

'Recollections of Frogtown' tells story of author's early days

By JANE MCCLURE

Long-ago childhood days in Frogtown come alive on the pages of *In Those Days: Recollections of Frogtown*. The memoir by Highland Park resident Alex Leibel was initially written for family and friends, but is finding a wider audience.

Leibel grew up in Frogtown during the Great Depression and World War II eras. His parents were German immigrants and the family lived on Blair Avenue just a block away from St. Agnes Catholic Church and kitty-corner from the Nickel Joint tavern. His stories are of a boy who loved cowboys, sports and playing outdoors; a boy who eagerly awaited Christmas and the St. Paul Winter Carnival. But it is also a story about family, faith and friendships that endure today.

The late Pioneer Press columnist Don Boxmeyer called Leibel "... a very talented writer with a gifted vocabulary." Boxmeyer enjoyed Leibel's stories of growing up in a working-class family and the stories of coal bins, rag vendors, binder guns, tar trucks, playing ditch, the ice-man and the 4:30 p.m. whistle that sent the working men home at day's end. Boxmeyer's encouragement and the urging of friends and family pushed the book project along.

"I'm very gratified by the response the book has received," Leibel said. He enjoys telling the stories and knowing that others



Author Alex Leibel's parents were German immigrants and the family lived on Blair Avenue just a block away from St. Agnes Catholic Church (above) and kitty-corner from the Nickel Joint tavern.

enjoy them.

Leibel attended St. Agnes School and graduated from Washington High School, the College of St. Thomas and William Mitchell School of law. He also served in the U.S. Marine Corps. He practiced law for many years, starting in 1957. The family lived in area neighborhoods before settling in Mendota Heights for many years, where they raised their son and daughter. They now have four grandchildren.

Alex and his wife Diane have lived in Highland Park since 1991 but often go back to Frog-

town to attend Mass and visit childhood haunts and attend Mass at St. Agnes. The church's Mozart Mass is a favorite.

Much of Frogtown has changed since the time of *In Those Days*. The Leibel family home is gone, as are friends' homes and many of the businesses his family patronized.

Leibel is a skilled storyteller and writer, describing vividly a time when he and kids didn't have much but shared what they had. Children played outside until dark, when their mothers

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would call them in. His stories will bring back memories for anyone who ever paged through a mail-order catalog, circling toys and making a Christmas wish list, or played forgotten childhood games.

Leibel and his young friends had a propensity for mischief. One time he and other little friends sampled the goods in another family's wine cellar, with disastrous results.

Leibel's law practice limited much of his written work to legal briefs and documents. But he has always enjoyed writing for fun, with two unpublished novels and several short stories penned under the name Alex Benedict. His undergraduate degree is in English literature and he continues to enjoy reading and taking college classes.

For many years his wife, Diane, son James, daughter Laurie and other family members and friends urged him to write his life stories. He questioned whether there would be much interest. "We have a friend who said, 'This is what you have to do. You have to write a book about growing up in Frogtown,'" Diane Leibel said.

Leibel finally wrote the memoir for friends and family, in longhand. A friend typed it up and the family made copies at Kinko's. As more people read the manuscript, they urged Leibel to have it published as a book.

The Leibel family has found that *In Those Days* is enjoyed by others who grew up at the same time, in any place. James Leibel said the book also resonates with people whose parents grew up at the same time his father did. "A lot of us grew up hearing and enjoying those stories," he said.

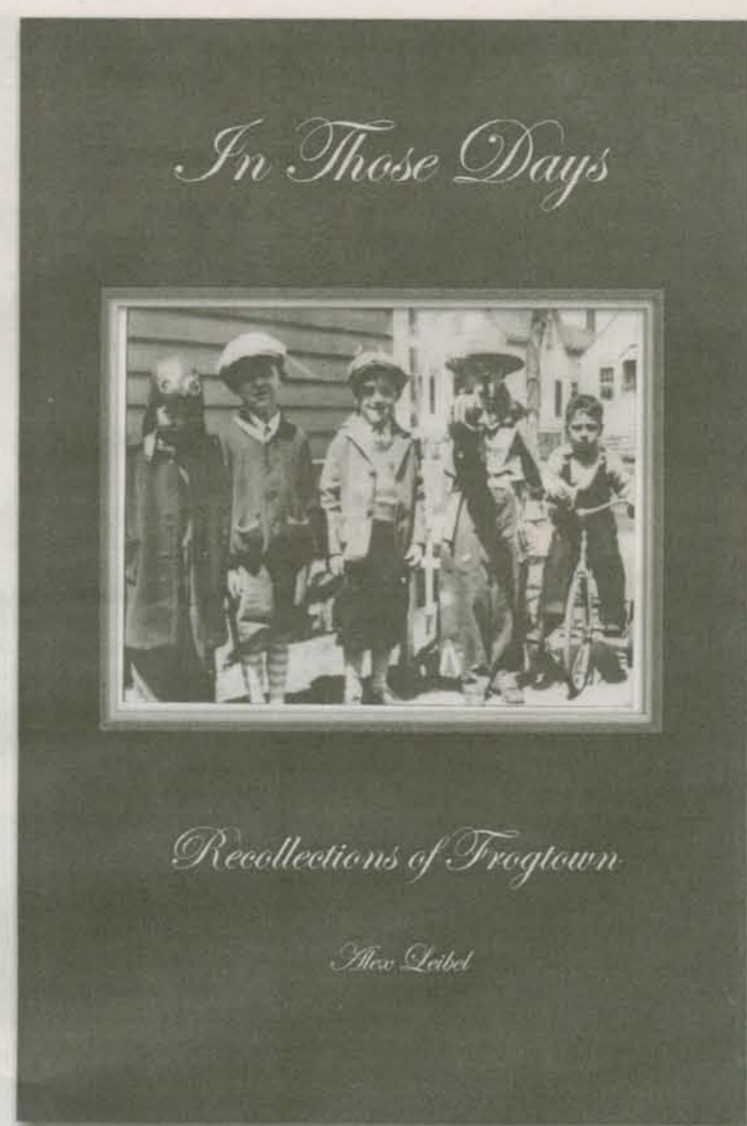
The book cover features a picture of a group of boys, who look as if they are answering a casting call for an *Our Gang* movie. Leibel is wearing a long, oversized coat and an aviator's cap with goggles. Another friend, dressed as a cowboy, points a toy gun at the camera.

It was a time when families didn't have much but shared what they had. "Nobody knows today how hard people had it then," said Leibel. Although he and his siblings and friends were aware that money was tight, it wasn't something they dwelt on. "Everyone we knew was poor."

For Leibel, it was a childhood of seeking a balance between wanting to be "American" yet respecting and understanding the traditions and heritage of his parents Appolonia and Alexander Senior. They would speak German when they didn't want the five Leibel children to know what they were saying. They also didn't understand their sons' love of sports. "They thought sports were a waste of time," Leibel said.

But for a child, having immigrant parents could be difficult. He considered his first name to be old-fashioned and was usually called Junior. "I never went by Alexander," Leibel said.

But as he grew up, Leibel appreciated his parents' heritage and wanted to learn more about it. In one part of the book, Leibel



describes singing "Silent Night" in German with his mother, when she was in a nursing home.

His parents, especially his mother, had a strong faith. Growing up Catholic is a recurring theme in the book. Leibel grew up in a community where the Catholic faith was all-encom-

passing.

Frogtown still has three Catholic churches. In Leibel's childhood St. Agnes was largely German. Poles attended St. Adalbert and St. Vincent still reflected its Irish roots. People lived near their parishes.

One of Leibel's favorite

chapters is *The Sign of the Cross*, in which he describes a child's questioning of faith and the use of prayer. "When I was a kid, I think I took religion too seriously," Leibel wrote. "It got to be I took everything the nuns told me as gospel and I'm not trying to use a pun here or whatever you call it, but a lot of my worries were about church and religion and that sort of thing. What really bothered me and that I couldn't understand was everyone was praying and asking God

Henry bar triggered too much guilt for the young boy. *The Faust*, which was an X-rated theater in its final days, was the neighborhood theater during Leibel's childhood.

One day at St. Agnes Grade School, a nun asked him to sing a few scales as a choir tryout. He wound up as an altar boy and describes the rituals that task entailed, as well as his own childhood theory of where Ash Wednesday ashes came from. He imagined angels bravely ventur-

"It got to be I took everything the nuns told me as gospel and I'm not trying to use a pun here..."

- Author Alex Leibel

for special favors and some other people were asking God for the same thing and only one could get it."

He vividly recalls a St. Agnes nun telling the grade school students to pray for a high school basketball victory over Cretin. "Now I don't know for sure but I'd bet the Cretin kids were asking God for them to win and Cretin was a Catholic school and all those holy Christian Brothers taught there and they might have had more influence than our nuns but I'm not sure about that."

He also writes about the Lenten season and his mother's admonition to give up things he loved. Giving up movies and candy proved to be too much, but sneaking to the Faust Theater for a Geronimo film and an Oh

ing to Hell to retrieve the all-important ashes.

But there are also stories of childhood and adolescent fun. One chapter describes how he and his friends would connive to sneak into sporting events. "Hey, we were Frogtown kids," he said. "We didn't have any money."

Leibel's surviving siblings and friends have enjoyed the book, although some have differing memories of what happened when. Leibel noted there are stories that didn't make the book, such as his annual trips to the Minnesota State Fair. That may be materials for a sequel.

The Leibel family's hope is to distribute the book more widely. It's currently for sale at Micawber's, Common Good Books and online, at alexleibel.com

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