

PROJECT Negroes of New York

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Sketch of Pig Foot Mary

Source: Interviews with widower and daughter

Early in the fall of 1901 a huge, Goliath of a woman with a living to make, discovered that street corner peddling was the answer and began to lay the foundations to a sizeable fortune in real estate with a ramshackled baby carriage, a roomy tin wash boiler, and a mess of pigs' feet.

When she was going ~~on~~ twelve, Lillian Harris, smooth-skinned, butter-colored, and over-sized, had separated herself from a hapless brood in a Mississippi delta shanty and run off to make her own way in the world. During the subsequent fifteen years she had lived in a number of northern cities, drifting like an unmoored row boat and finding it consistently difficult to secure ~~or~~ keep employment as a domestic ^{worker} because of her tremendous bulk. In Boston she had faced dire need and had finally determined to come to New York. Penniless, she made the trip in short slow stages via hay, milk, and vegetable wagons.

Within a week after her arrival in New York she had contrived to find sufficient employment as a day worker to earn five dollars. Three dollars she spent for a delapidated baby carriage and a shining new tin wash boiler. The other two

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dollars she invested in pigs feet. Next she wheedled the proprietor of "Rudolphs," a saloon near 61st Street on Amsterdam Ave. into allowing her to boil the delicacy atop his cookstove and mounting the ^{steaming} boiler of pigs' feet on the baby carriage she wheeled the total of her worldly wealth through the saloon's swinging doors and set up business at the curb stone out in front,

A month passed and the pigs' feet business boomed. Hog-maws, chitterlings, and boiled corn on the cob ^{became} ~~part~~ ^{part} of the menu. And "Pig Foot Mary" now a licensed ^{portable} peddler, presided over a specially constructed steam table which she had designed herself. The coins rolled in and "Pig Foot Mary" 's bank account mounted accordingly.

Pleasant faced, deep-voiced, her enormous proportions neatly swathed in starched checked gingham, she was at her stall from early morning until late at night. ^{Her personal needs were few.} She owned two cotton dresses which she kept spotlessly clean and she lived in a tiny furnished room. She was saving her money against her old age and she explained that she intended to have enough to buy herself a place in an old peoples' home for respectable colored folks. Nothing else held her interest.

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After nearly ^{sixteen} years of steady selling in the sixties Pig Foot Mary came to Harlem. This time she rented a tiny booth at Lenox Ave and 135th St. that was an appendage to a newspaper stand. In less than three weeks Mr. John Dean, the stand's owner and Pig Foot Mary were married.

As Mrs. Dean, Pig Foot Mary's concern about her old age lessened and she allowed herself to be persuaded to invest her savings in Harlem properties. Her first venture was the purchase of a ~~\$2,000~~ \$44,000 ^{7th Ave} apartment building, which ^{6 yrs} she later sold to a Negro undertaker for \$72,000. Her subsequent dealings in real estate were outstandingly successful and numerous. Among the houses owned by her were 69-71 West 138th Street, 164 West 144 Street, 2324 Seventh Ave and several others. At one time her total property holdings were valued at \$375,000. In the middle twenties she also began to buy real estate on the west coast, concentrating largely on the cities of Pasadena and Los Angeles.

A careful and astute business woman, Pig Foot Mary could neither read nor write. According to her step-daughter (Mrs. Ella Evans 164 W. 144) who served for years as her secretary it was the habit of the Pig Foot Queen to close all her business correspondence requesting the remittance of rental moneys with the command to "send it and send it damn quick" Occasionally the step daughter sought to economize on expletives, but Pig Foot Mary had learned to identify her favorite letter-ending even transcribed to the written page and so when her routine scrutiny of what last line did not

conform with her established mental picture she never failed to loudly demand that that and all other missing "damns" be scrupulously inserted.

Pig Foot Mary (Lillian Harris Dean) died in California in 1928. at the age of fifty-eight.