

Wobegon Boy

Garrison Keillor embarks on a mission to discover his imaginary city in the small towns of Minnesota

Garrison Keillor answers questions posed by St. Cloud Times reporter John Molene.

Times: Is it still fun writing and broadcasting stories on Lake Wobegon after all these years?

Keillor: Usually it's some fun doing the news from Lake Wobegon and sometimes it's a real hoot. It all depends on how good the arm is that day. It's miserable to stand up in front of people and do lousy material and one hopes to avoid that at almost any cost. What keeps me going, however, isn't the fun of it — I wasn't brought up to have fun, we were Calvinists, born to suffer — but the duty of doing radio in a humane form. Radio is a fabulous medium and yet everywhere it is so homogeneous and robotic and invincibly stupid. So a person like me, lucky to have a little soapbox, feels duty-bound to use it and not break it up for kindling.

Times: Did you have any concerns with including the "sex parts" in Lake Wobegon Summer 1956?

Keillor: Sex looms large on the horizon for a Sanctified Brethren boy. Repression has the effect of magnifying its allure. So, in writing about such a boy, one must be true to his thoughts, and the truth is that boys think about sex all the time. Every spare minute.

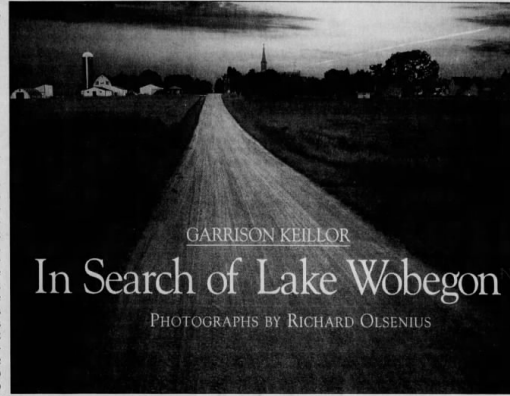
Times: As one of Minnesota's favorite sons, do you think these books will change the way people feel about you? Would it bother you if they did?

Keillor: A writer sits in his dark little cave and broods over his material and pokes at it and junks big swatches of things and in the process you simply lose track of your reputation, your very personhood, and you put yourself at the service of a story and a set of characters. I'm not a celebrity or a public person, I'm a writer. I'd be a writer if nobody had ever heard of me. It's a compact you make with yourself.

Times: Does the oncoming urban sprawl from the Twin Cities threaten the existence of Lake Wobegon? What will life be like in Lake Wobegon when it is a suburb of the Twin Cities?

Keillor: The outer tentacles of the Twin Cities now extend to Monticello and beyond, the strip malls and Wal-Marts and such, and yet Stearns County is still very much

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Distinct style emerges in 2 new books

By John Molene
Times staff writer

Garrison Keillor fans are in for a double treat as two books bearing the author's distinctive Lake Wobegon touch hit the bookstores tomorrow.

For the past 25 years, Keillor has breathed life into the fictional Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon, refining its streets and soda fountains into a uniquely humorous vision of America.

Keillor returns to the land where the women are strong, the men are good-looking and all the children are above average in "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" (Viking, 293 pages, \$24.95). The book is a laugh and affectionate story of one young man's funny and poignant coming-

of-age. Published in conjunction with the new novel is an elegant photo and essay book, "In Search of Lake Wobegon" (Viking Studio, 128 pages, \$29.95). Keillor supplied the opening and closing text for the book. Former Minneapolis Star Tribune and National Geographic photographer Richard Olsenius supplied the magnificent black-and-white photos.

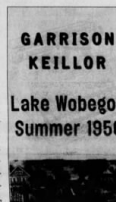
The photo book is entirely focused on the people and places of Stearns County. Lake Wobegon devotees

will find a lot to like in Lake Wobegon Summer 1956 (Viking, \$24.95), his first novel in four years.

The novel

Keillor introduces readers to 14-year-old endearingly geeky Gary, who has been raised among a tiny evangelical group of God-fearing Christians. Gary's four passions, not necessarily in order, are his rebellious older cousin, his borrowed copy of a porno mag, rock and roll music, and crafting his own stories on his prized Underwood typewriter.

In 1956, Lake Wobegon is a town of about 1,200, populated mostly by German-Catholics and Norwegian-Lutherans, both of whom the Sanctified Brethren are "supposed to



keep clear of." Blessed with an active imagination and raging hormones, Gary is smitten with his comely cousin Kate and also enthralled with his copy of "High School Orgies." His passions will land our young

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Just who is this Garrison Keillor?

Garrison Keillor is a writer and broadcaster, creator and host of "A Prairie Home Companion," a popular syndicated series on public radio.

Born in Anoka, Keillor changed his name from Gary Edward Keillor to the "stronger" Garrison Edwards when submitting poems to his junior-high school paper.

He graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1966. As a student, he wrote for a campus literary magazine and was staff announcer on the campus radio station. He continued with the station after graduation while working on short stories.

In 1969, The New Yorker magazine accepted one of his stories. From 1968 to 1982, he was the host of a classical music program on Minnesota Public Radio.

While there, he broadcast mock commercials for firms in the mythical town of Lake Wobegon, Minn.

Keillor, 59, conceived the idea for his radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" while researching a 1974 article on the Grand

Ole Opry of Nashville, Tenn. Like the Opry shows, "A Prairie Home Companion" blends music, comedy, and storytelling with a cast of rustic fictional characters.

Keillor's program was first broadcast in 1974. With the creation of American Public Radio (now Public Radio International) in 1982, more than 200 stations began carrying the program.

The show, which won a 1981 Peabody Award and a 1987 Grammy Award, ran until 1987, when Keillor announced his retirement.

He returned in 1989 with "American Radio

Company of the Air," a similar program broadcast from New York City.

The program moved to St. Paul, and in 1993 resumed the name "A Prairie Home Companion."

Keillor's books include "Happy to Be Here" (1982); "Lake Wobegon Days" (1985); "Leaving Home" (1987); "We Are Still Married" (1989); "Wobegon Boy" (1997) and "The Book of Guys" (1993).

Keillor lives in St. Paul with his wife, Jenny, and their daughter, Maia. His son, Jason, from a previous marriage, lives nearby in Wisconsin.



Garrison Keillor
Was born Gary Edward Keillor

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hero in trouble with his family — devout Christian fundamentalists. While Gary deals with his raw emotions and struggles to discover his voice as a writer, Kate finds herself involved in a scandal with a local boy, a promising pitcher for the town baseball team, the Wobegon Whippets.

All this leads to a personal crisis for Gary and a family showdown that will change things forever.

Called the funniest American writer still open for business and a modern Mark Twain, Keillor can still turn a phrase with the best of them. Here's are some examples:

■ "He gave them all his gaudiest stuff and they scowled and swung at the pitch previous and missed the current one and were set down like legless men at a square dance."

■ "... it was a Scandinavian and German crowd and these folks do not take to sunshine. Exposure to the sun's rays makes them dopy and sullen and eventually turns them toward violence. If the sky had darkened and rain fallen and turned to sleet, the crowd would've perked up and felt refreshed, but the onslaught of sunshine deadened them."

■ "But if I told Daddy I wanted a television set, he'd say, 'People in hell want ice water.' His philosophy in a nutshell: You want it, forget it."

Lake Wobegon Summer 1956 is an old-fashioned tale of first love and the sometimes bitter consequences that occur when innocence and experience clash. It's also a touching story about families and the sadness of growing up and growing apart from those you loved as a child.



Photos by Richard Olsenius

These three photos were taken from Garrison Keillor's new book, "In Search of Lake Wobegon. At the polka band concert (above).

The picture book

Keillor explains "In Search of Lake Wobegon," how he came to choose the towns, farms and folk of Central Minnesota to set his novels in.

"I used to say (Lake Wobegon) is fiction. 'Oh,' they said. 'Sure.' But they were disappointed. People want stories to be true," Keillor wrote. "So I started telling people that the town is in central Minnesota, near Stearns County, up around Holdingford, not far from St. Rosa and Albany and Freeport, northwest of St. Cloud, which is sort of the truth, I guess."

Since Keillor first brought it to life, the rural Minnesota town of

Lake Wobegon has become a national treasure. In this lavishly produced photography book, words and images combine to illuminate the real Minnesota town-life, landscapes and people who inspired its creation.

The photographer takes us on a tour of Stearns County, the place Keillor deems most "Wobegonic." Keillor waxes lyrical on the origins of the place where, as a young writer, he found the inspiration for his fiction and his radio show.

Richard Olsenius' more than 80 dramatically composed black-and-white photographs of rural Minnesota capture the soul of his subjects, the beauties of the landscape, as well as the values and eccentricities of the communities.

Memorable photographs march one after another: the high school homecoming court in full regalia, standing in the back of a pickup, the farms and farmers, the picnics at the lake, the stark small towns.



Grotto with Blessed Virgin Mary.



Memorial Day parade, Grey Eagle.

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Keillor

itself, proud of its history and culture, and the young people seem to want to stay and enjoy the same good life they knew growing up. There's dancing and baseball and good fishing and the churches are magnificent and the neighbors loyal and there's Fisher's Supper Club in Avon and what's not to like? Avon and Albany and Holdingford aren't going to become suburbs for at least another 50 years, and by then I'll be 109 years

old and deep in the golden mists of senility, and to me Lake Wobegon will be more real than anything else.

Times: Do you think the changing demographics of Minnesota mean fewer people feel a strong connection to the heritage of the state? And will that translate into fewer people recognizing themselves, and their friends and neighbors when they read the Lake Wobegon stories?

Keillor: For some people movies and television are the only authoritative versions of life, and shopping malls are like churches. They live in apartment ghettos

and their social life is all in Internet chat rooms. But that's not my life, nor the life of anybody I know. Most people are sociable and curious and fascinated by the past and glad to have kids and buy a piece of the future. The Lake Wobegon stories are an optimistic take on the subject of family.

Times: What is your next project?

Keillor: "Prairie Home Companion" starts a new season Oct. 6. And I'm writing an opera for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. And I'm thinking about writing a little memoir about my interesting life. I'll be 60 next year, and it seems to me that a person is obli-

gated to make a report on his life so that the young can avoid his mistakes and go on to better things.

Attention Kmart Shoppers
The Kmart August 26, 2001 weekly ad circulate, on page 13 feature the Powerman 5000 "Anyone for Doomsday" CD. This item will not be available at this time due to the recording studio's change of release date. We regret any inconvenience this may have caused our customers.

