

The Arabbers of Baltimore

A Photo Essay by Roland Freeman

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“Arabbing” (ā-rab-bing) is a folk term peculiar to Baltimore, Maryland, for the selling of goods from horse-drawn wagons, pushcarts, trucks and corner stands by hawkers of street vendors. It derives from “arab” or “street arab”, colloquial words for a peddler. The term is most often applied to the selling of produce from horse-drawn wagons.

Selling from horse-drawn wagons was once a major means of supplying city-dwellers with fresh fruit and vegetables, fish and poultry, and ice, wood and coal. Today, this kind of street peddling is nearly extinct in major American urban areas — except in Baltimore, where some 100 wagons still work the streets.

In the 1960s there were some 25 stables in the city of Baltimore. Many stables have since been torn down as part of Baltimore’s urban renewal, and many closed because they were not economically viable. Another blow to Arabbing has been the relocation of the Camden and Pratt Street wholesale produce markets to Jessup, Maryland, some 20 miles outside the city, beyond the reach of horse-drawn wagons. And it is increasingly hard for the Arabbers to compete with the large chain food stores which have edged closer in recent years to the neighborhoods formerly served exclusively by their wagons. However, the Arabbers’ continuing strength is personal customer service and attention.

The five stables which still operate in Baltimore, and the Arabbers who continue to ply their trade from them, are today both present participants in a style of commerce rooted in the city’s culture and history and a reminder of how far and how fast Baltimore has changed.

The Stables

Only five Arabbing stables still operate in Baltimore. There are only two men left in the city who shoe horses for the Arabbers, and three men who still build and repair wagons. Most horses and wagon parts are bought in the Pennsylvania Dutch country.

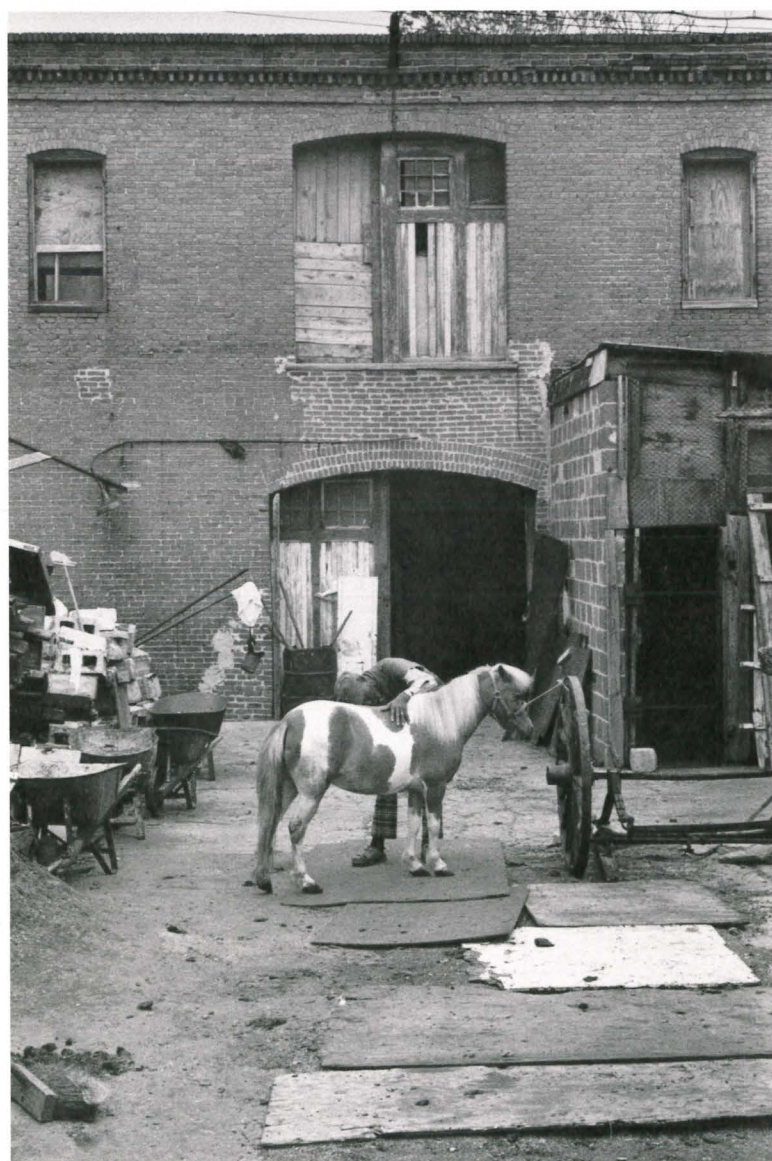
All horses must be examined at least twice a year by a veterinarian in order for the horses' owner to obtain an annual Arabbing license. Throughout the year, the stables and horses are also continually monitored by the State of Maryland Animal Control Division and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.



Arabbers at "Buddy" Kratz' stable in Southwest Baltimore: (left to right) Tom "Tomboy" Hughes, Walter "Teeth" Kelly, Walter "Buddy" Kratz, William "Easter Jim" Fields, Robert "Porky" Warner, and "Mandyman."

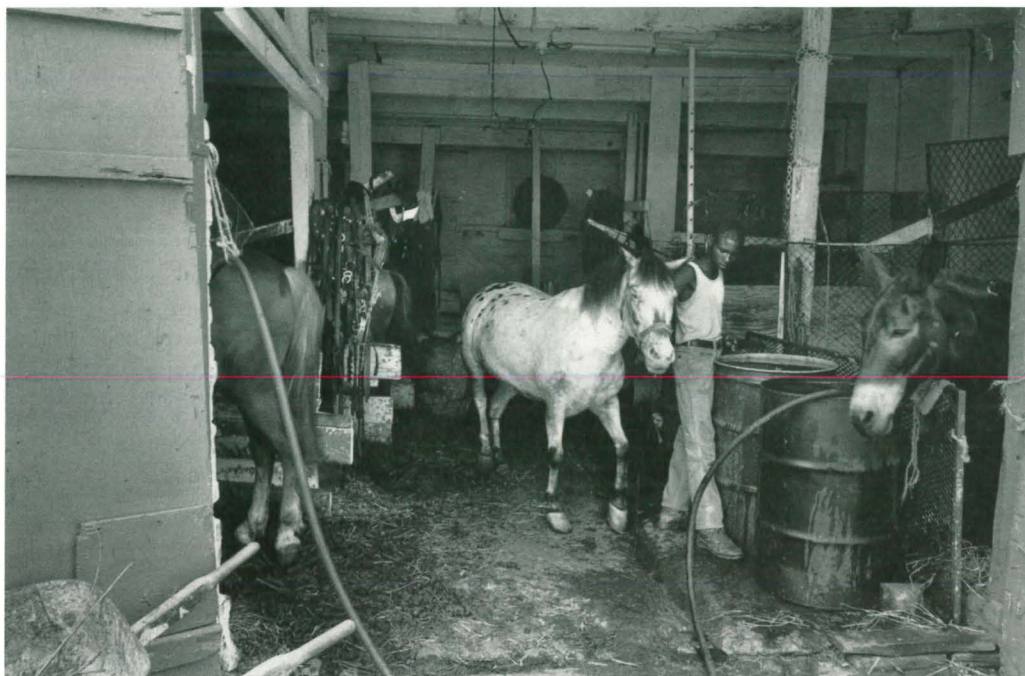


Walter "Teeth" Kelly, one of the city's few remaining wagon-builders, working at Kratz' stable.



Grooming a pony at Saul Taylor's stable in Southwest Baltimore.

Watering horses at the Allen brothers' stable in Sandtown in West Baltimore.



Milton Brown and Mu Tee MuLazim, stable owners, in front of their stable in Northwest Baltimore.

Buying Produce and Loading Wagons

Following a routine virtually unchanged until recent times, Arabbers traditionally put in a ten or twelve hour day in warm weather, starting between five to seven o'clock in the morning. Most Arabbers first went to the stable to get their horses and wagons, and then drove across town to the old Camden and Pratt Street produce center and nearby poultry and fish market. There they bargained for and bought their produce, and then "decorated" their wagons — artistically arranging the produce so as to attract customers' attention. They then traveled their respective routes through the city, selling to customers. Other Arabbers worked for food distribution companies which bought produce in bulk and delivered it by truck to the stables.



Mr. Rob shoeing a horse at Fred Barnhart's stable, the only one left in East Baltimore.



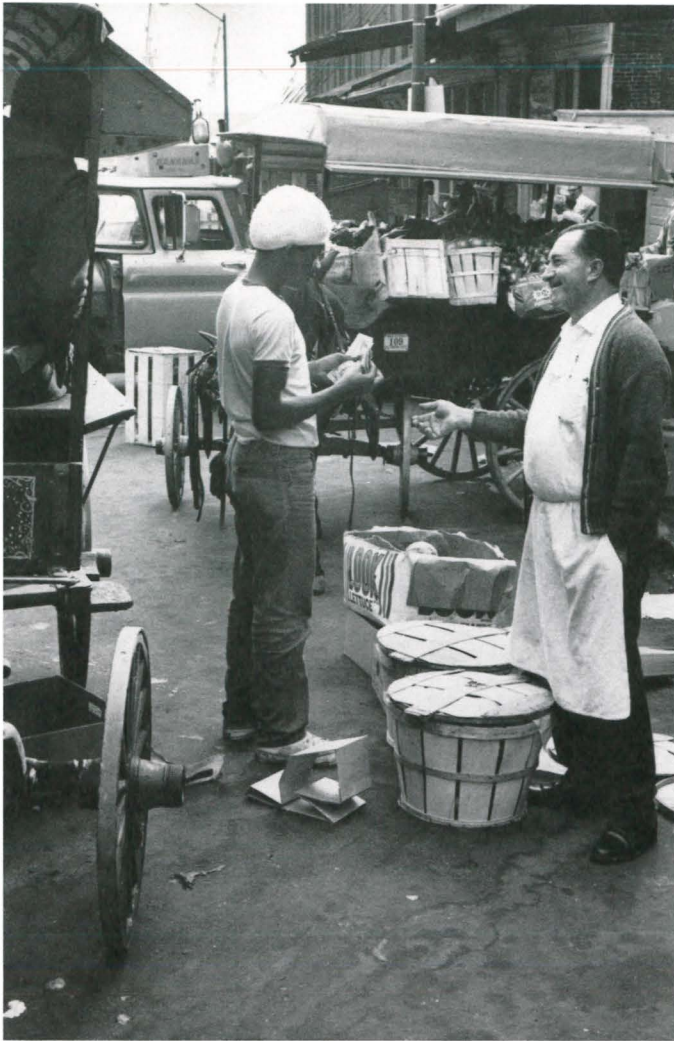
Arabber June Fulton (now deceased) entering the produce center at Light and Camden Streets. This center was razed in 1973-74 as part of Baltimore's Inner Harbor redevelopment.



Camden Street market scene.

Arabbers buying produce in bulk at the old Camden Street produce center and loading their truck.





Arabbers buying produce at the old
Camden Street produce center.



Arabbers loading wagons at the
Allen brothers' stable.

Arabbers take great pride in
decorating their wagons.



Serving the Community

Over the years most Arabbers have established traditional routes through Baltimore and have developed many faithful customers. Arabber wagons bring produce to their customers' doorsteps. They provide a useful service for the elderly, the handicapped, and "shut-ins" who either can't leave home or have difficulty getting to a grocery and bringing their food back home.



Arabbers "Monk" and "Peppers" (both deceased) selling watermelons. In Baltimore, customers traditionally ask to taste a "plug" of watermelon before buying it.

Gilbert Hall, Sr. has been Arabbing for 45 years and has been working his current route for the past 12 years.



Arabber "Popeye" at his wagon. He has been working the same route in West Baltimore for about 40 years.



Arabbers braving the snow to serve customers in South Baltimore.



Arabber on his route.



Arabbers are most appreciated by those customers who are least mobile.

Friends and Family

In their private and social lives as well as their daily routes, Arabbers link homes and families, kin and co-workers. As a community, Baltimore's Arabbers have lost the occasion of daily gatherings at the Camden produce center to swap stories and keep track of each other. Since the closing of the Camden market, social events such as those pictured here—family reunions, parties, club outings, and funerals—have taken on greater importance as gatherings of the Arabber community.



Father's Day: Arabber Gilbert Hall, Sr. with his son Gilbert Hall, Jr. and grandson, Gilbert Kinard Hall III.



Arabber June Fulton serving his children dinner.



Last rites for one of Sandtown's best known Arabbers, Mr. Handy Janey (1904-1975). Many of the Arabbers from this predominantly Black West Baltimore neighborhood worked for or with Handy during his life.

Arabber "Winfield" and friend joking during the annual boat ride.



Arabbers and friends at Baltimore's Inner Harbor for the Finos, Inc. Social Club's annual boat ride.



Twin members of the Allen family, "Fatback" and Paulene, at their birthday party. Paulene is one of the few women still Arabbing in Baltimore.



The Allen's annual family reunion. Though Arabbing is often practiced by more than one member of a family, the Allens are exceptional as nearly all the women, men and children have been involved in some way. This Allen family tradition was inspired by Mrs. Mildred Allen (1890-1973), among the best known and most respected of Baltimore's Arabbers. For over 50 years, her stables continuously employed over 40 people.