two-hour performance consists of music and comedy from Keillor's regular troupe, which is accompanied by a rich array of musical guests. The cornerstone is Keillor's trademark monologue, *The News from Lake Wobegon*.

(In a recent installment that considered the vagaries of gardening, the differences between German Catholics and Lutherans and the legacy one generation leaves for another, Keillor recalled how Mr. Holmberg had shot at his neighbor, Mr. Kloefkorn, when the latter was plowing. As Mr. Holmberg put it: "Over the past 40 years, he has been steadily getting on my nerves.")

Keillor has been in Hartford before, performing his radio show from the Mark Twain House in 1990.

"A minute before we went on the air, I decided I wanted to sing the opening theme song outdoors leaning against a tree," he said, speaking in the measured baritone that has soothed listen-

ers for 20 years.

"It was a remarkable feeling. I was there all by myself. The sun was going down. The last latenessers were arriving. They dashed right past me," Keillor said.

So why the return visit? From the times he has performed in New York City (besides stops by "A Prairie Home Companion," the city was home to Keillor's "The American Radio Company" from 1989 to 1993), Keillor remembers "busloads" of fans from Connecticut.

"And we believe in going to the customer," he said.

"A Prairie Home Companion," launched in 1974, is broadcast on 329 stations to an estimated 1.2 million people. This year, the program's 51-show schedule includes 34 live performances, 18 from its home in St. Paul, Minn., and 16 from the road.

Besides the regular entourage, the Bushnell show, the second this year in New England, will

feature violinist Chee-Yun, Boston blues guitarist Paul Rishell and Little Annie Raines, a fellow Bostonian who will join Rishell on the harmonica.

"It's our second chance to talk about New England,

which is a rich topic," Keillor said.

Hartford is the first of eight successive road dates that will take Keillor as far as San Diego. He doesn't mind the travel, but it's tough leaving home in the spring.

"We've just endured a long, bitter, brown, grim winter," he said. "A week ago, the temperature was over 70 for the first time. Things are growing up. I started my garden."

He said it's especially beautiful at his cabin near Grantsburg, Wis., just over the Minnesota border. He splits his time between that home and a New York apartment.

Keillor is the author of seven books, including his newest, "Cat, You Better Come Home" (Viking, \$15.99). Although it's written for children, it gives the adult reading it "a chance to put on a great performance."

Despite calling radio "a sideline" to his primary calling as a writer, Keillor dismissed a question about whether he saw any end in sight for his long-running radio show.

"Why would one think of ending it? I had a great time last Saturday," he says, before pausing. "I suppose if I hadn't, I wouldn't sound so cheerful."



A scene from a performance of "A Prairie Home Companion." Frederic Petters

"A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard locally each Saturday from 6 to 8 p.m. on Connecticut Public Radio (WNPR-FM, 89.1, or WPKT-FM, 90.5) and on WFCR-FM, 88.5. Tickets to the Bushnell show, sponsored by SNET FaxWorks and SNET Conference Calling, are sold out.