

ONE: DOWN AND OUT IN EAST VANCOUVER

Today, Vancouver's citizens discuss concerns over the cost of living and the problems of home affordability with the grave tones that other cities usually reserve for the topic of violent crime—which, according to most evening news reports, is now all but restricted to the suburbs. It wasn't always so. The 1986 World's Fair—Expo 86—is commonly cited as the event that changed Vancouver's small-town sensibility forever. But was it a change for the better? This is hotly debated; many residents nostalgically remember Expo favourably while others believe it destroyed the city's character. But the first significant signs of change in Vancouver took place considerably earlier than Expo, when Vancouver could be seen as two different and distinct cities.

More than fifty years ago, Vancouver started to undergo changes resulting from zoning bylaws, immigration, and industry that would begin to shape not only its size and density, but also the kind of policing issues it would face in the future. The city's downtown core and West End would undergo drastic change in the 1960s, thanks to new zoning bylaws that encouraged the development of 220 highrises and apartment buildings, creating a new city skyline where single-family, three-storey homes had stood before.¹

The economy of British Columbia was still being driven by large lumber companies such as MacMillan Bloedel, and that industry coated the province in sawdust, even in downtown Vancouver, where log booms sat next to the wharves on False Creek. From the 1920s to the beginning of the 1960s, False Creek “rivalled Pittsburgh for smoke output.”² But this was beginning to change. As Vancouver historian Bruce MacDonald notes: “In 1963 there were just three sawmills left in False Creek. The utilization of sawmill waste in BC's new pulp mills and the subsequent disappearance of smoking beehive burners greatly reduced the amount of smoke in the city's air and halted the

1 Bruce MacDonald, *Vancouver: A Visual History* (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 1992), 55.

2 Michael Kluckner, *Vancouver: Between the Streets* (Vancouver, BC: Consolidated Merri-ment Ltd., 1981), 121.

number of foggy days compared to the 1940s.”³

In the 1960s, some properties in the city sold for less than they had in 1912⁴, but by the early 1970s new and old homeowners were becoming property speculators, and within just a few years a real estate boom doubled property values. However, while downtown and west side residents were experiencing a sense of growth and a promise of prosperity, East Vancouver was a different story. The east side neighbourhood of Strathcona was regarded as a blighted area. Even before the 1967 proposal to run a freeway through it, areas of East Vancouver were slated for demolition. Since the 1950s, banks would not lend money to area residents for home improvements. In general, East Vancouver was not often regarded as an attractive neighbourhood, especially in comparison to the west side of the city.

In fact, for much of Vancouver’s history the west and east sides of Vancouver were seen as two very distinct parts of town. They differed in attitudes, occupations, cultural makeup, and political affiliations, with residents on the west side typically white-collar workers, and those on the east side mostly blue-collar and less prosperous.

While the East Van neighbourhood surrounding Commercial Drive is today regarded as a multicultural area, home to a broad array of eateries and cafés, and where a left-of-centre cool is seen in abundant supply on the sidewalks and in its stores, in the 1960s East Vancouver had none of this. Students, artists, musicians, and the counterculture were more often found in the west side neighbourhood of Kitsilano, near the University of British Columbia. East Van was yet to undergo the influx of Vietnamese and Latin American immigrants in the late 1970s and ’80s that resulted in new ethnic businesses on Commercial Drive. In the early 1970s, the area was widely regarded as Vancouver’s Little Italy.

There was plenty of colour and personality in the neighbourhood: On the street, the sounds of children taking accordion lessons in the back of barber shops could be heard mixed with the shouts of adults playing cards or doing a little wagering on the horse races at Exhibition Park. Women walking by themselves along Commercial Drive in the afternoons were used to being cat-called or whistled at. Some ignored it, but others fired back with vivid Italian

³ MacDonald, 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

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swear words or hand gestures they'd learned even if they themselves weren't Italian. East Vancouver children learned to skate on Trout Lake back when the winter froze it over, and learned to swim there in the summer.

Many Commercial Drive businesses that Vancouverites would now consider venerable institutions didn't open until the 1970s, such as Joe's Café in 1974 (although Nick's Spaghetti House has been on the Drive since 1955). Other stores included Grippo Television Repair, Manitoba Hardware, Norman's Market, and Longo's Auto Shop, along with Monty's Pool Hall and Grandview Billiards (open since 1921, until it closed in the early 2000s, and today home to Falconetti's East Side Grill and The Cannibal Café)⁵. For a bite to eat, you could go to Wally's Burgers, but you could also find home-cooked burgers made by the old-timer off Victoria Drive who grilled them on his hibachi and sold them right off the front stoop of his apartment building.



Commercial Drive circa 1960s.

PHOTO: Walter E. Frost, City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 447-310

Down at the corner of Princess and Hastings streets was Curly's Tattoos, run by the wheelchair-bound Curly Allen himself (real name John W. Weatherhead). Although paralyzed on his left side, he inked thousands of tattoos in East Vancouver for generations, always with an ever-present cigarette that dangled from his lips. His shop was just up the street from a butcher who advertised horse meat for sale; the sign stayed for years, long after they'd stopped selling it.

Until 1970, you had to be older than twenty-one to drink alcohol when the

⁵ Jak King, *The Drive: A History to 1956* (Vancouver, BC: The Drive Press, 2011), 62.

legal age was dropped to nineteen. Those who were even younger but looked reasonably old enough might drink their first beers down at the American Hotel on Main or in one of the bars in Chinatown that didn't ask for ID—unless it was a Sunday when all the liquor stores and bars were closed, leaving the more adventurous to head to Point Roberts across the border in Washington State.

Keith Singer, who was born in 1951 and raised in East Vancouver where his father was known in the local billiard halls as a pool hustler, recalls that there was a sense of stagnation in East Vancouver that especially affected neighbourhood youth. “There wasn't a lot to do or places to go in this area of town. East Van was a working-class area that had started to run down. There were a lot of older businesses and older homes, but there wasn't a lot to do if you didn't have a job or went to school. [The local secondary schools] Vancouver Technical and Gladstone weren't known as academic schools or strong in athletics [programs]. So a lot of kids had a lot of time on their hands. If you quit school, you had even more time to kill. Put this together with the drug culture that had spread in the area and you have a cultural time bomb.”

Rod MacDonald, who grew up south of Clark Park in the 1960s and later worked as a battalion chief with the Vancouver Fire Department, remembers the divide in the city: “The difference between the east side and west side was very noticeable back then. I remember, we went on a visit to a west side school, and everything was nicer, modern, and new there, where our school was really rundown. That sort of thing, that the west side was better off, helped build our dislike [of west siders]. Where we were from, everything was so worse off.”

It would be disingenuous to characterize East Van's social problems as approaching anything like the level of urban decay taking place in larger cities at the time, especially in the United States; this was not the South Bronx, after all. There were no depopulated blocks or boarded-up, burnt-out buildings lying in rubble, or drunks passed out or dead on Commercial Drive. But some of the same symptoms of poverty, substance abuse, and absentee parents, combined with North America-wide trends in music, youth counter-culture attitudes, and fashion, contributed to the likelihood of East Vancouver kids joining territorial street gangs as in other cities.

Many East Van youths also shared the experience of having immigrant families. “There was a common denominator in that all our parents were from

other ethnicities or countries,” remembers Al Walker, who later, as a full-time musician and prominent blues-rock guitarist with his born-and-raised-in-the-East-End roots, played hundreds of gigs in neighbourhood clubs as he came up in the scene. Born in 1956, he grew up in East Vancouver and attended Gladstone secondary school. “There weren’t just Italian families, but Scottish, Irish, Portuguese, Eastern European ... My father had come from South Africa. But one thing everybody seemed to have in common were parents who came from somewhere else, where they’d been poor or left for political reasons. Living in this new country, they’d constantly warn us not to get in trouble—so much so, it drove us crazy.”

Some parents were overly worried about their kids, but there were others who seemed unable to care for their children at all. These parents, who had lived through the war, were perhaps too preoccupied just trying to put their lives back together to deal with the rest of the world, including their kids. Whether beset with chronic unemployment, poverty, or alcoholism, this story would be repeated time and time again by many East Vancouver families. All too often the boys who lived in such homes learned to shut up before they could talk, and home life seemed constantly filled with tension. Sometimes an absentee mother didn’t see her children enough to take care of them; in other cases, it was a nightly guessing game to determine the father’s state of drunkenness: would he be tipsy and thus in a good mood, or would the demon drink turn Dad into a minotaur and the home a labyrinth where the boys were chased and beaten, leaving their mothers or sisters lying curled up on the floor? The nightmare of the evening before was never spoken of the next day. “You had hard-working, hard-drinking people,” Rod MacDonald recalls. “There was more than one kid out on the street at eleven o’clock at night. If your parents were awake, sometimes you just didn’t go home.”

Another East Ender, Rod Schnob, recalled his turbulent home life years later in a letter from Matsqui prison where he was serving a life sentence. “The kids on my block jumped me and beat me up pretty good ... I ran home with tears in my eyes and [my father] leaned down and told me that cowards don’t live in this house ... [My grandmother] armed me with a stick and a garbage can lid in order to make my presence known to the neighbourhood kids.” The only time his father expressed pride in him was when Rod came home wear-



Houses along Heatley Avenue, 1972.

PHOTO: Walter E. Frost, City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 677-947

ing the neighbours' son's blood on his clothes.⁶ In such homes, the boys often learned the particular vocabulary of male violence, handed down from father to son. And while once they were too small to defend their mothers or sisters, eventually they became old enough, big enough, and skilled enough to fight back.

Born in Nova Scotia in 1954, Malcolm "Mac" Ryan was another East Vancouver teen with an unstable home life. School life was no less turbulent; disciplined on too many occasions for fighting, vandalism, swearing, and possession of alcohol, he became too much to handle, even for East Van teachers used to dealing with disruptive youth, and he was expelled from the district's schools. "About three or four of us got kicked out of all the East Van schools altogether, so we had to go to Kitsilano Secondary School [on the west side]. What a culture shock!" He laughs when recalling this. "From all the greasers to all the hersheys—that's what we used to call guys from good homes who had better clothes. We had cut-off jackets and tattoos and Dayton boots."

⁶ Rod Schnob, "Dear Mother, Dear Mother," *The Incarcerated InkWell*, <http://theincarceratedinkwell.ca/>

Now in his early sixties, Ryan is a likeable, raffish character with a good sense of humour and a gravelly laugh. He strikes you as the sort of man who worked in the trades for most of his life—but in a trade that may not have always been above-board. He still lives in East Vancouver and is a storehouse of names and stories from decades of living there, periodically interrupted by stays in prison, which began at an early age.

“My stepdad was a real bastard,” says Ryan. “He used to beat me and my mother. So eventually, I just ran away from home, and I ended up getting sent to juvie at twelve years old.”

Ryan didn't know it, but he was headed to a place that thousands of Vancouver's young offenders would pass through and where many Clark Park gang members would first meet. Vancouver's Juvenile Detention Home was where some of the most unmanageable kids were sent to be disciplined—and for more than just not saying their prayers or combing their hair.