Charles Aikens lived a few doors down from Miss Sing's. As a boy, he ran errands for famous guests, including the Harlem Globetrotters.

Miss Sing's House

Black entertainers, travelers to BR found a place to stay at Leona Stewart 'Miss Sing' Pearson's

Editor's note: During October, the People section asked black readers to share with us their memories of growing up in Baton Rouge. This is the first in a series of occasional features.

By ED CULLEN

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At this bed and breakfast, Louis Armstrong and his musicians ate in the dining room and slept on rollaway beds.

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Not until the Lincoln Hotel opened in 1955 at 600 S. 16th St. did black travelers have a hotel where they could stay.

And while black entertainers might play at white supper clubs, they couldn't dine there, said Aikens. For lodging and food, they went to Miss Sing's house or other residences that took in guests.

At 67, Aikens is tall thin at 6 feet, 2 inches. Regulars at old Pinches's on Perkins Road will remember him as the courtly head waiter in the restaurant's corps of free-spirit waiters in jackets and bow ties.

"Her name was Leona Pearson," Aikens said. "Everyone called her 'Miss Sing.'"

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"Leona was my sister," said Miles, one of 10 children.

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Big name black entertainers, including Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald, stayed in the home of Leona Pearson on South 16th Street before integration opened hotels to black people. Pearson, known to friends and family as 'Miss Sing,' left, is shown here with sisters Beatrice, Margaret, Bessie and Eleanor.

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"Leona was my sister," said Miles, one of 10 children.

"My mother said the younger children tried to say 'poor thing,' but it came out 'Sing.'"
“It was where we lived. Word got around that blacks could stay with us and get something to eat.”

Her sister fed guests in the house, but she ran a snack bar and short-order place in a little building in the back yard. Students at Perkins Road Elementary School were among the regular customers.

“It was the only school for black children for years, and it didn’t have a cafeteria,” Miles said.

Some black families in surrounding parishes sent their children to live with relatives in Baton Rouge so they could attend school.

Black entertainers and travelers stayed at Miss Mamie Turner’s house, too, a big place at 16th and Wisteria, a block up from Miss Sing’s, closer to Government Street, Miles said.

Miss Sing’s house could accommodate 12 guests with men doubling up and sleeping on rollaways. What most impressed Miles was what regular people the entertainers were.

“Louis Armstrong slept in the same room with the musicians. They were like family. They were very nice people. I was surprised to see men who spent so much time together get along so well.”

“We wanted to know how they got along in other cities, how they were treated,” Miles said.

“It didn’t strike me as anything fabulous that I could talk to Louis Armstrong,” she said. “I mean it was wonderful that he was staying in our house. For us to see them, they had to come to us.”

Miles’ older sisters went to dances at the Temple Roof Garden on North Boulevard.

“I was 17 when my mother died, and my sister wasn’t about to let me go,” she laughed.

Miles’ sister Beatrice had pictures of all the entertainers.

“She took pictures at parties and at the house. The entertainers would send her pictures they took in other cities. We don’t know what happened to the pictures.”

Charles Aikens earned pocket money taking Miss Sing’s guests’ “shirts, trousers and stage clothes to the ABC Laundry on Government Street.”

“Everything was done in the neighborhood. If it couldn’t, then you had a problem.”

Miss Sing’s guests ate at Bernard’s Restaurant. “They had a fried chicken that resonated,” said Aikens.

“People cried when Bernard’s closed.”

“There was DePitt’s and The Spot Cafe and the Ever Ready Cafe — also the Ever Ready Cab Co. and the Ever Ready Hotel, all in the 1300 block of Government Street.”

“The Spot Cafe was open 24 hours a day. All the restaurants delivered,” Aikens said.

To Miss Sing’s came black men traveling on business, in town for church conventions or traveling across the country.

Aikens was 10 or 11 when the Harlem Globetrotters stayed at Miss Sing’s.

“Goose Tatum was the pivot man,” he said. “This was before Meadowlark Lemon was the featured player.

“The Globetrotters practiced outside at the Perkins Road School. They took time to pass the ball with me a few times. I was a kid, but I knew it was big because everyone loved the Globetrotters.”

Miss Sing’s guest business declined with the success of the Lincoln Hotel and integration. Pearson died in 1996 in her late 90s. The house had been in the family for about 80 years when it was sold.