

# Oakland's International Blvd

RT Manning

Wednesday August 7, I pay a visit to observe the most notorious street in the country. This is in East Oakland and it has a reputation for being very dangerous. I decide to go and see it for myself. I didn't have a single problem being there. In planning it, I didn't want to go by foot and get mugged or worse. I didn't want to bring the car and have it broken into or vandalized. I decided the safest option to visit is by bus during the day. And that's what I did. East Oakland is a depressed area and low income district. Most of the people are good people - they only have to work to make their financial obligations, which can be very difficult with high cost and minimum wages. Some families have to share one room. As time goes by, things will get progressively worse.

Being a youth in East Oakland is like being cursed to a life a poverty. There are very few opportunities to prosper there. It is like being setup for failure. One winds up being a victim of crime or a victim of justice system or both and not much chance to escape. So one that lives there is trapped. East Oakland once had an economy after the second World War. It had shipyards, factories and warehouses along the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad. It offered relatively good opportunities for negroes in spite of the racism. Most of these opportunities have left town due to the export of jobs overseas from globalization where labor rates are cheaper. The people that live there are getting squeezed by high inflation and low wage rates if one can find the employment. These conditions force youth to get into gangs for the sake of survival and get involved into lucrative illegal activity. The drug and skin trades can make one a millionaire overnight. There is an attitude to flaunt the law. And, they do it.

I take the 181 bus to BART and get off at Bay Fair BART station. I take the AC Transit bus #1 and it heads north on E 14th Street. This street it looks suburban and normal and not threatening in the least. I am in San Leandro. I see shopping centers, car lots, repair shops, eateries both local owned and franchises. The street has a fresh appearance and clean of litter and trash. The passengers on this bus were elderly and some were extremely obese that they take up two seats. There were only two white people on the bus. Before I reach Oakland, they are off the bus on E 14th street. When I get on the International, things change. It's East Oakland's International Boulevard; it got that name when Jerry Brown was mayor. It was formerly called East 14th Street. The street got such a bad reputation, the mayor and city council were compelled to change the name, to encourage redevelopment.

Now, I am the only white person on the bus. The first thing noticed about the street is the graffiti all over the place. Many of the business have security bars on the windows and doors. It looks like it's all run down. Small private businesses still exist. It has used car dealers, mechanics shops, independent eateries not franchised, pawn shops, filthy run down strip malls or shopping centers, small grocery and liquor stores, exploitive loan companies and fortune tellers. Some businesses cope with the graffiti by having colorful graffiti related to their business; it seems to work well; the taggers don't seem bother them. I didn't see much of a police presence there, only one squad car. There is a police

station on the International. I didn't see any drug dealing, prostitution or illegal activity. On International, there are establishments of religion. I didn't see much graffiti on the places of worship. There still seems to be a respect for the Deity.

In the bus, a mother and daughter were together; the mother was 32 years old and daughter was 8 years old. To keep the neighborhood kids from harming her, mother had to fix the daughter's hair to conform with the normal in East Oakland. She would patiently braid her hair applying colorful pastel tubular beads. Doing this on the bus is her only opportunity for she has to work two or more jobs. The mother has to be careful so the pimps don't get her daughter. Child prostitution is popular in East Oakland.

The bus ride was about a two hour excursion. I got off the bus at 19th Street and Broadway. I had lunch at Frida's Cafe on 23rd and Broadway. I had a sandwich and a Pepsi. I shortly took BART to Fremont. I caught a bus back to San Jose. It was an interesting experience. Most of the people are good - it's just that they find life more difficult to cope with and they try to make the best of it.



International Blvd at 53rd Avenue - photo courtesy of SF Gate and SF Chronicle