

Jan. 28, 2001----

ST. PAUL, Minn. ---My wonder for wanderlust probably began in 1972 when I first heard Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen sing a cranked-up cover of Del Reeves "Looking at the World Through a Windshield."

I was 16 years old.

A wild road trip was from my Naperville home to nearby Pontiac.

The Reeves song came off of Cody's album, "Hot Licks, Cold Steel & Trucker's Favorites." Cut on eight tracks for a mere \$5,000, the album holds up as one of country-rock's timeless road records.

So when I heard that Garrison Keillor was hosting a reunion of the original eight members of Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen earlier this month at his "Prairie Home Companion" radio show, a road trip made all the sense in the world:

First of all, the eclectic, hard-living band has defied the odds. They are all still alive, which was pointed out in the concert program by paraphrasing a lyric from Merle Travis's "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke (That Cigarette)" (which Cody turned into a 1973 hit): "We ain't dead yet!"

Secondly, I hit the road with my high school buddy Mark, who is a bigger Cody fan than me. We did the seven-hour drive from Chicago to St. Paul listening to nothing but Cody CDs. It was our first road trip together since Mardi Gras, 1980. We also defied the odds. We didn't meet the local constables like we did in the French Quarter.

Finally, I was fascinated with the idea of the mellow Keillor hosting a reunion of a redneck, psychedelic, truck-driving, jump-swing-country-rock band at the generally pabulum "Prairie Home Companion."

That's like Studs Terkel doing a tribute to Wayne Newton.

It turned out Keillor is a real Cody fan. He also came of age with the band around 1972 when they appeared at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. In 1989 original Cody fiddle player-saxophonist Andy Stein became a regular member of the "Prairie Home Companion" house band. Late last year, Stein brought the reunion idea to Keillor.

"Prairie Home Companion" reaches 2.7 million listeners worldwide.

Between the regular 5 p.m. Saturday taping of the show and a full-tilt Cody concert that began at 8:30 p.m., Keillor took time out to reminisce about the road.

He led me to the darkest backstage corner of the 91-year-old Fitzgerald Theater, where the public radio show is taped. Keillor pulled up two folding metal chairs near a loading dock door. In the gloom, his eyes beamed like trucker's headlights. Somewhere beyond his eyes, I could see his stoic Plymouth Brethren roots.

"The Mississippi River is the part of the Twin Cities I'd recommend," Keillor said with icy-clear enunciation. "Drive up the Mississippi from La Crosse, on the Wisconsin side to little towns like Alma.

"Its such a beautiful drive ...

"... Then you come in on Highway 61 to Prescott up along the river into St. Paul. (And don't miss the bald eagles, which can be seen through March in Wabasha, Minn.) St. Paul is a city of neighborhoods. It's a city you can walk around and ride a bike in. The neighborhood of F. Scott Fitzgerald on Summit Avenue is a lovely place to see in any season, but especially in the winter and fall."

Set back on a bluff overlooking the city and the Mississippi River, Summit Avenue is St. Paul's street of 1800s Victorian mansions. More than 300 of these buildings are located in the National Register, making the area one of the nation's most cherished Victorian-era neighborhoods. Keillor lived here for a while.

Summit Avenue is also the location of several Fitzgerald homes. Fitzgerald left St. Paul as a young man, but he was living with his parents at 599 Summit Ave. when he wrote his breakthrough book *This Side of Paradise*.

Keillor, 58, was born in a little slice of paradise north of the Twin Cities in Anoka, Minn. He grew up along the Mississippi River. "It was a magical place for a kid," he said, "because it was a place that adults never came. When you came over the riverbank and down on the shore, you were in a realm that belonged to boys--and boys your age.

"Older kids did not go down there. Men and women didn't go down there. It was truly for young boys, and that's why we loved it. You could skate on the river. If it froze hard before snow fell, you'd have a time when the ice would be smooth. If a child of mine was getting on the river, I'd be terrified. But my parents weren't aware of it. We had speedskates. And we skated for long distances. It reminded us of the Hans Brinker novel."

Keillor clearly has held onto his heartfelt memories. Nearby, one Cody bandmember remarked how unusual it was for the band to play for the "sober" "Prairie Home Companion" crowd. But Keillor was in another world.

Keillor continued, "There were islands in the river you couldn't get to while skating, but you could get to them in the summer. You could swim to them. That was amazing. That was what the river was all about, getting away from the grown-up world, school and church and forming what seemed to be like this little ideal society for 11- and 12-year-old boys."

Keillor recalled a childhood full of fantasy: cowboys vs. Indians, cops vs. robbers, all the good vs. the emerging evil of the real world. This is where he launched the imagination for his 11 books, which include six New York Times best sellers.

"The moment an older person came around, it destroyed the whole thing," Keillor said. "Then you come to an age--for me it was 13--where you couldn't do it anymore. It was not the cool thing to do."

And Keillor got quiet.

I asked Keillor about his favorite eateries in the Twin Cities. He didn't reveal the same enthusiasm for the present as he did for the past. "I'm somebody who keeps going back to the same restaurants," he said. "I keep going to D' Amico Cucina over in Butler Square (in Minneapolis) and the St. Paul Grill (try the blueberry streusel coffeecake spiked with soft caramel)."

During my weekend in St. Paul, I hung out at Mickey's, a classic American diner about two blocks away from the Fitzgerald Theater. Styled to look like a railroad diner car, Mickey's was built in 1937 in New Jersey. It was transported by flatbed car to its current location at 36 W. 7th St. where it has operated almost continuously, 24 hours a day, since 1939--about 62 years. The diner closed for two days in August 1995 to protest drug use and crime in the area.

Mickey's was one of the first Art Deco diners. Previous diners had been white, where Mickey's has a bright red and cream streamline design. Mickey's was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, one of only two diners to make the list.

The place holds only four booths, but the booths feature working Seeburg Wall-O-Matic jukeboxes where you can play "El Paso" by Marty Robbins and "Inka Dinka Doo" by Jimmy Durante for a quarter a shot. The diner was founded by David "Mickey" Crimmins and John "Bert" Mattson.

Notable visitors to Mickey's' have included actor Bill Murray, co-owner of the St. Paul Saints Northern League baseball team., Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura, Roseanne Barr (of course) and Julio Iglesias (?!).

I knew Mickey's was my kind of place the minute I walked in. A middle-aged

cook in a grease-splattered smock crept out of the tiny kitchen. His gut looked like a sack of potatoes. The cook lifted up his yellowed T-shirt and rubbed circles around his hairy belly. I don't know if he was digesting food or contemplating food, but it was a true Mickey's moment.

Unfazed, I went ahead and ordered the house special homemade Mulligan stew (carrots, beef, celery, onions, tomatoes with grilled Texas toast on the side, \$5.20). "It's good food of its kind," Keillor said in cautious tones. "American diner food. It kind of slows you down a little bit."

Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen fast-formed in 1963 when rhythm guitarist John Tichy met piano player George Frayne at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The band was named after a 1950s sci-fi film. Tichy was studying engineering and running the kitchen crew at the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity. Frayne, a.k.a. "The Commander," was washing pots and pans in the kitchen.

Between 1969 and 1976, when the band called it quits, Commander Cody had seven charted albums and a top five single with "Hot Rod Lincoln." The grizzled music veterans got a charge out of seeing the Keillor show in action. "We were all interested in how they ran the show and how Garrison did his live thing," Frayne said. "How they do the cues, how they rewrite the script every five minutes. They go right down to the last minute."

It was the first time Keillor had met the band. "I had a nice chat with the guy," Frayne said. "He's got a Orson Welles thing going."

And in a way, Keillor has an idyllic lost planet vision. He says the "Prairie Home" is a place "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

That's not a bad way to look at the world.