

Keillor still searches for 'Wobegon'

Central Minnesota reality disappoints
Prairie Home Companion star



Lois Thielen
Times Writers Group

First we had "In Search of Lake Wobegon" in National Geographic, which in itself is no small feat.

Then author Garrison Keillor and photographer Richard Olsenius expanded the magazine article and photos into a book of the same title, which came out last fall.

Now the best-selling duo is planning an exhibit of more of the same at the Stearns History Museum in St. Cloud.

Set to open April 21, the exhibit will feature 46 Olsenius photos accompanied by text by Keillor. The two will make an appearance to open the display and will talk about their work and autograph their book at a reception at the museum. The exhibit will be open through September.

Keillor began his chronicles of Central Minnesota some 30 years ago when he, his wife and small son moved from the Twin Cities to a rented farmhouse south of Freeport. Within a few years he began a radio program at St. John's University in Collegeville, where he described a small Central Minnesota town called Lake Wobegon.

Keillor, in his magazine article, said he set it in Central Minnesota because it was a place he knew something about and his listeners, who mostly knew the scenic North Shore, the Boundary Waters or the Twin Cities, didn't.

For the next 25 years Keillor talked and wrote

about Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, all the men good-looking and all the children above average." He moved out of Stearns County in the late 1970s, but he continued the story of Lake Wobegon.

Finally, in 1998, the county made a section of the Great Northern railbed into a bike trail and named it the Lake Wobegon Trail, putting his imaginary town on the map. Keillor decided to spend a few days driving around the area to see if it was there or not. He took with him Olsenius, a retired Minneapolis Tribune photographer.

The two made several visits to Central Minnesota during the next two years, capturing the essence of Lake Wobegon in text and photographs. This became the wildly popular National Geographic article published in December 2000.

Central Minnesotans at first were astonished that a national magazine would publish an article about them — everyday people, small-business owners, local homecoming royalty, farmers picking rocks, boys eating lunch at the local parochial school and families picnicking at the lake.

After their disbelief passed, they eagerly bought copies to share with friends, relatives and family members. After all, being featured in a publication the caliber of National Geo-



AP photo

Columnist Lois Thielen says Garrison Keillor doesn't understand the people behind Lake Wobegon because he didn't have the right contacts while in Central Minnesota.

graphic was pretty heady stuff.

However, after reading "In Search of Lake Wobegon" several times, I'm surprised that Keillor, an expert on the ways of Lake Wobegon, still doesn't understand the area or the behavior of its residents.

While Keillor lauds the banana cream pies served at Charlie's Cafe in Freeport, admits to spending time at Mary's Family Restaurant in Holdingford or Achmann's Tavern in St. Wendel, he seems disappointed that the area wasn't different from what made it Lake Wobegon in the first place.

He bemoans its lack of Norman Rockwell small-town friendliness — "... no neighbor ever dropped in with a plate of brownies." He wonders why the other guys at the Pioneer Inn didn't strike up a conversation with him, or why his visits to neighboring farmers resulted in "an uncomfortable few minutes."

Much of his isolation

arose from the differences between the Central Minnesota natives and the Keillor outsiders. Many of the area residents worked at neighboring factories or operated farms; Keillor was a self-employed writer.

Almost all of the Freeport area, in which the Keillor family lived, was Roman Catholic; Keillor was Protestant fundamentalist. Being a different religion also meant he wouldn't be a part of many volunteer groups, because most were offshoots of the Catholic Church — the Knights of Columbus, Christian Mothers, Catholic Aid Society, etc.

That left community booster clubs such as the Lions, the Jaycees, or sports activities such as the local softball team or snowmobile group. (Come now, can you see Keillor belonging to a group of guys who ride snowmobiles around as a sport?)

Maybe things would have been different had he worked a shift at Kraft Foods in Melrose, his wife had been a waitress at Charlie's, or their son had been old enough to attend the local elementary school.

Then again, had he been incorporated into the community, maybe we never would have known the many radio monologues that began: "It was a quiet week in Lake Wobegon."

Lois Thielen grew up on a farm north of Freeport while Garrison Keillor lived south of Freeport. She was a student at the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph while he developed his radio show at nearby St. John's University in Collegeville.