

## MYTHICAL COMMUNITY WITH A LIVE MESSAGE . .

**G**ARRISON Keillor, author of the new rage in the book world, *Lake Wobegon Days\** recaptures the spirit of land speculation that gripped most early American communities.

Lake Wobegon is known to thousands of Keillor's fans from the whimsical, earthy, tender tales he spins about its people on his weekly radio show from St. Paul.

The new book tells the history of Lake Wobegon, a mythical place, yet so true to life that it has become the quintessential small town the "real America" for a growing public.

In 1850, Henry Watt, an unsuccessful New England poet who once camped on the lake, dreams of founding a college and "a city of learning" there. Bayfield, a wealthy Bostonian who had been looking to Minnesota territory "with an eye toward speculation," agrees to go west to help in the venture.

Watt did not know, when he described his chosen town site, that Bayfield already owned it. Ojibway Indians had first rejected a government deal, accepting Bayfield's more generous offer for 500 square miles.

Federal agents said this would lead the Indians to sell off vast tracts to "eastern oligarchs" instead of opening Minnesota to "the common man". So, with a squad of soldiers as persuaders, they cancelled Bayfield's contract, made the Ojibways accept the standard three cents an acre and turned the tract back to Bayfield.

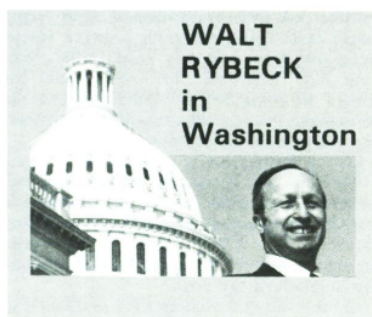
To attract residents, Bayfield produces a poster that depicts a fine town and announces: "Home of New Albion College, World Revered Seat of Learning Set In This Mecca of Commerce And Agriculture. Dr. Henry Francis Watt, Ph.D., Litt.D., D.D., President. Choice Lots Remain For Purchase, \$100."

Watt protests that he has no philosophy, literature or divinity degrees. Bayfield, however, assures him that the college, once established, will grant every degree that is needed.

A few years later, with a college and some fifty buildings on the shore of Lake Wobegon, one resident writes to a brother in Maine: "The state of things is prosperous at present - indeed, all are getting rich at a rapid rate and think nothing of doubling

\**Lake Wobegon Days*, Viking Press.

# Gripping land fever at Lake Wobegon



their prosperity once in five or six weeks.

"The price of farm land rises by leaps and bounds and town lots too, of which I have purchased seven at \$500 each for the small sum of \$70, which is the first year's interest on the mortgage and which I hope to sell within six months and become a creditor myself.

"Meantime, I must find a livelihood, however, as I don't have cash on hand and am considering using two of the lots as security to purchase a half-interest in the newspaper."

Keillor continues with the nearly-forgotten chapter in the history of new settlements.

The town's main industry appears to have been speculation, judging from feverish articles in the *Star* that predicted the imminent arrival of the St. Paul & Manitoba railroad and great fortunes for all. The town was mortgaged to the hilt; by 1856, six thousand lots were owned by two hundred and forty-seven people, most of whom, while practising a trade temporarily, were really in the business of waiting - waiting for the railroad to appear on the horizon and buy right-of-way (along the obvious practical route from the south, lots

were going for up to \$1,000), and deliver carloads of innocents to drive up the value of the land.

*Lake Wobegon Days* does not relate how to this day speculation continues to enrich a few at the expense of the many. Nor does it tell that Minnesota has one of the most complex property taxes in the nation. It provides different rates for some 40 different categories of land users, according to State Rep. John Burger.

Burger (whose community of Long Lake may be close to Lake Wobegon) is seeking ways to let communities benefit from land values that have continued to burgeon since pioneer days. And he is working with researchers on ways to untax homes, commercial structures and enterprises to create positive incentives and spur the economic growth and jobs so desperately needed now in his state.

He could gain philosophical support for the fair sharing of the land's bounties from another spinner of tales, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In *The Song of Hiawatha*, also set in Minnesota, Longfellow had the Great Spirit of the Ojibways say:

*"I have given you streams to fish in,  
I have given you bear and bison,  
I have given you roe and reindeer,  
I have given you brant and beaver,  
Filled the marshes full of wild-fowl,  
Filled the rivers full of fishes;  
Why then are you not contented?  
Why then will you hunt each other? . . .  
Therefore be at peace henceforward,  
And as brothers live together."*

Keillor's, Longfellow's and Burger's Minnesota is worth watching to see what new chapters will unfold in the struggle to overcome the state's modern land problems.