

# YELLOWSTONE COMPANION

■ Keillor delights audience with his radio show at Old Faithful.

By Alison Gregor

Wyoming residents embraced Garrison Keillor at Yellowstone National Park as though it had been their small town he left and not Lake Wobegon, Minnesota.

The popular radio personality and author broadcast his public radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion*, Saturday from the Old Faithful Lodge recreation hall in front of 400 dedicated fans from Wyoming and neighboring states.

Keillor and his Hopeful Gospel Quartet kept the audience enraptured with camp songs and live geyser reports while commemorating the 125th anniversary of Yellowstone, the world's oldest national park.

He kibbitzed with members of the Geyser Observation Study Association (GOSA), also known as "Geeks Out Stumbling Around," he said. They were stationed at six geysers with CB radio handsets.

Keillor, the "geyser geezer," was stationed by the radio receiver, and so was his national audience. "Giant is the immense geyser that goes off once a month, at least in recent times," he said. "David Schwartz is standing by Giant. Come in, David..."

There was the hiss of static. "I wonder if Giant has gone off," Keillor said to a roar from the crowd. "David Schwartz is from deep down within Giant."

Ralph, another geyser gazer, gave Keillor an enthusiastic report from Beehive, rendered completely inaudible by static.

"In response to that, Ralph, I would just like to say — ZZSFURZZISH ZOOFVZZSFURZZ." Keillor blasted into his mike with his hand over his mouth to the delight of his audience. "Ralph, I just wonder if you're holding that CB handset under your arm."

The wonder of a nationally broadcast Old Faithful eruption was drowned out somewhat by the collective din of thousands of visitors and their crinkling candy wrappers. But Yellowstone superintendent Michael Finley — an old friend of Keillor's who invited him to Yellowstone — was on hand to commemorate the solemnity of the occasion.

"Let us reflect on what we've got," he said. "We have a society that decided to set aside that which was rare, that which was new, that which reminds us of where we began as a people."

Former U.S. Sen. Pat Williams of Montana also spoke on behalf of the National Park Service. "It was a great idea, this notion that wondrous places can be set aside and belong to all people," he said. "It has been called by many America's best idea."



NEWS PHOTO / ALISON GREGOR

Garrison Keillor croons campfire songs during his *Prairie Home Companion* radio show broadcast from Yellowstone National Park.

Keillor gently poked fun at the taciturn, small-town, 'backy-spitting, Republican Wyomingites in a mock soap opera, *Lives of the Cowboys*. A gum-chewing waitress reflecting on a sharp-shooting spitter says, "Lemme tell you somethin' mister. If yer a Democrat in the state of Wyoming, you gotta learn to spit with accuracy — or else."

Keillor shoots back, "Yer one of them tax-and-spend Democrats... posing ridiculous regulations so a man can't even spit any more without filin' an *environmental impact statement*."

Keillor relived a childhood trip to Yellowstone, taken in 1955 with his misfit family. Recounting the beauty of the Morning Glory Pool, he used his uncanny ability to twist the poignant from his wry humor.

"We were fascinated by that color blue... and the steam rising from it," he said, "... to look at something so beautiful that you're struck dumb by it, so that everything else doesn't matter."

It was a moment that lasted 10 minutes, tops, he said. His visit this time provided two hours of inspired silliness, ending on an uplifting note.

"Yellowstone: it never seems crowded to me," Keillor shouted. "It always seems beautiful, just as it was when I saw it when I was 13."