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Live from Muncie



ON THE RADIO: Garrison Keillor (far right) and the rest of the *A Prairie Home Companion* crew during a live performance. Below, Keillor delivers a monologue, perhaps one of his reports from Lake Wobegon. Photos provided

'A Prairie Home Companion' in America's Hometown

By MICHELLE KINSEY
The Star Press

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MUNCIE — John Hoyt called the 800 number on a whim.

"Heck, I just did it for the fun of it," he said. "It was kind of funny; you had to audition over the phone."

Hoyt held a tape recorder up to the receiver and pressed play. A little ditty Hoyt and the other members of the local band The Great Divide recorded — *Chittin' Cookin' Time In Cheatem County* — flowed from the speaker and traveled through the phone lines.

That was it. "Two minutes and our audition was over," Hoyt said. "I never thought we would make it in."

Until he got a call back.

The phone call was from a producer at the public radio show program *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Hoyt and The Great Divide — Ron Beach and Ric Dwenger — had been selected as one of six finalists in the show's "Talent From Towns Under 2,000" contest.

Hoyt, you see, lives in Selma. Population: 1,656.

The best part? The show will be broadcast live from Emens Auditorium. Garrison Keillor and his band of merry-makers will arrive in Muncie Saturday for a live broadcast of the third "T-TUTT" contest. Local public radio station Indiana Public Radio (WBST-FM 92.1) will carry the 6 p.m. show. It will be repeated next Sunday at noon.

The folks at *APHC* received "boxes and boxes" of entries. "I still can't believe it," Hoyt said. "I'm such a big fan of the show. And this will certainly be the biggest audience we've ever played in front of."

Aside from the soldout crowd of 3,600 at Emens, more than 2 million listeners to 380 stations will hear Hoyt and Great Divide pickin'

and grinnin'.

"They asked us what kind of music we played," Hoyt said. "And I said 'I don't know.' It's kind of a mix between bluegrass, folk, blues, jazz, rock and gospel. They just put us down as folk."

With Hoyt on banjo, Beach on guitar and Dwenger on bass, they play everything from "Bing [Crosby] to Sting." They've been doing it since 1978.

Their competition:

- **Patty Ediger**, a "whistler who farms near Dayton, Ore." Population: 1,705.

- **The Newark Balkan Chorus** from Newark, Vt., made up of seven girls ages 10 to 16, who attend Newark Public Schools. Population: 354.

- **Kirkmount**, a Scottish group from Woodland Hills, Utah, made up of the Bigney brothers: Alex, Sam and Simeon. Population: 301.

- **The Enter Family**, an all-accordion group from Giennellen, N.D. Population: 960.

- **Al Malone & His Melody Men Quartet** from Lebanon, Ala. Population: 150.

The audience will vote for the winner. "We didn't have a chance to stack the audience," Hoyt joked. "All the tickets were already gone."

Saturday will be a big day for Indiana Public Radio. According to Carol Trimmer of IPR, they have been trying for 6 years to get *A Prairie Home Companion* in Muncie. Keillor and Co. perform about 32 live shows from St. Paul a year and less than a dozen on the road.

"This is a huge event for us," she said. "It is an honor to host such a show."

For Hoyt, just being there will be enough. "I'm not even sure what we win," he said with a chuckle.

Actually the winner will be awarded the Silver Watertower trophy by last year's winner, Emily Shakleton.

"Wow, that's great," Hoyt said. "If we win, we'll probably be keeping that at Ron's house."