By Jim Knowles

San Leandro Times

Fred Setterberg remembers his dad coming home from work ready to drop.

“He was just beat and his hands were swollen from solvents and adhesives,” Setterberg recalls.

But the work at the Naval Air Station in Alameda was steady and the family had a roof over its head in Jefferson Manor, the fictional name of the neighborhood in Setterberg’s work of true-life fiction, *Lunch Bucket Paradise,* his account of growing up in San Leandro in the ’50s and ’60s.

Setterberg has been a writer most of his life and has won numerous awards but he’s always had the idea of writing about his childhood home of San Leandro, a blue-collar town in California, a land of abundance.

“I had always had the itch to write about where I grew up,” he says. “I really feel lucky I’ve lived long enough to write a story which is really important to me.”

The post-war suburbs have never been portrayed accurately, only in stereotypes, Setterberg says. The suburbs are always described as “a town of Archie Bunkers” or “a Leave It to Beaver existence, but if you look at Beaver’s house it’s like a mansion in Piedmont, not this.”

The post-war economic boom brought prosperity to millions and suburbs started sweeping the country, “the great experiment,” as Setterberg calls it. At the time, the Manor was a new development, surrounded by farms.

“Jefferson Manor” is a nod to Thomas Jefferson’s view of an agrarian America, as opposed to big cities.

“I remember looking out over the backyard and seeing cows,” Setterberg says.

But he didn’t write a sentimental story, he tells it like it is – from the poison sprays used on the yards to the pent up anger just below the surface of the newly poured suburban concrete.

The story is bounded by two wars – World War II and Vietnam. It's a story of fathers still carrying the weight of the massive mayhem of the Second World War and sons picking up the scent of what might await them in a far-off war in Southeast Asia.

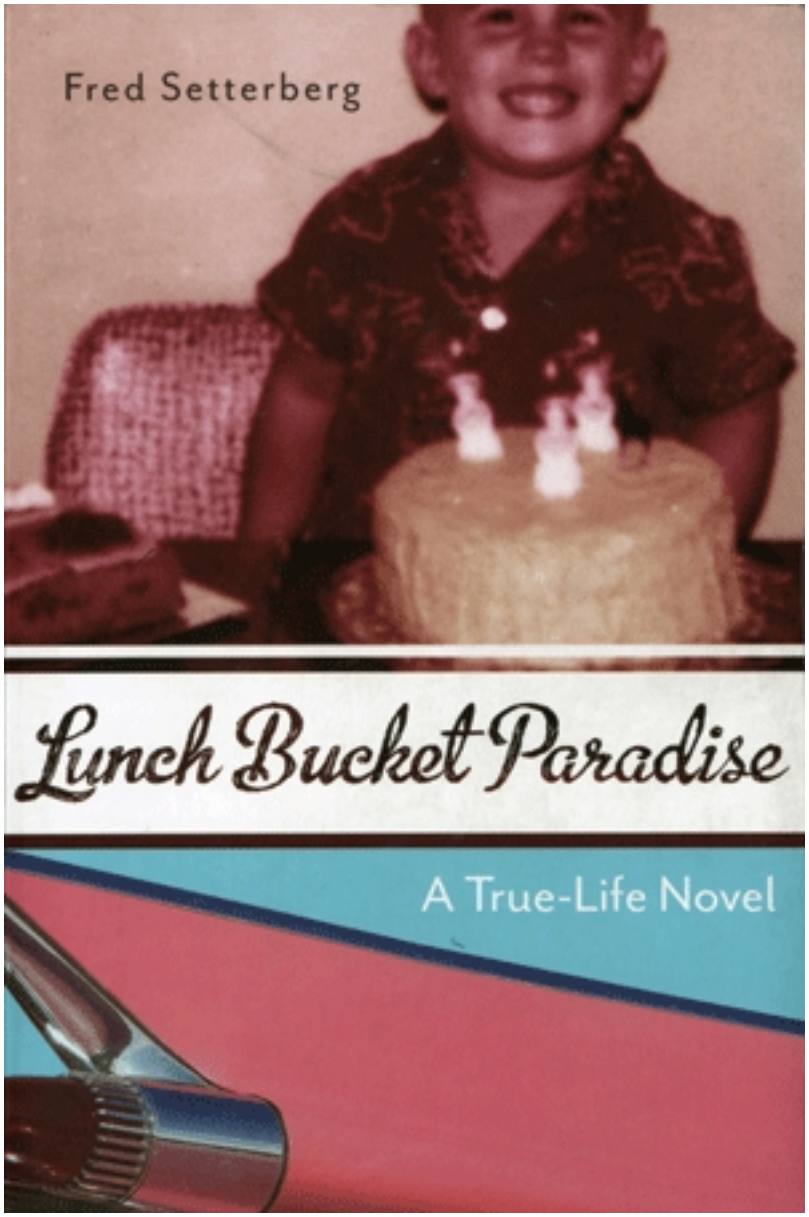
Men had spent their youth in the war in Europe or the Pacific and there was a sense of violence and roughness to everything, Setterberg says. But at the same time there was a great economic miracle springing up between wars.

One day in high school a teacher tells the guys that the ones fighting the war in Vietnam are from towns just like theirs, and they know she's right.

There was tension in the air but also great hope. In Lunch Bucket Paradise a working man could make a good life for himself and his kids could get a good education and have an even better life.

Setterberg is afraid that era may be gone, where people believed this society worked, invested in schools, and knew life for their kids would only get better.

He says he's fond of the quote from writer Susan Straight who said the book evokes "an eerie prescience for the future of California."



The book is a tribute to his parents, and all the parents in the neighborhood, who made it possible for him to have his band, The Lost Souls (in real life they were The Post Raisin Band).

One of their regular gigs was at Ft. Ord in Monterey, because one of the dads had a connection there, Setterberg recalls, and a parent would drive them down to Monterey for their shows.

The band was into Motown and their hero was James Brown. The lead singer wore a red velour cape, made by his mom. The guitarists and horn players wore satin jackets and had the Motown moves down pat.

At some moments a couple of his friends in the band use racial slurs common in a segregated America, but at the same time they're into James Brown like you wouldn't believe. It's a dichotomy that shows that suburban life is complex, an example of what separates Setterberg's book from the stereotypes of suburbia.

This band of white and Hispanic guys even played "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." That is, until they played it at a gig at Castlemont High in Oakland one night and realized that it didn't quite ring true.

Setterberg still lives close by, near Lake Merritt in Oakland. He drove over to the Manor Bowl for an interview with the newspaper, where he remembers bowling as a kid.

He wants to describe what the parents did for the kids in the Manor, to help them succeed but not give them everything and spoil them.

“It’s as if they said, ‘You figure it out and we’ll hold up the walls.’ It was good parenting.”

Parents didn’t just care for their own kids, but for the kid down the street or around the block, Setterberg says.

It’s the same neighborhood where Brian Copeland grew up and portrays in his one-man show, *Not a Genuine Black Man.*

Setterberg says he remembers some of the same people who were helpful to the Copeland family, when a black family in San Leandro wasn’t welcomed by everybody.

“There were people who looked out for you, the men at St. Felicitas, for example,” Setterberg says.

Setterberg’s father grew up on the plains of Saskatchewan and his family fled during the Dust Bowl in the ’30s. Later, in San Francisco he spend four years in a sanitarium with tuberculosis, but he used the time to read, self-educated in everything from the Ancient Greeks to modern politics.

“Before I was in my 30s I couldn’t sit down and debate with him,” Setterberg says.

He was a jack-of-all-trades who could fix anything around the house and who would never think of calling a plumber, electrician or carpenter to do a job he could do himself.

Another suburban stereotype is that the houses are all the same, like the ’60s song “Little Boxes” by Malvina Reynolds.

That's another image Setterberg doesn't buy. A lot of houses were similar but people worked on their house, put in a brick fireplace, and made the house their own.

The parents were a generation kicked around by the Depression but they were building a new life and the future looked bright.

"They didn't have much," Setterberg says. "But they had optimism about the future."

You can read more about Lunch Bucket Paradise *at Setterberg's website: www.FredSetterberg.com.*

The publisher, HeyDay Books is offering a 20 percent discount to San Leandro Times readers by using the code SL TIMES. The link is: https://heydaybooks.com/book/lunch-bucket-paradise.