



Radio personality and author Garrison Keillor, who once lived near Freeport, is on the cover of the current issue of Time.

Keillor's renown gratifies county fans and friends

By SYLVIA LANG
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FREEPORT — "Local Boy Makes Good." If the town of Lake Wobegon existed, its newspaper, the Herald Star, might well have spread that headline across the front page this week.

Lake Wobegon's favorite son, Garrison Keillor, is on the cover of Time magazine. The feat proves once again, as Keillor would say, that in Lake Wobegon, all of the children are "above average."

Keillor is considered much above average these days because of the success of his just-published book, "Lake Wobegon Days." It has been on the New York Times' best-seller list for 10 weeks.

The book tells all about the little village that "time forgot and the decades cannot improve."

People who listen to "Prairie Home Companion" Saturday evenings on Minnesota Public Radio already are familiar with the mythical Midwestern town. The show, produced by St. Cloud native Margaret Moos (to whom the book is dedicated), centers around a lengthy monologue in which Keillor tells the news from Lake Wobegon, updating

listeners about happenings at the Sidetrack Tap, Bertha's Kitty Boutique and other fictional local haunts.

Lots of the material for that monologue and for the book is said to come from Freeport, the Stearns County community 25 miles north of St. Cloud.

Keillor lived on a farm about five miles south of Freeport in the early 1970s when he broadcast an early-morning classical music show from KSJR-FM radio station in Collegeville.

But most people in Freeport can't recall meeting Keillor.

"I've never heard of him," said Charlie Heidgerken, owner of Charlie's Cafe. "But I'm sure excited about the idea of someone from Freeport getting on the cover of Time."

When told that a former resident was a celebrity, Heidgerken immediately stopped cutting some of his famous caramel rolls and got on the phone to ask several other local businessmen if they ever had heard of Keillor. None had.

Heidgerken appeared surprised to hear that his restaurant may have been the inspiration for Keillor's fictional Chatterbox Cafe in Lake Keillor/12A

Keillor

Wobegon.

"That would be a good name for this place, though, because there always are three or four tables of chatterboxes here in the morning," he said.

Al Braun, a customer at Charlie's, said he had heard of Keillor's popular new book. "But I didn't realize he had lived near Freeport. That's pretty amazing," he said. He added that he thought Keillor might end up being another Sinclair Lewis, who immortalized Sauk Centre, just a few miles farther up Interstate 94.

A clerk at the Freeport Corner Store recalled seeing Keillor in the store. "He seemed like a nice enough guy," the clerk said, stacking some apples in a fruit bin.

The clerk was shy about having his name used in the newspaper. Keillor would understand; he is an extremely shy man, according to people who have met him.

Dr. Arlen Simi, a St. Cloud dentist, said Keillor was "very, very nervous" before giving a speech in St. Cloud in July 1984 for the benefit of the Children's Home of Minnesota.

"I was sort of surprised to see that," Simi said, "because he's appeared in public so many times and done radio shows for so many years."

Keillor didn't do much socializing the evening of the benefit, Simi recalled. Before he went on stage, Keillor asked someone he knew if he could stand next to him without engaging in a conversation.

Simi, who co-chaired the event, said he was impressed that Keillor volunteered his time for the benefit, which raised about \$10,000 for the society. "He's very generous. He didn't take a penny for the appearance," Simi said.

Keillor has many friends at St.

John's University in Collegeville because of his early association with the radio station there, according to the Rev. Hilary Thimmesh, the school's president.

"It's been a joy to see him go from success to success," said Thimmesh, long one of Keillor's friends and fans.

Thimmesh said he could remember the early beginnings of Lake Wobegon lore. "Garrison already was doing phony commercials for Jack's Auto Repair back in the early 1970s," Thimmesh said.

Thimmesh added, chuckling, that he had "no doubt" about Freeport providing the inspiration for Keillor's tales from Lake Wobegon.

"Anyone who reads Garrison's books and has lived here (in Stearns County) can say, 'I've been to that place or seen that place before.'" Thimmesh said.

To prove his point, he read a passage from Keillor's other popular book, "Happy to Be Here," that described perfectly a typical Stearns County farm.

At the end of the passage, Keillor said he had found paradise on that farm.

Keillor indeed was happy to be here, Thimmesh said. "In fact, I wonder how he likes living in St. Paul now," he said. "It's certainly not Lake Wobegon. It's a much different world he's in now. He's caught up in such a strange life for someone so introspective and quiet."

Keillor, according to Thimmesh, is "a philosopher, a person of great depth. Perhaps he's a prophet of our time. His book is popular, I think, because it touches all of us down to our roots."

Keillor gave a commencement address at St. John's a few years ago, Thimmesh said, "and it was Garrison at his best. It was about rearing children, and it was funny but also touching. That's the nature of life."