

ARABBING: More Than a Way of Life

By Katherine O. Rizzo

Delivering fruit and vegetables using a horse-drawn cart may seem outdated to many, especially at a time when the entire world has practically been forced indoors and onto cell phones, tablets, computers and other electronic devices to do everything from ordering groceries to attending work or school. It would seem that in the virtual age we are living in, Arabbing might have met its end, however, the complete opposite has happened.

While the world anxiously awaits a COVID-19 vaccine and a return to “normal,” the tradition of Arabbing has become an even more important fixture of the Baltimore City landscape. Without the dedication of these men and women, many residents within the urban areas of Baltimore would not have been able to weather the storm that is the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the Front Lines

When Governor Hogan shut down Maryland businesses last March, except for those deemed essential, food distribution remained on the “essential” list. However, for many inner city residents, heading to the grocery store was not an option. Whether it was physically impossible or for fear of catching COVID, a large population stayed indoors, relying heavily on delivery of food.

The Arabbers of Baltimore immediately stepped forward, taking to the streets to deliver food and other necessary items, such as facemasks and information about COVID-19. However, instead of selling these items, they gave, and continue to give, them away for free, partnering with various groups such as Food Rescue Baltimore, Holly Poultry and the University of Maryland, Baltimore’s, Community Engagement Center.

Arabbers are uniquely suited to this role. M. Holden Warren, founder of Food Rescue Baltimore and Vice President of the Arabber Preservation Society, stated in an April 2020 *Equiery* article, “the Arabbers are a trusted institution. The people in these communities will listen to their advice and messages.” As the pandemic continues, Arabber Levar Muller of the Carlton Street Stable recently stated, “we have a duty. It’s up to us to provide to these people.”

Despite the tradition of Arabbing being a fairly social affair, normal operations have halted until it is safe to resume gatherings. “It’s a hard pill to swallow, but we will get through it,” Arabber Dorothy Johns of the Bruce Street Stables said. Johns has switched to using her truck for neighborhood deliveries during the pandemic. “I don’t want to encourage people to gather around the horses so the truck is a bit more subtle,” she said. “We are all afraid of [COVID] and we want to protect ourselves and others.”

Arabber James Chase of Fremont Stables stated, “There are still people in the city that cannot go to the store. We help these people. We provide a door to door service.” Chase is also the current President of the Arabber Preservation Society. Muller added, “We will survive this [pandemic] because we have to survive it. We are a service to the community and we need to preserve this history.”

The one positive that has come from this pandemic for Baltimore’s Arabbing community is the positive public exposure they are receiving. From articles and photos in local publications to national news coverage, it seems the country needs these stories of public service more than ever.

An American Story

Street vendors have been around since the beginning of America’s history. The tradition of Arabbing, selling fruits and vegetables from horse-drawn carts, stems back to the early 19th century and was once common all along the East Coast. The lyrical calls of the Arabbers have become an American oral tradition, taught by word of mouth through generations.

“The horse and wagon pretty much built this country,” Muller stated, explaining that without a horse and wagon, distribution of products across the U.S. could not have happened. The history of Arabbing has not just become important to America’s story, but to that of Baltimore City and the African American community. “You have to be an old soul to understand the culture [of Arabbing],” Johns added.

“Baltimore is lucky to have something as distinguishing as the Arabbers,” stated freelance journalist and filmmaker Charles Cohen. “Arabbing really is a part of Baltimore and a way to embrace rural culture inside Baltimore City.” Cohen has been filming John’s Bruce Street Stables and has even brought filmmaking students from John’s Hopkins to the stables for assignments. “I’m shooting because the story is there,” he said.

After the Civil War, many African Americans headed north and took with them some of the South’s rural traditions. African American men mostly dominated Arabbing in cities until the 1920s when women began to be more involved with the trade.

Mildred Alan was one of these women who headed to the streets of Baltimore and became the first African American woman to own a stable within the City. “Our family came up from the Carolinas in the 1920s and she was my grandfather’s mother,” Muller explained. “Arabbing is all about family.”

The Remaining Three

As industries and technologies progressed, the need for horses and wagons almost dried up

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As soon as the state shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic last March, the Arabbing community of Baltimore City shifted gears providing food, facemasks and other supplies to inner city residents free of charge.



Arabbing is a time-honored tradition kept alive by a few devoted Baltimore families. (photo taken in 2008)



Dorothy Johns, owner of the Bruce Street Stables, with one of her Arabbing horses.



The Carlton Street Stable is one of three remaining Arabbing stables in Baltimore.