

Lake Wobegon comes to life

Garrison Keillor has (sort of) revealed the location of his fictional town of quiet weeks and above-average children.

By Chuck Haga
Star Tribune Staff Writer

FREEPORT, MINN. — The anecdotal evidence lined up at the Pioneer Inn bar is overwhelming; Alice Sand is strong. Lornie Middendorf is good-looking. And, Dennis Heidegerken says, all four of his children are above average.

This is Lake Wobegon.

Garrison Keillor himself says so. In the December issue of National Geographic magazine, the Minnesota Public Radio storyteller writes about the inspiration he took many years ago from small towns in Stearns County — from Holdingford's "fine little downtown of elderly brick buildings" to the stately Catholic church in New Munich.

And the Sidetrack Tap in his mythical Lake Wobegon was modeled, he says, after the Pioneer Inn.

KEILLOR continues on A16:

— *Garrison Keillor wrote that people appear disappointed when he tells them everything about the town is fictional.*



Star Tribune photo by Jane Hwang

A white picket fence adorned with hand-painted red hearts graces Main Street in Freeport, Minn. Garrison Keillor says he modeled his fictional Lake Wobegon after such small towns in Stearns County.

KEILLOR from A1
Lake Wobegon is a fictional town built on solid truths

Middendorf, 57, said he isn't surprised, though he notes that time has NOT forgotten this little town.

"What he describes, it's like it used to be here," he said. "But it's still the same interesting people, nobody trying to put anything on. People here are very set in their ways, very opinionated. But friendly."

In the magazine, Keillor writes that people are always asking the location of the village he chronicles in his weekly "News From Lake Wobegon" segments. They always seem disappointed when he tells them that everything—the town, the Krebsbachs, the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian—is fictional.

So when the county established an intra-community bike path recently and called it the Lake Wobegon Trail, Keillor decided to spend a few days roaming the area "to see if it was there or not."

Sure enough, it is.

It's still there

He was moved again by the New Munich church, with its "high columns with figured capitals, the rose windows in the transepts, the lovely statues with the compassionate faces."

It's a little much, actually, for Lake Wobegon's Our Lady of Per-

More information:

► Richard Osenius, who photographed the people and towns in Keillor's National Geographic article, grew up in St. Paul and was a Minneapolis Tribune photographer from 1970-1981.

► For an online multimedia presentation from the National Geographic's "In Search of Lake Wobegon," visit the Web site <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0012/feature5/index.html>, or go to <http://www.nationalgeographic.com> and search for Wobegon.



Photos by Richard Osenius, National Geographic Society

In October, the homecoming court from Holdingford High School posed in a pickup truck with Holstein markings for National Geographic. Holdingford is the Stearns County town that looks "most Wobegonic," Garrison Keillor says in the December issue of the magazine.

petual Responsibility. "I could see I didn't get the baroque feeling at all," he writes. "If I'd put it in Lake Wobegon nobody would have believed it."

He writes of watching a man leave the Post Office in Freeport, "a man in a brown porkpie hat and pale blue polyester suit and green plaid shirt with a string tie with an agate clasp and wearing white shoes."

The man could have been Florian Krebsbach, Lake Wobegon's Chevrolet dealer, he said.

A visitor on Monday asked Middendorf and Heidgerken whether a man so dressed might commonly be seen departing the Post Office. They seemed confused by the question.

"You never had white shoes?" Middendorf asked.

"I did," Heidgerken said, not without pride.

But much has changed inside the Sidetrack... uh, the Pioneer, though it's still in a building that went up on Main Street in 1881.

As the model for his fictional tavern, Keillor writes, it was "a gloomy smoke-filled sour-smelling tavern, cluttered with neon beer signs and deer heads and mottos (Don't Sleep in Our Bar, We Don't Drink in Your Bed), except the Pioneer Inn has been cleaned up and remodeled and the sourness expunged."

Atkinson, who with her husband, Ed, has operated the Pioneer

for about 20 years, said that she's glad the author noted the improvements.

"I think he's talking about the 1940s or something," she said. "Life was a lot slower then. Everybody smoked, and there was no ventilation — it HAD to be smelly. People chewed snuff and spat and it was really gross."

"Our lives are different now. Then, people talked about a trip to St. Cloud being a real highlight. Now people go to St. Cloud two, three times a week."

She said that one of her longtime bartenders remembers Keillor coming in by himself back when he was first researching the places and characters that would become Lake Wobegon.

The people-watcher

"He says he's a really quiet person who gets a glass of beer, sits in a booth and watches people," she said.

Keillor recalls in his article that he often sat listening to the locals, who didn't include him in their conversations.

"As I sat in the Pioneer Inn and recalled the years I spent in Stearns County, it dawned on me where in Lake Wobegon had come from. All those omniscient narrator stories about small-town people came from a guy sitting at the end of a bar, drinking a beer, who didn't know anything about anything



Star Tribune photo by Jane Hwang

Alice Sand, Chris Middendorf and Dennis Heidgerken, from left, relaxed at Pioneer Inn bar in Freeport. The comfy tavern was the model for the Sidetrack Tap. Keillor has said he discovered Lake Wobegon while listening to the locals share their stories about small-town life at the bar.

going on around him."

Heidgerken, 63, said he used to operate the Corner Bar in Freeport, and he remembers Keillor doing research there, too — sitting by himself, usually drinking pop and watching people.

Next door to the Pioneer, at Charlie's Cafe (you've seen the signs from Interstate 94), Keillor stands in a large framed photograph, taken in 1986 and dedicated in his hand "To Charlie's, the true home of Lake Wobegon."

(Monday's dinner special at Charlie's was a hot roast beef sandwich. It was gone by 5 p.m. There is something Wobegonish about that.)

As Keillor describes it, Lake Wobegon seems about evenly divided between German Catholics and Norwegian Lutherans. Freeport is populated mostly by people of German background. Middendorf said, "but over to Albany and Melrose, you get a little mixture."

Alice Sand, 67, lives on a farm near New Munich, but she enjoys an occasional visit to the Pioneer Inn. She has never heard a Keillor monologue, she said, and she has only a vague understanding of Lake Wobegon.

But Keillor would know her. She likes living in this area because of "the freedom to not lock your doors," she said, and because of the way people get together and



Star Tribune map

help one another.

"Oh, there's gossip," she said. "But that's only natural."

She was supposed to be called Alicia, she volunteered. That's what her German father wanted to name her. "But the priest said, 'You're an American, so you should be an Alice.'"

"But it's OK," she said, smiling. "I have a granddaughter now who's named Alicia."

Joyce Middendorf, Lornie's wife, has never heard the news from Lake Wobegon either, but she knows what Lake Wobegon means.

"It's what you make home," he said. "And this is our Lake Wobegon because this is our home."

"I came here a stranger, from Albany (10 miles away), and it was total acceptance."

Are the women really all strong?

"We have to be," she said.

The children all above average?

"All of them."

And the men are all good-looking?

"Oh, yeah," she said. Then, with a smile for her husband, she added, "We've only been married a year; I had to say that."

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