

BBC is visiting Lake Wobegon

Program will focus
on Keillor's writing

By Dennis Lien

Knight-Ridder News Service

The thing about it, Elmer Ebnets says, is that it makes such perfect sense.

After all, how many baseball teams could be made up of nine brothers, in the heart of Lake Wobegon country, and in 1946, when Garrison Keillor had the legendary slugger Babe Ruth, dying of cancer, making a last barnstorming tour?

"This story just amazed me," Ebnets said of a 1986 fictional piece Keillor wrote for *Sports Illustrated*, in which nine Schroeder brothers played the Babe's team of all-stars at the Wally Bunsen Memorial Ballpark in Lake Wobegon, Minn.

Ebnets, now 61, was the youngest of 10 Ebnets brothers from Holdingford, Minn., nine of whom played three games together against neighboring communities in 1947. An earlier Holdingford manager named A.J. Schroeder sounded suspiciously like the article's crusty manager and father, E.J. Schroeder, he said.

Ebnets told the story last week to a film crew from the British Broadcasting Corp., which was in central Minnesota filming footage for a one-hour documentary on Keillor, the Minnesota humorist and writer who often uses the fictitious Lake Wobegon as a locale for his stories.

The crew was interested in Ebnets' story because of Keillor's penchant for drawing upon information gleaned from conversations or travels in small communities for his own work.

"He seems to be a pretty assiduous researcher," said the film's producer, Jeremy Harding.

The crew already has filmed Keillor, the former host of the nationally syndicated radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," in a sold-out performance at London's Apollo Theater and plans to film an interview with him in New York City. The documentary, part of a series of music and arts shows called "Omnibus," could be broadcast as early as next spring, Harding said.

The BBC was interested in a documentary on Keillor, Harding said, because he is widely read and publicized in Great Britain.

"The documentary will be about Garrison Keillor as a writer and, where it's relevant, about his life," Harding said. "We hope to show the language of the state and the people

he writes about and the characteristics that he reworks."

Although Lake Wobegon is on no map, Harding and his crew were in an area northwest of St. Cloud at the suggestion of Keillor, who grew up in Anoka and lived near Freeport while working for a public radio station in Collegeville.

"He suggested if we were looking for a sense of Lake Wobegon, it might pay for us to go to Holdingford," said Harding, who tried to dispel any notion that Keillor intended that community to be Lake Wobegon.

"It may well have been a key place," he said. "I suspect he likes it, but he likes a lot of Minnesota."

Among other visual possibilities suggested by Keillor, Harding said, were churches in Holdingford and Marine on St. Croix. "He wasn't really giving us general clues, but he was helping us out in a practical sense," Harding continued.

Harding said he expected a much harsher way of life in rural Minnesota than that portrayed by Keillor. But he said he had been pleasantly surprised and didn't think Keillor had romanticized the region.

"I was a bit dubious, but coming here has brought me much closer to his books," he said, referring to such Keillor works as "Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories."

In that book is a chapter called "A Glass of Wendy," a reference to the fictitious Saint Wendell's beer.

"They were in here a couple of hours," said John Achmann, the owner of Achmann's Tavern in St. Wendell. "Then they had me go outside and split some wood. What they wanted to show was what the people in his books are like."

While visiting Holdingford, Harding encountered Ebnets, a tall, wiry barber who still plays in a weekly basketball league.

Unlike Keillor, Ebnets has never claimed to be shy. And so Harding soon learned about the amazing similarities between the Ebnets and the Schroeders.

Keillor, he said, was spotted in Holdingford not long before the *Sports Illustrated* article appeared.

"He was here early in the morning and he never let it be known to anyone who he was," Ebnets said. "And there wasn't another family of nine brothers around here who played a full-fledged baseball schedule the way we did."