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Courier-Journal columnist

## On Lake Wobegon, life is a fantasy

The place is Lake Wobegon, in the heart of Mist County. Miss Travel brochures would call it a sleepy little town of 500, but that's really not the case.

It's the home of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery (if you can't find it at Ralph's, chances are you can get along without it). The Chatterbox Cafe and Sledtrack Top, Bob's Bank (its motto: Neither a borrower nor a lender be), Jack's Auto Repair and Jack's School of Thought (which teaches intellectuals how to bow!) and, most importantly, the Powdermilk Biscuit Co. ("Heaven's they're tasty... and so expeditious.")

In other words, from one corner of town to the other — from Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church to the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian — Lake Wobegon is, well, if not jumpin', then at least moseyin' along just fine.

The town has become known from coast to coast, and there are said to be scores of tourists who get lost in the wilds of Minnesota each summer just trying to find the place.

They needn't look any further than their radios, because it's there that Lake Wobegon actually exists.

There and in the head of its creator, Garrison Keillor.

Keillor is the host of a public radio show called "Prairie Home Companion," and for two hours every Saturday he sends his laid-back, off-the-top-of-the-head humor to all parts of the country — even the big cities.

Lake Wobegon is the show's given, its point of origin. The imagination is left to define the rest.

"Prairie Home Companion" is heard on 151 stations now after being on the air nationally for just a year and a half. It's broadcast live each Saturday from an old, formerly run-down theater in St. Paul.

The show attracts a full-house crowd of about 800 for each show, and thousands more listen regularly each weekend.

The fans are devoted; ask a "Prairie Home" regular about Lake Wobegon and he'll know the town like the back of his hand.

Keillor is the show's backbone. He's the guy who visited Nashville's Grand Ole Opry a few years ago and decided that doing a live radio show was the thing for him.

As you might suspect from a person raised in a small Minnesota town, his style is relaxed. His comedy mentions include Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Fibber McGee and Molly. Give him good words, good images, and lots of memories from those golden days of radio, and he'll produce a program that gives you the same thing.

And that's what he's done with "Prairie Home Companion." He writes some ideas for the show a couple of days a week, then leaves those ideas at home when he goes to the studio on Saturday.

"I seem to remember the best of them and forget the rest," he said. "And as the show goes along, I think of some other things that sort of help out."

You get the feeling after talking with Keillor that he doesn't really give a rat's tail whether or not you care for his show. He likes it and he knows it's good. So there.

You can take Lake Wobegon, Powdermilk Biscuits and the rest of it however you like. He's happy; he hopes it makes you smile. But if it doesn't, then turn the radio dial. Or, heaven forbid, watch television.

Keillor is, above all else, a writer; his works have appeared in "Atlantic" and "The New Yorker." And when you talk with him on the telephone, he's quick to tell you that the success of his radio show isn't all that significant.

"I don't own a house," he said. "And I'm beginning to think that

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maybe I should. But I'll never make enough off this show to own a house. And the writing is the important thing."

Popularity? Oh, he's proud of it. "But if I ever get to the point where I'm talking about the show more than I'm working on it, then something will be wrong," he said.

What about television? Has that been proposed?

Of course, he answers. And, though many of his radio-oriented fans may take offense, he isn't all that opposed to the idea.

"NBC came in here to do a thing on us for their magazine show," he said, "and they were as intrusive as possible. They stuck a camera in every available face and I didn't mind it as much as I thought I would."

Keillor is, therefore, willing to do a "Prairie Home Companion" for television, provided that it's a one-shot thing, and provided that he thinks it would be fun.

"If it stops being fun, I won't do it," he said.

And despite the notoriety, despite the stories in the major newspapers across the country, "Prairie Home Companion" continues to be fun.

"We're still using the same studio; still doing the same thing," Keillor said. "And when I walk down the street, people don't recognize me or anything like that. We're still doing what we want, and when we can't then we'll change."

In the meantime, Keillor and the "Prairie Home Companion" show will keep doing what they do best. They'll give you a taste of small-town life, a little satire, some folk music, even music from Scandinavia, and of course, commercials and promotional announcements for the town and businesses of Lake Wobegon.

You can hear the show every Saturday on WFPL-FM at 6 p.m.

You ought to listen.