

Wobegon woes: Locals react to Keillor allegations

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St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

It's been an interesting week in Lake Wobegon.

Garrison Keillor's stories from the fictional Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon — "Where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average," according to its creator — provided an idyllic setting for "A Prairie Home Companion" and earned the humorist a spot on the bestseller list in 1985.

Keillor, who was born in Anoka, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, based Lake Wobegon in part on various small towns in Stearns County, Minnesota.

Now, residents of the area that inspired Keillor's tales are reeling from allegations of "inappropriate behavior" that caused Minnesota Public Radio to terminate his contracts.



"All of Central Minnesota is going to feel this hurt," said Bud Heidgerken, former owner of Charlie's Cafe in Freeport, Minnesota, which inspired Keillor's famous Chatterbox Cafe.

"Here's this guy that we always looked up to — we all did — and then something like this happens. And you just don't know."

In an Associated Press report on the

Garrison Keillor serenades dinner guests at Fisher's Club in Avon to celebrate his birthday in 2011. JASON WACHTER, JWACHTER@STCLOUDTIMES.COM

allegations, Keillor said he was fired over "a story that (he thinks) is more interesting and more complicated than the version MPR heard." Later, Keillor told the Minneapolis Star Tribune that he had put his hand on a woman's bare back when trying to console her.

Keillor retired as host of "A Prairie Home Companion" last year, after 40 years behind the microphone, but continued to work for MPR on various other projects.

The allegations have caused MPR to announce that they would rename "A Prairie Home Companion," now hosted by mandolinist Chris Thile, and end the distribution and rebroadcasts of Keillor-related products, like "The Writer's Almanac" and "The Best of A Prairie Home Companion."

But Keillor's intellectual property has long been beloved, not least of all by the

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Keillor

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people who inspired his colorful, quirky characters.

'It's a rampage'

"People like to hear about rural Minnesota, about the rural United States in general," said Heidgerken. "It could be anywhere, Lake Wobegon."

In his book "Lake Wobegon Days," short story anthology "Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories," and other written works, Keillor characterizes the Central Minnesota area as one comprised of wholesome, hardy people, folks who are equal parts humble and somewhat obliviously self-inflated.

"He makes our lives seem so boring, and they're not that boring," Jackie Atkinson told the St. Cloud Times in a November 2000 interview. Atkinson and her husband, Ed, own Ackie's Pioneer Inn, the Freeport, Minnesota bar that inspired Lake Wobegon's Sidetrak Tap.

Atkinson said Thursday that the recent wave of allegations against men in media and politics, including those made against Keillor, "makes (her) sad."

"It's a rampage," she said. "We just went through Black Lives Matter, and that was the hot news story, and now it's this. ... What used to be OK is now not OK."

When asked if she believes the allegations against Keillor, Atkinson said she "doesn't know."

"I believe that some women were harassed by some people and some organizations. As for (Keillor) ... I don't know him personally. I'm sad for him, and I hope it's not true."

Atkinson said that the "epidemic" of sexual misconduct allegations makes her "real sad about the whole of society."

"We're frenzied, like fish. You put some food in the water and we just go for it," she said. "I'm sad that society has come to this."



Bud Heidgerken, right, has a warm word with customer Stephen Hartung of Avon as he worked behind the register of Charlie's Cafe on the morning of April 18, 2003. Heidgerken no longer owns the cafe that inspired Garrison Keillor's Chatterbox Cafe, but Charlie's is still in business under new ownership. JOHN DOMAN, COPYRIGHT 2001 2002 ST. CLOUD TIMES

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His literary home

Atkinson isn't the only Central Minnesota resident whose business was affected by Keillor's legacy.

Although the current owners of Charlie's Cafe declined to comment, Heidgerken, the former owner, said that the allegations don't line up with the Keillor he knew.

"It surprises me. We most certainly never saw any of that in Garrison," he said. "He always treated people with respect."

Heidgerken, who formerly served in the Minnesota House of Representatives, has shared the stage with Keillor in the past. He spoke of the storyteller's tolerant nature.

"I was a Republican, and he was a Democrat, but he always treated me fairly," Heidgerken said. "I know for him, it was interesting, because he was a Democrat and the area that he loved so well was all Republican."

Heidgerken painted a picture of Keillor as "an outsider looking in" on the Central Minnesota area, "because he was an Anoka boy."

But Keillor's more urban roots didn't stop Heidgerken from striking up a friendship with the homegrown celebrity over the years, nor did it stop the people of the area from appreciating his tongue-in-cheek take on their daily lives.

"He was just another guy. A little different from the rest of us — an intellectual. And a lot of time you writers are never accepted at home," Heidgerken said. "But Garrison, I think, always called this area his literary home."

As the story surrounding the allegations develops, Heidgerken says he's "hoping for the best."

"I'm hoping it's not true. He's got to have his day in court as well," he said. "I'm just hoping everything comes out alright for him, because he certainly never did any harm to us over here in Freeport."

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