

For Horse-Drawn Carts, Hurdles in Baltimore

By The New York Times

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BALTIMORE, Nov. 11— Boom Boom knows how to make his horse cart look like a gourmet produce market on wheels. And he, his grandfather, fiancée and son have more than a century of knowledge among them in the Baltimore peddling tradition known as arabbing.

Loading from a sidewalk, Boom Boom, whose given name is James Chase, packs a bounty of cantaloupes, tomatoes, collard greens, sweet potatoes and tangerines. He crowns the spread with bunches of grapes, which he'll pluck and eat as he plods his way through some of the toughest streets in Baltimore.

But these days being an arabber (pronounced AY-rab-ber) isn't just a matter of creating a splashy cart to compete with the supermarkets and convenience stores. The arabbers find themselves trying to weather urban development and some stormy politics.

The neighborhood where some arabbers stable their horses, Sandtown-Winchester, is undergoing a major development project that will include block after block of new town houses. In addition, in the last two years an animal rights group, the Maryland Horse Protection Coalition, has tried to shut the arabbers down, saying that the horses are mistreated.

On the other side of the debate, some neighbors -- a carpenter, an artist and other residents -- have formed the Arabber Preservation Society, which has taken on the city bureaucracy and has helped rebuild one of the stables.

The debates are a stark contrast with the low-key life of arabbers, who spend their days walking beside the carts through the city's neighborhoods, calling out a litany of their wares. They are known simply as Fat Back, Cabbage, Popeye and just plain Fruit, rarely revealing their given names.

Most of their horses were bought from auctions where they would otherwise have been sold to slaughterhouses. Now the horses clip-clop their way through their second life under the names Overdose, Tumble-Weed and Snake Eyes.

The arabbers, almost all of whom are black, live an old-fashioned life. Even their name has an antiquated echo in an ethnically sensitive era. The term arab comes from a 19th-century description of people who made their living on the streets, or of homeless children, according to Mary Makey of the City Life Museums.

At the turn of the century, most of the arabbers were white. Some were simply farmers bringing their produce to town. The black peddlers covered the ground on foot, selling oysters and deviled crabs. But during World War II, the white arabbers abandoned their horses and carts.

Today, about 25 arabbers are licensed by the city, said the Preservation Society's president, Steve Blake, who has a wagon, horse and peddler's license. Only about a dozen earn at least part of their living from hauling produce around town. The remainder are retired or "horse-crazy" and hang around the stables.

Four stables clustered in West Baltimore are all that remain. The Whatcoat Street Stable from which Boom Boom works, which has been owned by Fat Back's family for 50 years, is slated to close in January to make way for the new housing development.

From his cart, Boom Boom can see a shiny block of new town houses across the street, the kind seen in the suburbs. The city is considering a proposal to relocate the Whatcoat Street Stable to nearby historic Lafayette Market, but the arabbers who remain are more concerned about the animal rights forces.

On Friday, the debate came to the stables themselves when Baltimore City Animal Control inspectors arrived to check the horses. Animal rights people carrying clipboards also tried to enter to check the animals for themselves. Welcoming them were Preservation Society members, who advised the stable owners of their rights -- particularly the right not to let anyone in who was not wearing an inspector's badge.

The animal-control investigation supervisor, Bill Morris, made his rounds, checking hooves and temperatures and examining the stable roofs for leaks. When refused entry, the animal rights people milled around in the alley, peering into locked buildings.

At one point, an older arabber yelled, "When white people owned the horses, you never saw them."

Members of the Maryland Horse Coalition defended their presence at the inspections, and they credit their persistence with recent stepped-up city inspections. "If we back off, they're not going to do anything," said one coalition member, Colleen Brown.

Another coalition member, Mark Rifkin, said, "The only thing we're willing to negotiate is when will they go out of business -- five years, four years?"

The coalition's efforts to persuade the city to end arabbing or at least insure the welfare of the horses is backed by the Humane Society of the United States and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Ms. Brown said that in March, a horse died in the street after escaping from its owner. The owner is being investigated by city officials. Mr. Morris, of animal control, would not elaborate on the details, but Ms. Brown provided a city Department of Health memo that said a witness had seen the owner riding and whipping the horse. The owner, according to the memo, denied whipping the horse and said he had been trying to stop it from bolting.

In January 1994, two horses froze to death, and three others were taken to a farm from unlicensed stables that have since been shut down.

Mr. Morris has heard this criticism before, but he rejects the coalition's stance that the horses do not belong in the city. "My question is, Why shouldn't they have the animals in the city?" he said.

After reading the book, "The Arabbers of Baltimore" written by ex-arabber Roland Freeman, Mr. Morris said that he was convinced that the horse-powered peddling trade was part of Baltimore's indigenous culture.

At 21, Mr. Chase knows his history. He's been "horse crazy" since he was old enough to walk. One Christmas, his grandfather gave him a pony. Next year, he and another arabber are planning to go to a blacksmithing school in Oklahoma on a grant obtained by the Preservation Society.

On this cold November day, Mr. Chase is the last one to pull off with his horse Dirty White and his partner -- Twin, or 15-year-old Kevin Chesley -- in the bright sunlight that offers no warmth. He leaves behind his grandfather and the other old-timers to huddle around a barrel fire and tell stories from the Depression.

"If you work two days, if you made a dollar, you made money," said Cabbage, wearing an Irish-style cap.

Boom Boom and Twin are the new generation arabbers, a world away from when arabbers could be seen in every direction. Now when he turns the corner, he sees a long street in which the first block of lipstick-red row houses are deserted. But the street corners in the next block are jumping with people.

Boom Boom and Twin navigate the scene to get to their steady customers. A gray-haired woman yells down from the second-floor window: "How much are your bananas?" A tow truck driver parks in the middle of the street to check over the wagon.

Unlike the old-timers, Boom Boom never belts out the traditional arabbers' refrains. "They know when I'm coming," he said. During his rounds, Boom Boom waves at his mother and meets up with his fiancée, Shawnta Crampton. Last year, he left her with the cart and the next thing she knew, she was walking the horse down the street selling produce.

Now she's vying with Boom Boom to take the cart out on the weekends.

Later on, they'll meet their 5-year-old son, Binky, who will walk alongside them. "Yeah, he's into it," she said. "He says, 'Can I go with you and make some money?' "

Photo: Urban development projects and protests by animal-rights groups threaten the livelihood of Baltimore's street vendors known as arabbers, who sell fruits and vegetables from colorful horse-drawn carts. (Marty Katz for The New York Times)

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