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there's no place like



Richard Olsenius photos

St. Anthony, a village northeast of Freeport, Minn., the region that inspired Garrison Keillor's "Lake Wobegon."

HOME

Keillor shares the scenes that brought fictional Lake Wobegon to life.

By William R. Wineke
Wisconsin State Journal

Anyone who listens to public radio on Saturday afternoons has a mental image of Lake Wobegon, Minn., a place where men are strong, women are good looking and children are above average.

Now, "A Prairie Home Companion" host Garrison Keillor and photographer Richard Olsenius have teamed to provide a visual picture of small-town Minnesota.

"In Search of Lake Wobegon" (Viking Studio; \$29.95) includes more than 80 photographs of those small towns, plus a series of brief essays by Keillor.

Such a book could be disappointing. We have our mental images, after all, and any reality that intrudes upon them necessarily limits the romance of the imagination. However, it's hard to look at this series of photos and avoid coming to the conclusion that, if Lake Wobegon actually existed, it would look like these towns.

Keillor says Lake Wobegon is a compilation of images from Stearns County, Minn., where he lived 30 years ago "with my wife and a little boy in a rented farmhouse, south of Freeport, an area of nose-to-the-grindstone German Catholics proud of their redneck reputation."

As he created the town, however, Keillor admits that "I added, for dramatic interest, an equal number of Norwegian Lutherans. These don't exist in Stearns County, but I busied them in."

Keillor says he based his physical descriptions of mythical Lake Wobegon on the appearance of the real Holdingford, Minn., population 635. The mythical Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church is based on the real Catholic parish



"The Uptown Bar & Grill at 5th and Elm in Waverly. Formerly the municipal liquor store, and before that, a store operated by one Joseph Kevetensky, who emigrated from Bohemia in 1882 and by 1902 owned a block of businesses including this one," writes Garrison Keillor.

In New Munich, "a big dramatic brick church trimmed in carved sandstone with a bell tower, clock faces on all four sides, and magnificent heavy doors with big black hinges, a veritable cathedral in a town of only 314."

The Sidetrack Tap is modeled after the Pioneer Inn in Freeport, "a gloomy smoke-filled sour-smelling tavern, cluttered with neon beer signs and deer heads, and funny mottos, but the Pioneer Inn has been cleaned up, the smells expunged."

When he lived in the area, Keillor reports, he found the people most unfriendly, a characteristic, he was told, that stemmed from prohibition and the fear that strangers might be trying to separate the Germans of the county from their beer. "A strange face is, to them, a cruel face. My German neighbors were a closed community and I wasn't in it. Proximity does not equal membership."

From this rather isolated people came the "News from Lake Wobegon," Keillor said.

"As I sat in the Pioneer Inn and recalled the years I spent in Stearns County, it dawned on me where Lake Wobegon had come from. All those omniscient-narrator stories about small-town people came from a guy sitting alone at the end of a bar, drinking beer, who didn't know anything about anything going on about him. Stories about prodigals welcomed home, outcasts brought into the circle, rebels forgiven: all from the guy at the end of the bar nursing a beer in silence."

So, Keillor continued, he created his own town, a town in which "he is the mayor, the fire chief, the priest, the physician and the Creator himself, and he gets a radio show and through perseverance and dumb luck and a certain facility, the fictional town becomes more real than the real town and now when he goes to Freeport, some people come up and say 'You're Garrison Keillor, aren't you?' A person could write a novel about this."

BOOK CORNER

FICTION

Keillor captures a teen's life

Radio humorist Garrison Keillor publishes two books Monday, one a photo book about the people and villages amalgamated into his mythical Lake Wobegon, Minn., "In Search of Lake Wobegon" reviewed on this page, and one a full-length novel about his quirky little community.

"Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" (Viking; \$24.95), introduces readers to 14-year-old Gary, as he spends his summer in Minnesota. Since Keillor and this reviewer are of the same age and since, therefore, I was also 14 in 1956 and also lived in a tiny hamlet, I can attest to the essential truth of Keillor's story.

It opens with Gary lying on a white wicker porch swing reading "Fox's Book of Martyrs," or, really, the magazine "High School Orgies" tucked inside the noble book.

"From one mail-order house you can purchase nifty magic tricks, a correspondence course in ju-jitsu, novelty underwear, and powerful binoculars that can see through clothing. A cartoon man aimed his binocs at a high-stepping mama and his eyes bugged out and his jaw dropped and drops of sweat flew off his brow."

Did 14-year-old guys really think that way in 1956. Yep, I can attest to it, though I never read "Fox's Book of Martyrs."

This is not a syrupy book: being 14 isn't a syrupy age, not today and not in 1956. Keillor's characters get into fights with their parents. They fall in and out of love. One of the girls gets pregnant. Some have mentally ill relatives. Some of them are drunks. Some go to jail.

The beauty of Keillor's books, just as it is the beauty of his "A Prairie Home Companion" monologues is that his characters learn acceptance of the human condition. They don't always find happy answers to their problems, nor do they experience redemption for all their faults—but, they do know they live together in a small community and that their families and neighbors are the only people they've got.

— William R. Wineke

NONFICTION

Uneven collection stumbles, sings

At the end of David Rakoff's haunting story of his battle with cancer, he makes a frank admission: "This physical evidence will have to serve as proof that all that has happened was real, because even now I only half believe what I am telling you."

In most nonfiction writers this self-conscious ambivalence would be surprising, but it's a signature element of "Fraud" (Doubleday; \$21.95), Rakoff's uneven collection of essays.

Rakoff, a regular contributor to the radio program "This American Life," cultivates hipness and ironic distance from his subjects, who are usually living outside the mainstream: American Buddhists who pay for lectures from Steven Seagal; Icelandic elf communicators; Loch Ness monster believers.

Rakoff portrays himself as an outsider, aloof from even his own emotions. While some of the subject matter is marginal, Rakoff's reporting is often excellent, his analysis incisive. His best work overcomes the crutch of one-liners and pop-culture references, allowing his feelings to propel the writing.

The collection does not work to Rakoff's advantage, exposing patterns and set pieces he uses in essay after essay.

Not until Rakoff visits Seagal's Buddhism seminar does the volume take off. He uses a delicate touch to describe the almost surreal events, displaying his best qualities: humor, intelligent analysis and empathy.

— Adam Joyce, Associated Press

NONFICTION

An ode to a mentor

You might say that Kathleen Norris is missing