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AUTHOR Fine, Marlene G.
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ABSTRACT

The mythical community of Lake Wobegon, created by Garrison Keillor and presented each week through the public radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," is the place to which everyone wants to return. A town devoid of newfangled technology, where life goes on pretty much as it always has, Lake Wobegon offers respite to listeners who daily face the complexity of modern life. The fictional citizens of Lake Wobegon do not pursue personal life styles; they are not concerned with personal needs so much as community survival. Change is something longtime residents do not welcome, and modern technology and values are objects of ridicule. The tension between parents and children provides the substance of many Keillor monologues and stories, becoming, in many instances, a metaphor for the tension between Lake Wobegon and the outside world. The only way to escape is to leave home--in effect, to leave behind the values of the town--an amusing, nostalgic theme with enormous cross-generational appeal for listeners, many of whom are displaced Midwesterners. Through the radio show, listeners are able to return in humor to the life they left behind. The charm of "A Prairie Home Companion" lies in its author's ability to portray the myth of Lake Wobegon in such a way as to uncover the touching paradoxes of life, which enables listeners to keep their lives in perspective. It is concluded that Keillor's monologues draw on both myth and reality. (NKA)

THE SELLING OF A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION: RECASTING REALITY AND MARKETING A MYTH? OR, RECASTING A MYTH AND MARKETING REALITY?

Marlene G. Fine
College of Management
University of Massachusetts at Boston
Boston, Massachusetts 02125-3393

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THE SELLING OF A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION: RECASTING REALITY AND MARKETING A MYTH?, OR, RECASTING A MYTH AND MARKETING REALITY?

The double questions posed in the title to this paper are not meant to be merely playful phrases that follow the requisite colon in conference paper titles. They are, rather, meant to reflect the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the success of Garrison Keillor's A Prairie Home Companion. Set in mythical Lake Wobegon, a small town in the Minnesota prairie, the show features an odd assortment of entertainers--some of them regulars and some of them visitors, some of them real and some of them imaginary--all of whom are held together by host and storyteller, Garrison Keillor.

Keillor came up with the concept for A Prairie Home Companion after he spent some time in Nashville doing a New Yorker article on the Grand Ole Opry (Sutin, 1986). Although the music frequently reminds listeners of the show's country western origins and Keillor's monologues seemingly glorify the same small town values we associate with country western music, the resemblance ends there. The first A Prairie Home Companion show was broadcast on July 6, 1974 to a solely Minnesota audience (Sutin, 1986). By 1980, 30 National Public Radio stations carried the show (Sutin, 1986). Today, 270 NPR stations broadcast it to every available market in the United States. Only 30 NPR stations do not carry the show, and they do not because Federal law prohibits more than one station per market from broadcasting the same show (Circle, 1986). In just over a decade and with only word of mouth advertising, A Prairie Home Companion has become the most revenue generating program on public radio (Circle, 1986).

The popularity of the radio show has spawned numerous related products. Listeners can call a toll free number and receive a copy of the Prairie Home Companion Catalogue, through which they can order a variety of Lake Wobegon memorabilia. Begun as a small mail order operation in which orders were filled by hand, the

Catalogue now generates sufficient business to justify a fully computerized system worthy of discussion and emulation by large businesses looking for [illegible] computer software systems (Starr, 1986). When Keillor's book, Lake Wobegon [illegible] was published by Viking in 1985, it became an immediate best seller, topping the N[illegible]ork Times hardcover book charts for many weeks, and then continuing its popularity [illegible] Penguin paperback version. A 1981 Atheneum publication, Happy to be Here, a compilation of Keillor short stories, was reprinted by Penguin in 1983 with five new stories, and then reprinted again in 1984, reprinted three times in 1985, and once again in 1986. Fans can buy audio tapes of favorite Keillor monologues; T-shirts that advertise Powdermilk Biscuits; or maps of the United States that feature New York, California, and Lake Wobegon. And on July 4th this year, viewers of the Disney Channel celebrated Independence Day in Lake Wobegon, participating in the hometown celebration with Keillor and his friends.

Wnat makes A Prairie Home Companion so interesting, however, is not its success per se, but, rather, the extent of its success throughout the population. The radio show is an advertiser's dream; "regulars comprise an ad executive's heaven: young and old, male and female, urban and rural, yuppie and counterculture—not to mention the legion of 'shy' people of all persuaions for whom Keillor is an inspiration to come out of their shells" (Sutin, 1986, p. 44). When I called Minnesota Public Radio to ask for copies of any demographic studies of the show's audience, a member of the promotion department told me that no such studies had ever been done. The show was so popular throughout the country that the staff felt no need to know more about the audience (Circle, 1986). She told me that there is no typical A Prairie Home Companion listener; fans include small town folks from rural West Virginia and sophisticated urbanites like Bill Moyers. When Keillor took the show on the road, the box offices in New York, San Francisco, Boston, and Laramie, Wyoming were sold out in less than two hours.

How can we account for the cult-like popularity of a public radio show that features down-home country music, homely monologues by a laid-back storyteller, corny skits about Bertha's Kitty Boutique and Powdermilk Biscuits, and long lists of greetings from one listener to another? In particular, how can we account for its popularity among supposedly sophisticated urbanites, those cynical Yuppies who either left behind or never knew the homely virtues of small town life?

At first glance, the answer seems apparent. Lake Wobegon represents our collective history as Americans. Lake Wobegon is an abstraction: a mythical community discovered by European explorers; settled by Unitarians from Boston who named their new home, New Albion; later populated by the Norwegian Lutherans and German Catholics, whose descendants are still living there in the little town that time forgot. Early in Lake Wobegon Days Keillor asks, 'What's special about this town, it's pretty much like a lot of towns, isn't it?" (p. 114). In fact, it is precisely because it is like a lot of towns that Lake Wobegon is special.

It is the very ordinariness of Lake Wobegon that makes it seem extraordinary. Representing the simple, enduring virtues of a byegone time—Magnus Oleson, the first Norwegian bachelor farmer in Lake Wobegon sums up the townspeople's philosophy in the following advice, "buck up, be strong, believe in God, and be about your business" (Lake Wobegon Days, p. 96)—Lake Wobegon is the place to which we all want to return. Devoid of the new fangled technology and other inventions of modern life, Lake Wobegon offers respite to those listeners who daily face the complexity of modern American life.

Life goes on in Lake Wobegon pretty much as it always has. When Father Emil, the town's Catholic priest decides to retire after 44 years, he stays in town to help acclimate his replacement, Father Wilmer. Father Wilmer soon announces that he has accumulated 37 vacation days, which he plans to use immediately. Father Emil says, "I

never heard of any such thing in my life. Vacation time? Cumulated vacation time? I never heard of it." Father Wilmer responds that the bishop put through the vacation policy at the same time that the priests got IRAs. Father Emil is appalled:

> What will happen next? They'll have some kind of frequent prayer program in the church. Give away prizes, free trips for 5000 Hail Marys. What will they do next? Put in odometers on the rosaries. Give away cookware, or what are they gonna do? (PHC, May 31, 1986)

Father Emil, of course, has never taken a vacation. How does one take a vacation from the Church? And why should one receive rewards, at least in the material sense, for prayer? In the value system of Lake Wobegon, people work hard because they are supposed to work hard, they pray because they are supposed to pray.

Father Wilmer represents change in Lake Wobegon, something that its long time residents do not welcome. Keillor best sums up the Lake Wobegon philosophy of change when he shares his boyhood memories of Christmas. After describing the Lutheran minister's sermon and the various presents he gave to family and friends, Keillor concludes:

> The Herald Star still prints the photo of Main Street at night, snowy, the decorations lit, and underneath, the caption "O little town of Wobegon, how still we see thee lie"—the same photo I saw in the paper when I was a boy. That's Carl's old Chevy in front of Skoglund's, the one he traded in on the Chevy before the Chevy he's got now. He's sorry he traded it in because the new one is nothing but heartache. The one in the photo ran like a dream. (Lake Wobegon Days, p. 283)

The philosophy that change brings nothing but heartache is hilariously presented in Keillor's description of his parents refusal to install air conditioning. "Air-conditioning is for the weak and indolent" (p. 164); like dishwashers, automatic transmissions, frozen dinners, and liberal theologians, A/C represents change, the kind of change that "brought down the Roman Empire. . . . You get A/C and the next day Mom leaves the house in a skin-tight dress, holding a cigarette and a glass of gin, walking an ocelot on a leash" (p. 164).

To Keillor, modern technology and values are the object of ridicule. He simultaneously satirizes soap operas, modern management techniques, and comtemporary romance with excerpts from "One Minute Romance." He advertises the home haircut helmet, "the hair-care machine with the 3-horsepower Briggs and Stretton engine," and Phone Washer, "the power scrubber for people who eat while they talk on the phone" (PHC, June 28, 1986). He has Vern Sutton sing a contemporary version of "O Promise Me" that he does for garden weddings where the couple writes their own vows and signs a prenuptial agreement." The words are as follows:

> Promise me that some day me and you
> Will own a house where everything is new.
> With white walls and track lighting overhead
> And gray carpets and a king size waterbed.
> A lot of fabric walls and natural pine
> And one big rack of bottles of white wine.
> A tray to serve the crackers and the brie
> Promise me, oh promise me.
> Oh promise me that you will take my hand
> And we'll communicate and understand
> And be there for each other all the while
> We pursue our personal life style.
> And try to satisfy each other's needs
> A dance we'll do but never know who leads
> If these are things on which we both agree
> O promise me, O promise me.

The citizens of Lake Wobegon don't pursue personal life styles; they are not concerned with personal needs so much as community survival; in male/female relationships, they always know who leads; and they never have to ask if someone else agrees because there is only one point of view.

But it is only at first glance that A Prairie Home Companion offers us a vision with such clear distinctions between good and evil, with such comforting assurances that life endures, at least in Lake Wobegon, unencumbered by modern mores. A closer look reveals a darker side to Keillor's vision. Perhaps our first recognition that all is not as it seems in Lake Wobegon is found in Keillor's standard ending to his weekly

monologue--"That's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." Keillor's humorous role reversals for men and women introduce contemporary ideas that seem slightly askew in Lake Wobegon. For it is there that we expect men to be strong and women to be good looking, and if we cannot count on those truths in Lake Wobegon, then what in life can we count on? Keillor's humor also is sometimes tinged with cynicism. In a show that featured a celebration of marriage, Keillor introduced a wedding song with this stinging barb: "May and June are traditional months for weddings--to allow as much warm weather as possible before the first freeze and reality strikes" (PHC, May 31, 1986).

The advertisements that display much of the show's humor are not limited to satirical representations of life beyond the prairie. Minnesota Language Systems, "the simple cassette tapes and study guide to help you learn to speak Minnesotan," provide "linguistic security for Minnesota's visitors." Explaining that "complaining is the big mistake in Minnesota," Keillor recounts the following dialogue between a Minnesota psychiatrist and a Minnesota patient:

> Are you busy doc? It's no big deal. I could come back.
> No problem, Wally. How's it going?
> Oh, not too bad. It could be worse. I can't complain, really.
> Good deal, Wally. Hey, anything you want to bring up?
> I'd rather not talk about it. It's kind of personal.
> (PHC, May 31, 1986)

The premise that Minnesotans don't talk about their personal problems, even to their psychiatrists, provides the humor for the dialogue. But beneath the humor lies the reality of a community that requires stoicism of its members, even under the most adverse conditions.

The most stinging indictment of the small town values exemplified by the Lake Wobegon residents appears in Lake Wobegon Days in the form of a manifesto written by

a former Wobegonian, who left home, married a woman from Boston, and returned to Lake Wobegon, leaving his manuscript with the publisher of the Lake Wobegon Herald-Star. Titled 95 Theses 95, the manifesto lists in almost excruciating detail the many sins visited upon the young man by his parents. Their crimes range from feeding him "wretched food, vegetables boiled to extinction, fistfuls of white sugar, slabs of fat, mucousy casseroles made with globs of cream of mushroom" (p.314), to teaching him "the fear of becoming lost, which has killed the pleasure of curiosity and discovery" (p.315), to providing him with poor role models, "including the Sons of Knute, the Boosters Club and others whose petulance, inertia, and ineptitude are legendary" (p. 318). The manifesto, reprinted almost in its entirety, paints a picture of hypocrisy, bigotry, blind obedience, and guilt, a picture clearly at odds with the simple, enduring values I described earlier.

The tension between parents and children provides the substance of many Keillor monologues and stories, becoming, in many instances, a metaphor for the tension between Lake Wobegon and the outside world. Keillor's characters often have parents who, for some reason or another, drive them crazy. Darrell Tolerude's father "has a flaw in his character that has made Darrell angry most of his life. And it is just this: His father does not like to ever agree to do something in advance and sign on to a plan and say, 'Next Thursday, we'll do that. I'll be there, and I'll do it'" (PHC, June 28, 1986). Mildred's mother, Nyla, "was constantly looking for a chance to see disapproval and lack of appreciation. And made life impossible for her daughter" (PHC, July 12, 1986). When Dale Eeker graduated from high school, he asked his father what kind of salary his father would pay him now for working on the family farm. His father's response was to leave the table and refuse to talk to him (PHC, June 21, 1986).

For many Lake Wobegon children the only way to escape their parents is to leave home. Mildred leaves for Alaska to begin a new life and Dale joins the Navy, heading

out of town in his new blue Pontiac, "heading into his future, looking for it whenever it cared to show itself" (PHC, June 21, 1986).

Leaving home is more than just leaving parents. For Keillor's characters, leaving home represents leaving behind the values of Lake Wobegon, leaving behind their old identities and creating new ones. Early in Lake Wobegon Days Keillor describes his own experience when he left home to attend the University of Minnesota. His dog, Buster, had died and he missed him terribly.

> I needed Buster to be true to and thus be true by implication to much more, to the very principle of loyalty itself, which I was losing rapidly in Minneapolis. Once I saw Ronald Eichen in Gray's Drug near Campus, my old classmate who twice lent me his '48 Ford now sweeping Gray's floor, and because our friendship no longer fit into my plans, I ducked down behind the paperbacks and snuck out. I was redesigning myself and didn't care to be the person he knew. (pp. 23-24)

The child's attempt to assert his/her separate identity inevitably leads to the loss of childhood values, at least for a brief time.

The theme of leaving home has enormous appeal across generations--to parents whose children have left home and to children who have left or comtemplated leaving home. And for those of us whose leaving meant "redesigning" ourselves, Keillor strikes a familiar chord. Allison Circle, who works for Minnesota Public Radio, says that many listeners are displaced midwesterners who now live in New York, Atlanta, or Los Angeles and who miss the midwestern values they left behind. Keillor's characters, too, miss the values they left behind. In fact, they, like each of us, retain strong ties to their birthplace, returning home for holiday dinners and vacation visits.

Keillor's stories do not end when the young folks leave town. He brings us full circle, back from their future and into a shared past. He affirms that you can, indeed, come home again. At the end of Lake Wobegon Days, a man braves a driving blizzard just to go to town to buy a carton of cigarettes. Returning home he is forced to leave his car a short distance from the house and he realizes that he has left the carton of

cigarettes in town. In a moment of personal insight, he concludes: "Town was a long way to go in a blizzard for the pleasure of coming back home. . . . But what a lucky man. Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known" (p. 420). And much earlier in the book, Keillor remembers a sonnet he memorized at age 16 in "a classroom that smelled of Wildroot hair oil and Nesbitt's orange pop on my breath":

> This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
> To love that well which thou must leave ere long. (p. 29)

The paradox of life in Lake Wobegon is the paradox of life itself. The tension between parents and children, old and new, liberal and conservative, sophistication and naivete is the tension of life itself. We leave home seeking other worlds and other things, only to discover that what we left is what we seek. Yet the discovery in no way eradicates or even minimizes those things which caused us to leave in the first place. Life is imperfect, even in Lake Wobegon. The appeal of A Prairie Home Companion lies in Keillor's ability to uncover the paradoxical nature of life, helping us to keep our lives in perspective and allowing us to laugh at ourselves and our foibles.

On the book jacket of Lake Wobegon Days Studs Terkel says, "This is a wonder book of fact, fancy, and something in between." And so it is. Does Garrison Keillor recast reality and market a myth? or does he recast a myth and market reality? I think he does a little of both and sells us a vision rooted in the intersection of fact and fiction, a vision called life.

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