

JIM LOVE FEB. 6, 1986

GARRISON KEILLOR AND A "PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION

With the exception of our most junior members, most of us here can remember the heyday of network radio, which demanded our undivided attention lest we miss a clue on one of the mystery programs, the correct answer on "20 QUESTIONS" or "THE QUIZ KIDS", or a punch line on one of the many comedy programs which fell into the general categories of variety, such as "THE EDGAR BERGEN AND CHARLIE McCarthy SHOW"; or serial programs, like "THE GREAT GILDERSLEEVE", "AMOS AND ANDY", and "LUM 'N ABNER", two rustic gents who held forth at the Jot 'em Down Store in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Compare that with the current offerings of network television, with a lineup including "jiggle shows", cop shows, and programs of dubious comedic value, with a laugh track which is there to suggest that something humororous has just transpired, such as when a moon-faced minority dwarf mugs for the camera and delivers such unforgettable lines as "WHATCHUTALKINABOUT, WILLIS "

Such feeble attempts at programming have driven many of us to alternatives, such as public television, with a natural progression being to dial up National Public Radio where two native Kentuckians, Bob Edwards of Louisville, and Noah Adams of Bardstown, host the network's two most popular programs, "MORNING EDITION" and "ALL THINGS CONSIDERED".

As well received as those two programs are, the most popular program on all of public radio is "A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION", a "live" two hour broadcast originated by Minnesota Public Radio and syndicated through the American Public Radio Network, which has subscribers in this area, including WKMS-FM, Murray at 91.3, and WKYU-FM, Bowling Green at 88.9.

The program, which airs at 5 Saturday evening in this time zone, is the brain child of Garrison Keillor, who hosts the variety offering, which began in 1974; and until recently, he produced the entire two hours, right down to scripting each of the bogus commercials for such enterprises as RAW BITS, the by-invitation-only cereal; the Hotel Minnesota, where after a few hours you feel as if you've lived there all your life; Yards by Barbara, offering ready-made designer yards and gardens direct from the factory to you; and A Treasury of Themes from Television Reruns.

Other regular advertisers are from the mythical town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, "the little town that time forgot and the decades could not improve upon". These include Bob's Bank, "Save at the Sign of the Sock"; Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, where if you can't find it, chances are, you didn't need it."; and the Sidetrack Tap, where the clock is always a half-hour slow, the pinball machine never tilts, and love never dies."

Lake Wobegon, by all accounts, bears a strong resemblance to Anoka, a central Minnesota town of about 15,000 where Garrison Keillor was raised by a family affiliated with a strict fundamentalist branch of the Bretheran Church.

He wasn't always Garrison. It was Gary Keillor until the sixth grade when he submitted some poetry to the school newspaper, observing much later that Garrison sounded a little stiffer and a little bigger, like he was trying to hide behind a name.

Keillor worked at the campus radio station while attending the University of Minnesota, and upon graduation stayed in radio while branching into writing, with those two occupations being his livelihood since.

He became a regular contributor to the New Yorker and Atlantic magazines, and has authored Happy To Be Here, a collection of those articles; and the best-selling Lake Wobegon Days, a series of stories relating to the centerpiece of "A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION", a monologue about the goings-on in the mythical town, where "all the men are strong, all the women are good looking, and all the children are above average".

Interviewed by The Mother Earth News Magazine, Keillor said radio was important to him while he was young, particularly those programs which brought his family together. He said he believes that if you sit in a room with people and listen to something, you feel closer to them than if you sit and look at television. He says television isolates people even when they're sitting cheek-by-jowl, and adds that listening to radio is a communal experience.

Though I can't guarantee any such experience, I have prepared a tape to give those of you unfamiliar with "A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION" a taste of the program, while bringing back a few memories for those of us who may have heard these particular bits before.

JIM LOVE
2/6/86

"A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION"

TAPE...PROGRAM OPENING...70
ENDS: HELLO AND GOOD EVENING

AN ESTIMATED TWO MILLION LISTENERS TURN TO THEIR RADIO SETS EACH SATURDAY EVENING TO HEAR THE RADIO PRODUCTION WHICH ORIGINATES IN THE WORLD THEATER IN DOWNTOWN SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA, WITH OCCASIONAL LIVE REMOTE BROADCASTS FROM CHICAGO, LOS ANGELES, NEW YORK AND POINTS BETWEEN.

AFTER AN INTRODUCTION OF HIS GUESTS FOR THE EVENING, HOST GARRISON KEILLOR MAY JOIN IN A SONG OR MAKE A PITCH ON BEHALF OF ONE OF NUMEROUS BOGUS SPONSORS, SUCH AS BERTHA'S KITTY BOTIQUE, WHICH HAS SITES THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY.

TAPE...BERTHA'S...30
ENDS: WHO DO.

OR THERE'S THE MORE PROVINCIAL EMPORIUM--RALPH'S PRETTY GOOD GROCERY, WITH ONLY ONE OUTLET.

TAPE...RALPH'S JINGLE...60
ENDS: THANK YOU, BOYS.

OTHER SPONSORS ALSO OFFER PRACTICAL SERVICES.

TAPE...HOME DEFENSE HARDWARE...60
ENDS:...DO THE JOB.

BUT KEILLOR'S AT HIS BEST WHEN HE DELIVERS HIS MONOLOGUES, GENERALLY TWO PER PROGRAM, WITH ONE ON BEHALF OF WHAT IS NOW A RATHER FAMOUS MEAL TIME TREAT, WITH APOLOGIES TO MR. FRANK YOST.

TAPE...POWDERMILK BISCUITS...50
ENDS: SHORT ANSWERS.

IN THIS PARTICULAR MONOLOGUE, KEILLOR REFERS TO THE DAYDREAMS OF THE HABITUALLY SHY.

TAPE...POWDERMILK FANTASY...40

ENDS: NOT BAD.

HE ALSO DETAILS ANOTHER PROBLEM ENCOUNTERED BY THE CHRONICALLY SHY.

TAPE...SHY-MISPRONOUNCIATION...1:35

ENDS: CAN YOU GET.

HOWEVER, HE HAS IMPROVED WHEN DESCRIBING THE PRODUCT, WHICH HE INVARIABLY RETURNS TO, AND DESCRIBES AS "EXPEDITIOUS", AS HE WRAPS UP HIS PITCH FOR POWDERMILK BISCUITS WITH A JINGLE.

TAPE...EXPEDITIOUS-ENDING...60

ENDS: JINGLE OUT.

BUT THE REAL HIGHLIGHT OF THE "PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION" IS THE NEWS FROM LAKE WOBEGON, A WONDERFUL, RAMBLING MONOLOGUE WHICH KEILLOR DOES WITHOUT NOTES, TRACING THE HAPPENINGS IN HIS HOME TOWN, WHICH DOES NOT APPEAR ON ANY OFFICIAL MAP OF MINNESOTA BECAUSE THE STATE WAS SURVEYED IN QUADRANTS FROM EACH CORNER, RESULTING IN SOME OVERLAP WHICH OMITTED MIST COUNTY, THE HOME OF LAKE WOBEGON.

THE AUDIENCE SETTLES IN FOR AN ENTERTAINING FIFTEEN TO TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES WHEN THEY HEAR THE TRADITIONAL OPENING.

TAPE...LAKE WOBEGON NEWS INTRO...65

ENDS: HAVE THE HEART.

KEILLOR'S TALES OF SMALL TOWN MINNESOTA CANNOT BE PIGEON-HOLED. THEY RANGE FROM COMMENTARIES ON THE STATE OF PREPARATION FOR THE ANNUAL "TOAST AND JELLY DAYS" TO COMMENTS ON THE VARIOUS

CIVIC INSTITUTIONS, SUCH AS THE HERALD-STAR NEWSPAPER, PUBLISHED BY HAROLD STAR, WHICH HAS THE FUALTS OF MANY SUCH SMALL TOWN PAPERS--WITNESS THIS ACTUAL ACCOUNT OF A SCHOOL BOARD MEETING COMPARED WITH THE ACCOUNT IN THE PAPER.

TAPE...HERALD-STAR...45

ENDS: ALSO.

THE POPULATION OF LAKE WOEBOGON IS DIVIDED AMONG LUTHERANS AND CATHOLICS, WITH THE LATTER GROUP WORSHIPPING AT OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL RESPONSIBILITY CHURCH, WHERE FATHER EMIL IS PASTOR, EXCEPT WHEN HE GOES ON VACATION, AND THE RATHER MODERN FATHER FRANK FILLS IN.

TAPE...FATHER EMIL...40

ENDS: THIS IS GREAT.

POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS ARE OFTEN DIVIDED ALONG RELIGIOUS LINES, AND POLITICS ARE TAKEN AS SERIOUSLY IN LAKE WOEBOGON AS THEY ARE AROUND HERE, WITH DOROTHY POSTING A SIGN IN THE CHATTER-BOX CAFE, "NOT POLITICS", WHICH PROMPTED AN EXODUS TO THE SIDE-TRACK TAP, WHERE OVERINDULGENCE LED TO THIS ALTERCATION WHICH WALLY THE BARTENDER HAD TO BREAK UP.

TAPE...ALTERCATION...45

ENDS: LEANING ON EACH OTHER.

FROM THAT REFERENCE, KEILLOR WENT ON TO THIS WONDROUSLY DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF A HUBERT HUMPHREY SPEECH GIVEN IN THE PRE-TV DAYS IN HIS FIRST TERM AS A U. S. SENATOR FROM MINNESOTA.

TAPE...DESCRIPTION...55

ENDS: AND FEASTED ON IT.

LIKE ALL GOOD STORY TELLERS, KEILLOR HAS A THEME, BUT IS NOT AFRAID TO WANDER FROM IT, IF AN EVEN BETTER STORY COMES TO MIND.

THE FOLLOWING MONOLOGUE BEGAN WITH A PHONE CALL TO CATCH UP ON THE NEWS, WITH THE OPERATOR INTERRUPTING AFTER ABOUT TWENTY RINGS, AND THEN TAKING EXCEPTION WITH KEILLOR FOR HIS RELIGIOUS REFERENCES DURING A PREVIOUS MONOLOGUE.

HE JOLLIED HER BY REMINDING HER THAT SHE HAD TOLD "BIBLE JOKES" IN HER CHILDHOOD.

TAPE...OPERATOR...34

ENDS: YOU FOR THAT.

FROM THERE, HE WOVE THE THREAD OF A STORY INCLUDING SUCH DIVERSE THEMES AS CLOWNING DURING TROOP MEETINGS AS A BOY SCOUT, HIGH SCHOOL SONGS, LECTURES OF THE LAKE WOEBOGON THANATOPSIS SOCIETY, AND THE CATHOLIC HOSPITAL THIRTY-FIVE MILES FROM LAKE WOEBOGON WHERE KEILLOR'S GRANDMOTHER WAS TAKEN FOLLOWING WHAT PROVED TO BE A FATAL STROKE.

TAPE...GRANDMA'S ATTACK...40

ENDS: OF LOVE.

BUT KEILLOR SAID HIS FEELING CHANGED AS THE DEATH VIGIL WENT ON.

TAPE...SCENE AT HOSPITAL...3:00

ENDS: APPLAUSE.

AND THAT'S MY PRESENTATION FOR THE ATHENAEUM SOCEITY OF HOPKINSVILLE, KENTUCKY. THANK YOU.