

Gov. Ventura becoming 'Prairie Home's' constant companion

By Stephanie Simon,
Los Angeles Times

ST. PAUL, Minn. — He likes to portray himself as meek and mushy, so bland, as he puts it, that he makes linoleum look like great art. But these days, Garrison Keillor has an edge to him.

He's taking on Gov. Jesse Ventura. And his radio variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion," normally such a mellow mix, bristles now with insults directed the Minnesota governor's way: "You have the IQ of a salad bar." "If you were any dumber, we'd have to water you." "You couldn't pour water out of a boot if the instructions were written on the heel."

This is more than just a personal tiff. This is a culture clash. Keillor is a Minnesota icon. An aloof, inward man, he somehow compels 2.6 million listeners to tarry in the on-air block party he creates every Saturday night, to listen to his stories and dance to his music and to feel as though they know him and he knows them, as though they might all one day meet to swap jokes over a backyard grill. "A Prairie Home Companion" is celebrating its 25th anniversary this season, and it attracts more fans than ever.

So when Keillor starts slamming the governor, folks around here listen. And of course, this isn't just any governor. This is Jesse "The Body"

Ventura, the gun-packing, blunt-talking, bald and brawny head of state, the former boa-draped wrestler, the ex-Navy SEAL. The only governor who's not only a tourist attraction but also the inspiration for his own line of action figures. And a Minnesota icon in his own right.

Ventura makes a just-about-irresistible target for a humorist. And Keillor has succumbed to temptation with gusto, touching off a very public spat with the governor that has set Minnesotans buzzing and added a caustic new twist to the gentle humor of "A Prairie Home Companion." "I'm all in favor of a good feud," Keillor says.

Good thing, because he's in the middle of a doozy. It started when Keillor described the new governor in Time magazine as a "great big honking bullet-headed shovel-faced 'mutha' who talks in a steroid growl." Next, Keillor whipped out, in three weeks, a satirical novel about a wrestler turned governor: "Me, by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente."

Ventura promptly accused Keillor of "cheating" him by rushing the book to print before his own ghost-written autobiography, "I Ain't Got Time to Bleed: Reworking the Body Politic From the Bottom Up."

Next move, Ventura: The Gov announced plans to kill state funding for Minnesota Public Radio, which produces "Prairie Home Companion."

He denies he was out for revenge. Previously, however, he had responded to Keillor's snipes with this credo: "I don't get mad, I get even."

Whatever his motive, Ventura argued that Minnesota Public Radio does not need state funds, which pay for transmitters in rural areas. He accused unnamed public radio fat cats of getting rich while accepting taxpayer subsidies. Then he joked that he would like a peek at Keillor's income tax returns.

Instead, he has received a weekly on-air wallop. "We have a lot to fight about," explains Keillor, a tall, geeky-looking type with glasses sliding down his nose and hair ever flopping on his forehead. The antipathy, he adds, runs deep: "The governor owns Jet Skis and loves to get on them on a quiet Sunday afternoon and ride the hell out of them. I'm the person sitting on the porch of a cabin on shore, quietly wishing the person making that infernal buzzing noise would hit a dock and break a leg."

Ventura's tell-it-like-it-should-be style makes him an easy subject for parody. The governor has said, for example, that college athletes should be exempt from taking classes so they can concentrate on their games; that drunken Irishmen must have laid out St. Paul's crooked streets; that if American Indians are allowed to spear fish according to their traditions, he

should be able to catch his dinner by tossing bombs in a lake. Navy SEAL style.

But Keillor so far has refrained from picking apart the governor's pronouncements. Instead, he delights in sending up Ventura's populist image, depicting him as a thick-headed egomaniac in love with power but fed up with the burden of running a state.

In one recent skit, Keillor had the governor saying he preferred Hollywood to St. Paul because he could dress in Day-Glo bikini briefs and a feather headdress without the media getting on his case. "People really appreciate me there," he had the governor say. "They don't come up to me and bitch about the schools and stuff."

The insults Keillor reels off with such zest mark a departure for "Prairie Home Companion." He usually fills his two hours of air time with a homespun blend of folksy music and clean-cut skits, such as his "Guy Noir" parody of detective novels. In his sleepy, halting voice, a voice that seems to get where it's going almost by luck, Keillor introduces the tunes and reads hilariously serious mock advertisements for "sponsors" such as the Ketchup Advisory Board, the American Duct Tape Council and Bebobareebop Rhubarb Pie. Each week, he also runs through the news

from Lake Wobegon, the hometown he invented for himself and for all who long to return to, or are glad to have escaped from, small-town America.

That format has proved enduringly popular. "Prairie Home Companion's" audience has doubled in the last eight years, and it's now broadcast live on 467 stations. Although the average listener is at least 35 years old and college educated, the program attracts all types. Ten-year-olds ask Keillor for autographs. Gen-Xers and retirees alike line up at 6:30 a.m. to secure tickets to live broadcasts. Listeners tune in from Tasmania on the Internet. And the show's top markets are not in the rural Minnesota of Lake Wobegon but in San Francisco, Washington, New York, Boston and Seattle.

Even the slams against Ventura, so seemingly parochial, play well to a broader audience. It doesn't hurt that actor Tim Russell does a wicked impersonation of the governor's distinct Minnesota accent, flattening his vowels so taut they all but bounce.

It's unclear whether Ventura is among Keillor's audience. He did tell an interviewer that Keillor "makes Minnesota proud." But he hasn't commented on "Prairie Home Companion" since Keillor started spoofing him in earnest. He doesn't have to. While the show is a hit by

radio standards, it attracts less than half the audience of, say, a typical televised wrestling match. It hasn't made a dent in Ventura's 72 percent approval rating.

Perched on a stool at the edge of the stage, his tuxedo pants hiked up to reveal red socks, his eyes closed as he conjures the words, Keillor spins tales of family spats and neighborly one-upmanship, of homecoming dances and stinky manure, of can't-fail business schemes that everyone knows are doomed.

In addition to the Wobegon segment, Keillor writes all of the show's humor. He skewers himself at times, having a character tell him, "You have the personality of a turtle on Valium." These days, however, he more often jabs at the governor. "Don't strain yourself making sentences," one of his characters advises Ventura. "Just grunt."

For all the mileage he has gotten out of his feud, Keillor said he's weary of the game and plans to write the governor out of his scripts. "It's only interesting for a while," he said. Such restraint, if he shows it, may disappoint some listeners. "You anticipate certain things," said longtime listener Jim Hughes, a Vermont retiree. "Like the monologue. Or the razzing of Jesse Ventura."

Dole strategy: capitalize, but don't rely, on gender

By Ceci Connolly,
The Washington Post

SHIPPENSBURG, Pa. — The first thing people notice about Elizabeth Dole is that she's a she. It is a distinction this presidential candidate-to-be often highlights. At a recent appearance in this rural Republican community, Dole laced her 45-minute address with tales of womanhood. Like the day in 1970 when, as an aide to President Nixon, she tried in vain to get into the Metropolitan Club in downtown Washington for an important business meeting.

"Lady," Dole remembered the doorman replying. "I don't care if your name is Queen Elizabeth; you're not coming in." Today, Dole noted to hearty applause, women can enter that club. From her appearance (painted nails, high heels and pearl chokers) to her rhetoric ("What does a woman like me have to offer the

country?"), Dole is capitalizing on her most obvious asset: She is the only woman in a Republican lineup that currently includes nine men.

With the weight of history upon her as the first truly viable female presidential candidate, Dole is taking a calculated risk. She is attempting to craft a political persona that exploits the advantages of her gender but does not rely solely on that fact to woo voters.

If the strategy succeeds, Dole's supporters believe she could be the first national Republican candidate since the 1970s to put a dent in the huge "gender gap" that has historically cost the GOP crucial elections. "To Democrats she is terrifying," said Democratic consultant Dane Strother, who has successfully run women's races in the South. "She begins ahead of the pack; when she talks about education or health care she has more credibility than a white guy in a suit."

Yet it is a delicate balancing act; if Dole is to win over the largely conservative base that votes in Republican primaries, she runs the risk of offending the moderate and independent women her aides say give her an edge. "There is a huge opportunity there for bridging the gender gap," said GOP pollster Tony Fabrizio. "Meeting the challenge of that opportunity is kind of tricky. The question is can you make it through the primaries without alienating those swing female voters who may be looking for a reason to vote for you?"

She has been a trailblazer for women, Harvard Law School, two Cabinet positions, head of the American Red Cross, yet some professional women scoff at her sweet-as-molasses approach to serious matters. For every fan of Dole's carefully choreographed, theater-in-the-round-style performances, there are others who complain that the country is not

electing a talk show host. And for every voter drawn to Dole's well-articulated views on issues such as education, there are many, especially during this time of war in Yugoslavia, who express reservations about putting a woman in the White House.

In a telephone interview last week, Dole played down the role of gender in her possible candidacy. "I'm not running because I'm a woman, and I don't expect people to vote for me because I'm a woman," she said. Yet in the same conversation, Dole described taking over the "male bastion" at the Transportation Department in 1983 and her efforts to bring more women into the management ranks there. "Trying to help women fulfill their potential has been important to me in all positions of government."

In a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll, Dole's strongest supporters were white women in their 40s, two-thirds of whom choose Dole

over Gore in a hypothetical matchup. Republicans "have lost support with younger women, professional women, moderates and suburban voters," said Linda DiVall, Dole's pollster. "Those are voters she has a bond with."

That potential was obvious during her paid appearance at Shippensburg University, where women of all ages trilled over the prospect of a President Dole. Young women called her a role model. "She sends a message we're not limited by gender," as college sophomore Crystal Collier put it after meeting Dole at a private reception here.

Middle-aged women praised her as a trailblazer. "When I was little, I couldn't participate in the punt, pass, kick contest because I was a girl," said Sharon K. Cole. "I couldn't go to Princeton because I was a girl. That's what I love the most about Elizabeth Dole."

And many older women are rooting

for the 62-year-old Dole as one of their own. "I'd like to see her succeed," said June Toole, who puts her age round 75. "She's a qualified candidate, and a woman." After her speech, a group of students and two professors huddled in a circle to discuss Dole's appearance. Many of the twenty-somethings like the idea of a woman in the Oval Office, but they criticized Dole for delivering a canned speech. And several rolled their eyes at Dole's idealistic yearnings for the days when front doors could be left unlocked.

Thomas Segar, 26, said Dole's notions on America's drug scourge were naive. Steve McTaggart said Dole came off as just another packaged politician, despite her claims to the contrary. "They all seem like robots," he said. "She didn't break a stride."

FBI searches home of Los Alamos spy suspect

By Bob Drogin,
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — Armed with a warrant, the FBI searched the New Mexico home, car and garage Saturday of a Taiwan-born computer expert who has been identified as the chief suspect in an apparent case of Chinese espionage of U.S. nuclear weapons secrets in the 1980s.

After a six-hour search, witnesses said, the agents removed several boxes of papers, books and other items from the home of Wen Ho Lee, who was fired last month from his job as a senior computer scientist in a top-secret weapons modeling division at the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

The FBI obtained the court-authorized warrant, its first since it began investigating the alleged espionage more than three years ago, after Lee's co-workers told agents in recent interviews that he had frequently carried work home from the lab, according to a senior law enforcement official.

Lee, dressed in gardening clothes and fishing cap, stood outside talking to neighbors during part of the search at his wood-and-brick bungalow in White Rock, a suburb of Los Alamos, which is northwest of Santa Fe. Lee declined to talk to reporters, as he has since his name first surfaced in public, and his attorney could not be reached for comment. Lee has not been charged or arrested, and an FBI official here said the search did not mean he is guilty of any crime.

The FBI, CIA and Department of Energy are seeking to determine how

China obtained data that apparently helped it build smaller and more powerful nuclear warheads that are suspiciously similar to the state-of-the-art W-88 warheads that are carried on U.S. Trident submarines.

"The labs are convinced the Chinese acquired W-88 information," one official said. "How they did it, where they did it, when they did it, is still not clear." Lee has told the FBI he was approached and asked to reveal classified information during a scientific conference in Beijing in 1988, but he said he refused. He was fired, in part, because he didn't report the covert contact at the time.

Shortly after the conference, U.S. intelligence obtained a Chinese document that first raised suspicions about espionage because it specifically cited the top-secret W-88. Some U.S. scientists suspect that a series of underground nuclear tests that China conducted in the early 1990s may have used the new design, although there is no evidence that China has yet deployed it on any weapons.

The investigation began in earnest in 1996 and focused on Los Alamos, where the W-88 was designed. Although Lee was quickly identified as someone who had dealt with Chinese officials, he was not removed from his job, until the case erupted in the news in early March, for fear of tipping him off that he was a potential suspect.

The search warrant executed Saturday is "the kind of thing we're able to do now because the investigation has gone overt and we're able to talk to people," an official said. Secretary of Energy Bill

Richardson announced the warrant. "The FBI is investigating and pursuing this case vigorously, and the Department of Energy is supporting the law enforcement effort fully," he said in a statement.

As part of the investigation, the Energy Department abruptly ordered all classified computer work stopped on computers and related equipment at Los Alamos, Lawrence Livermore in Berkeley and Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, the nation's three main nuclear weapons facilities, on April 2 pending an intense review of security procedures.

The stand-down, as it's called, is still in effect, said Jim Danneskiold, spokesman at Los Alamos. He said about 2,400 employees with access to classified computers, servers, routers, printers and other equipment have undergone special briefings on cyber-threats. "The gist was we want employees to ensure that there is no way that information can leave the secure network," he said.

Under the current system, Danneskiold said, only some e-mail to the outside world is monitored, and rules require employees to lock up removable hard-drives, zip drives, discs and other material containing classified data in safes at night. "What's to keep someone from sticking a removable hard drive in his pocket and walking out the gate at night?," he asked. "Nothing. Except the rules. And we're patriotic Americans."

By Richard Simon,
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — Politicians wish they got this kind of attention. A pair of pesky beavers ravaging Washington's beloved cherry trees, and the government's inability to solve the toothy problem, is the talk of the nation's capital. Never mind that the NATO leaders are coming to town. "Where can I see the beaver? That has been the No. 1 asked question the last couple of days," National Park Service ranger Erin Broadbent said Friday.

The Washington Post rated it a Page One story suggesting that two beavers, rather than the one suspected, appeared responsible for the damage. The paper also offered a Top 10 list of ways to catch a beaver, including: "Send Al Gore out to the Tidal Basin in a pink sombrero, with instructions to 'stand very still.'"

A local radio station is sponsoring a Name the Beavers contest. Wilbur and Fanne was one suggestion, a reference to former House Ways and Means Chairman Wilbur Mills, D-Ark., whose companion, former stripper Fanne Fox, was the last celebrity to occupy the Tidal Basin,

around which more than 1,600 cherry trees are located.

George was another suggestion (as in George Washington, who legend has it was no friend of cherry trees) and Theodore (as in Beaver Cleaver). Park rangers named one of the critters Rocky (they don't care if that's the name of a famous squirrel) but have yet to name the second beaver.

Federal government workers joined hordes of tourists at the Tidal Basin Friday in hopes of catching a glimpse of the tree chompers, or at least surveying the teeth marks left on trees. "We thought we saw a beaver, but it was a stick," said a Virginia woman who, in the true spirit of Washington, would speak only on the condition that she not be named.

The park service has hired a professional trapper to set "humane" traps in hopes of capturing the beavers for relocation to a refuge. "There are a lot of nice places I think they would be happier," said Julia Long, a biological sciences technician for the park service. Added Long, sounding as if this was a national security matter: "I don't disclose anything about the number of traps or their location. It's

detrimental if we have people looking for them."

Meanwhile, some tree trunks have been wrapped in rubber tubing to protect them from surprise beaver attacks. Beavergate upstaged the Cherry Blossom Festival, when the city celebrates the Tidal Basin the blossoming of cherry trees, a gift from Japan in 1912. The basin is an inlet from the Potomac River where the Jefferson Memorial is located.

The beavers as of Friday had destroyed four cherry trees, damaged four others and damaged five cedar trees. So far, none of the 150 trees remaining from the original gift have been damaged. The park service has been receiving tips from the public on how to capture the beavers. One Pennsylvanian passed along the name of a "good friend who is an expert trapper."

Visitors also have been suggesting what the park service should do, if they ever defeat the beavers. Bob Lande of Silver Spring, Md., suggested that the rodents be put on display at the National Zoo. No new teeth marks were sighted Friday morning, giving park officials hope that the critters have moved on.

Melting in Antarctic quickens

By Rob Stein,
The Washington Post

Two ice shelves in the Antarctic appear to be melting more quickly than had been predicted. Satellite images show that the Larsen B and Wilkins ice shelves, which are on opposite sides of the Antarctic

Peninsula, have lost nearly 1,100 square miles in the past year, U.S. and British scientists said.

The melting apparently was caused by a regional warming trend, said researchers at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the British Antarctic Survey. Temperatures have risen by about 4.5 degrees Fahrenheit

since the 1940s.

"We have evidence that the shelves in this area have been in retreat for 50 years," David Vaughan of the British Antarctic Survey said in a statement issued last week. "To have retreat (of this size) in a single year is clearly an escalation."