

The Washington Post

Local

Baltimore's arabbers keep history alive

By Brianna Rhodes|AP April 20 at 4:42 PM

BALTIMORE — “The Last of the Mohicans” is how Donald Savoy III described the remaining handful of arabbers left in Baltimore on a sunny Wednesday, while watching a fellow horse-drawn cart vendor load up with fresh fruit and vegetables.

Almost every day, arabbers, all African-American, take to the streets of Baltimore with a horse and a cart to sell fresh produce to residents around the city.

Dan Van Allen, founder of the Arabber Preservation Society, said there are three working stables in Baltimore. There are two wagons on the streets currently and he's looking for six wagons to be working by the end of spring. In total there are 30 people involved with maintaining the horses and stables.

Van Allen said that door-to-door vendors have been around since the beginning of time all over the world. The term “arabber” is a local Baltimore expression and they have been around since the founding of the city.

Van Allen said the profession was prominent in major cities such as Baltimore, New York and Philadelphia in America.

Arabbing was one of the few jobs African-Americans could have in the

country after the Civil War.

Today the only remaining arabbers in the nation are found in Baltimore.

“It started back in the 1800s,” said Savoy III, whose grandfather and father were arabbers before him. “Arabbers were around way before. It’s a tradition and I’m like the third generation.”

Savoy III, 40, has been an arabber as long as he can remember. He is a resident of Baltimore, born and raised.

He works for the city, but he works as an arabber as a side job.

“It’s a good business to get into, but it’s kinda a hard business,” Savoy III said. “If you don’t put your all into it you’re not going to get nothing out of it.”

Arabbers are continuing to keep the legacy alive, although they are small in numbers and the price of produce has also increased. Two arabbers work full time year-round, and about four more join in during the warmer months.

“It’s not as plentiful as it used to be because all the guys done passed away, and you know the younger crowds are not into it as much as they used to be,” Savoy III said.

Arabbers frequently sell produce in the spring and the summer, and less often during the fall and winter. They also travel to various locations depending on the day of the week, according to Savoy III.

“I can’t really speak for other people, but on behalf of my experience...I might go to East Baltimore one day, and West Baltimore (the other) and vice versa,” Savoy III said. “It depends on our (produce) we have for that day.”

Arabbing as a business is rooted as a family and friend tradition. Outside of

their stables on North Fremont Avenue in Baltimore are murals to commemorate the profession, and a wall painted with the faces of family members and friends.

Anthony Savoy, who is an older relative of Savoy III, grew up as an arabber. Savoy is continuing to keep the tradition as alive as well, although he doesn't arab too frequently. Both men stand on corners to sell produce, rather than walking their horses through the city like some of the younger men do. Savoy said he started arabbing around age 10 or 11, during the early '70s.

Savoy recalls going to school and witnessing his father arabbing during the day and watching people wait for a horse and wagon. He said they would say, "There go my fruit man, my vegetable man." That experience influenced him to work as an arabber himself.

"I would take a buggy with a little pony and put the little vegetable or whatever on that cart and walk around the neighborhood and people, you know, they would buy from me," Savoy said.

Savoy also said that his father not only introduced him to arabbing, but to his love of horses and how to take care of them.

The arabbers have at least 10 horses in the stables, all different colors and sizes. They also have a pig, chickens, pigeons, an alpaca, and other animals. They are all kept at the stable.

"He taught me a whole lot," Savoy said. "See, a horse can't tell you what's wrong with him. ...Any animal can't just open up its mouth and say, 'My stomach hurt.' You gotta know things. ...I was taught by a lot of people, especially my father, to know what to do when a horse don't feel good and stuff like that."

While walking with the horse and cart, arabbers have a call known as hollering to get residents' attention. Most arabbers call out what foods they

may have on their cart that day, such as fish, watermelon, cantaloupe, and oranges.

Savoy III compared hollering to a rap: What you put into it is what you get out of it.

Savoy says he makes his own rhymes, such as, "Bring your pots and pans because there goes the fish man!"

Another arabber, Tony Todd, 57, like Savoy and Savoy III, grew up falling in love with the profession and horses as well.

Todd said riding horses is a relaxing experience for him. He said he rides horses around the city sometimes.

He thinks it's very important to keep the profession alive and maintain its legacy. It's also needed for senior citizens and residents who don't have cars and can't make it to grocery stores.

"They look forward to you coming around there and selling those fresh vegetables and fresh fruit," Todd said. "They depend on that so much."

Customer Edgar Cephias, 48, has been buying from arabbers for many years. Cephias said his mother used to buy fresh produce from them and he has never been disappointed. He said he used to buy tree pears from the arabbers but now he usually buys oranges.

Todd explained why it's important for people to know about arabbers and for Baltimore to support the profession.

"(We need to) let people know that the city of Baltimore needs to keep this alive," Todd said. "...To be able to let people know around other cities, when they pick up that paper where they can read or hear on television, radio or whatever it may be, that the city of Baltimore has the arabbers still going on

after maybe a few hundred years.”

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