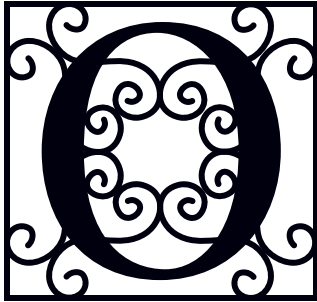


**S A D I E ' S**  
**S O U T H**  
— *o n a* —  
**W E S T E R N**  
**P O R C H**



**How Louisiana foodways survived  
and thrived for generations  
in Los Angeles**

*by* **DEREK S. HICKS**



**N A WHIM, I DECIDED TO MAKE** my first pot of pinto beans. My grandmother, Sadie Lucille Dean, was a pro at making them. She added just enough ground beef in the mix to throw you off, but this was not chili. A ham hock provided the base of flavor. Throughout my childhood, her pinto beans were an autumn and winter staple in our house.

So, these many years later, my grandmother was sitting on her porch as she took my call and provided step-by-step instructions on how to make her pinto beans. She was dismayed that, for all the cooking I do, I'd never made them before. After she gave me some general advice about soaking dried pinto beans and what seasonings to put in, which were simple but always included Louisiana Hot Sauce, I inquired about why she used ground beef. She explained that the extra protein made the beans more robust and filling. The goal was to make them a full meal for my grandfather, a sanitation worker. "Besides," she said, "it just makes it taste better." Listening to this ninety-five-year-old woman's culinary guidance revived memories of sitting on her front porch, eating bowls of pinto beans and rice. It was no accident she instructed me from that porch, a sacred site in our community.

### **The Porch**

Sadie's porch has long served as a canvas for cultural expression, bearing traces of the South transplanted to Los Angeles. It was the only porch on the block where people congregated. To this day, my grandmother sits there on her little white bench, protected by a massive bush that offers

shade against the heat. At ninety-five years old, Sadie still gets dressed and puts on her nicest earrings and a little makeup just to sit on the porch in anticipation of someone stopping by. Inside the house, photos and paintings of Louisiana folklife depict the same custom of porch-sitting, a ritual that has long been central to my grandmother's identity. Anyone with the privilege of visiting would experience the intricate interplay of place and the numerous genuine performances that unfolded within that space. As frequently as spiritual and culinary expressions found their stage on her porch, it was also a place where individuals whose humanity had elsewhere been denigrated and debased by racism and discrimination found nourishment. Sadie is made of central Louisiana stock, and this heritage was imprinted on her porch. On any given day, an observer might be transported perceptually to a porch in Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama.

Sadie's path to this porch is connected to multitudes of African Americans who migrated from the South to places like Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Detroit. Her religious and culinary training arises from the place of her birth and rearing: Colfax, Louisiana. Born there in 1928, Sadie, as her parents and grandparents had before her, existed under the imposing shadow



LEFT and RIGHT: The author and his grandmother at her home in Los Angeles, August 2023

of the Colfax massacre of 1873. Not a decade into Reconstruction, former Confederate soldiers and Ku Klux Klan members murdered upwards of 150 Black freedmen and militia members after a tumultuous gubernatorial election. The exact death toll remains unknown. The white mob slaughtered Black soldiers as they surrendered. Therefore, Sadie's hometown epitomized the full weight and toll of Jim Crow.

At the age of twelve, she began helping her grandmother, a domestic worker, clean the homes of white families in Colfax after school. There, she learned the Southern protocols of Black workers being forced to enter and exit through back doors and take meals on the back porches of the homes they served. It's no surprise that Sadie's front porch has always been a place of affirmation.

### Sadie's Southern Performance

"Sadie" is widely known throughout our Watts section of Los Angeles, yet relatively few neighbors know her by that name. To most, she is "Mama Dean." Mama Dean is what she performs. When I was a child, Sadie was my sometimes-strict grandmother, but Mama Dean has always been a soothing force in the community, enveloping everyone with magnanimous concern. To frame

what she does as performance in no way suggests her engagement with others is inauthentic. To the contrary, her performance, recapitulating her Southern upbringing, was recognizable to other Black migrants from the South as a connection to home. Scholar Diana Taylor maintains that performance acts as a critical mode of transfer, transmitting "social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity" through reiterated behavior. From a chest of cultural practices groomed in the South, Mama Dean created sacred moments of food and faith in real time. She skillfully integrated her Louisiana roots while embracing Los Angeles as she adopted ways to connect to her community that reminded them of the South. And if performance constitutes the transmittal of many cultural practices, such as dance, song, colloquialisms, and ways of "telling the story," then Mama Dean performed and distributed a consolidation of religious and culinary cultural productions nurtured and tested over time in the South.

Mama Dean's porch provided her a space to carry out her unique form of activism. Her porch was a strategic tool facilitating engagement with and for the community. What unfolded there was not merely a restatement of her church's theology or even a replication of church services for those

Zaire Love



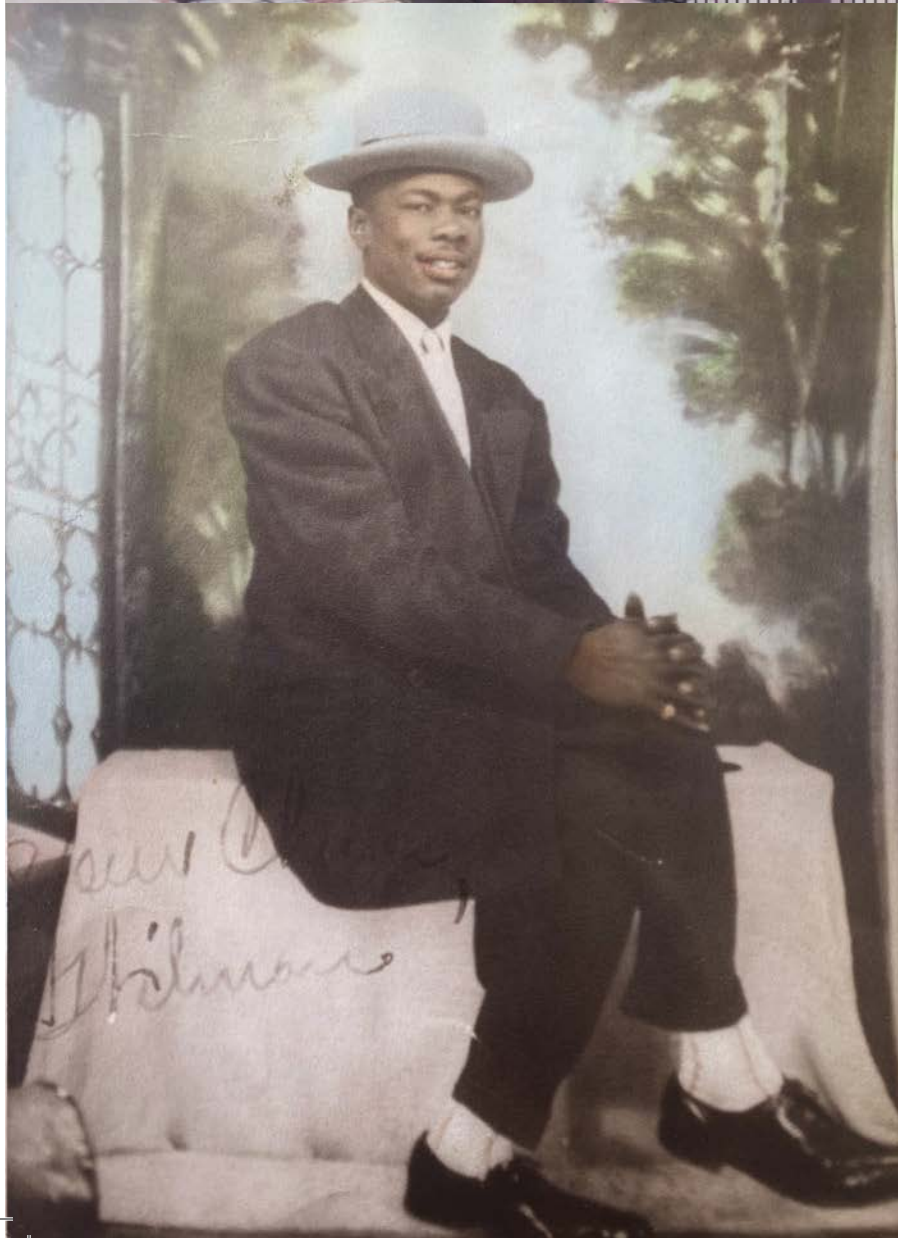
who didn't typically attend. Mama Dean's porch embodied a religious experience unto itself. Her front-porch religion was a substantive and subversive collection of activities that empowered broken people to make meaning of their lives and strive for new possibilities.

When James, one of my oldest friends, returned home after twenty-nine years of being falsely incarcerated, he sought Mama Dean, not Sadie, for the transcendence of her gentle touch, her encouraging word, and her food. James would later tell me that Mama Dean saved his life when he returned to the neighborhood from prison. The reason, he said, was that she treated him like a long-lost son who'd returned home. She warmed him up with the food she had on hand that day—a pot of pinto beans, cabbage, and cornbread. She hugged him. She read scripture. She prayed. Mama Dean simultaneously fed his flesh

and spirit. Her unfettered embrace of people like James is an act of revolutionary acceptance. James consistently returns to her porch as a place of fortification, bringing books of the large-print crossword puzzles she loves.

The larger point is that social and cultural practices of place delineation expand the sacred borders for African Americans who generally share a diasporic and migrational experience. What happens on the porch is at once Southern, northern, urban, rural, West African, American, orally disseminated, informed by sacred texts, expressed through gospel as well as blues, jazz, and hip hop. Therefore, place need not be bound by time nor geography. It is influenced by both. Nestled within a neighborhood bearing the imprint of social challenges many Black Los Angeles residents face, Mama Dean's porch remains a genteel Southern space. With a Louisiana twist,

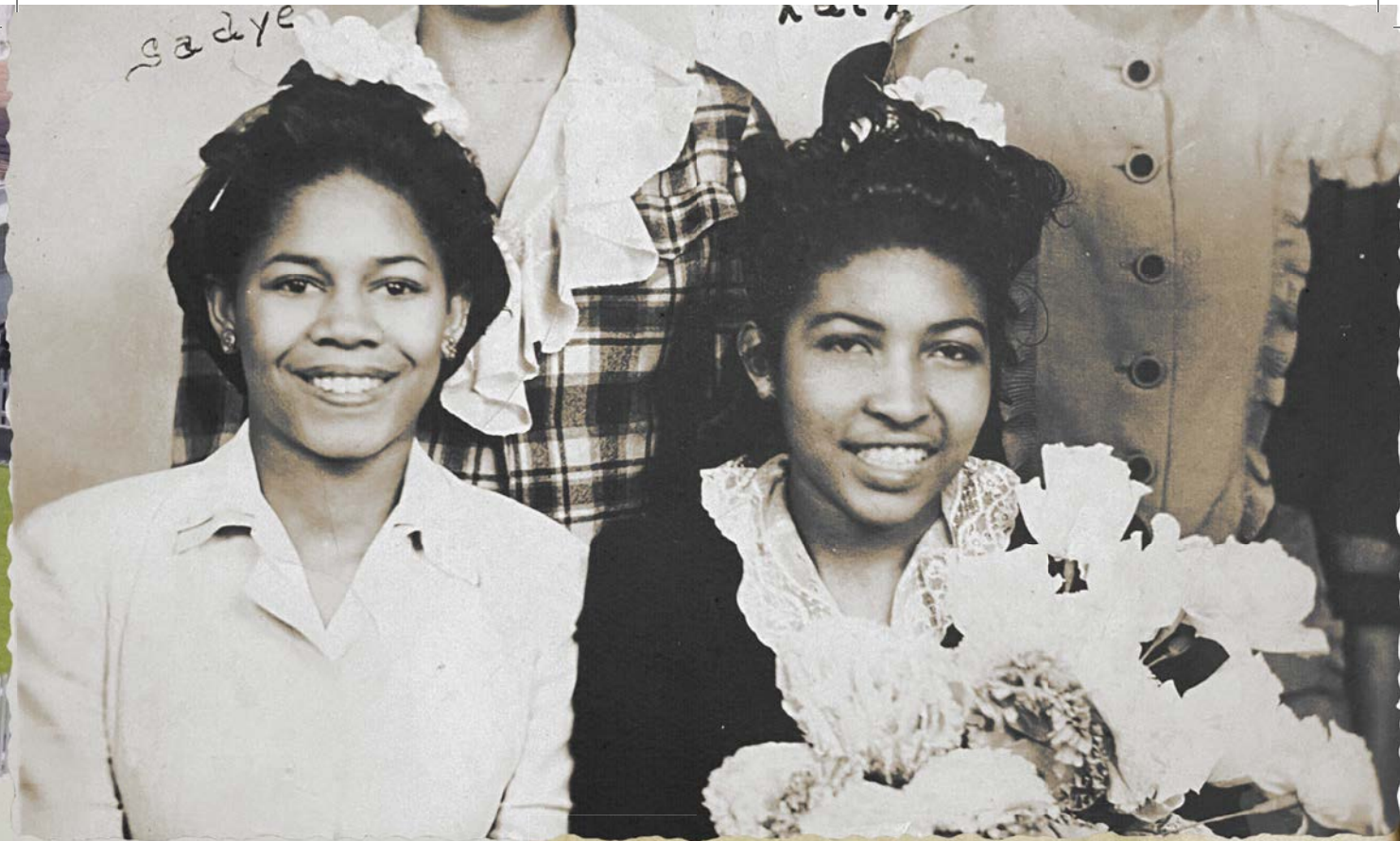
**MAMA DEAN'S PORCH HAS LONG BEEN A SPACE  
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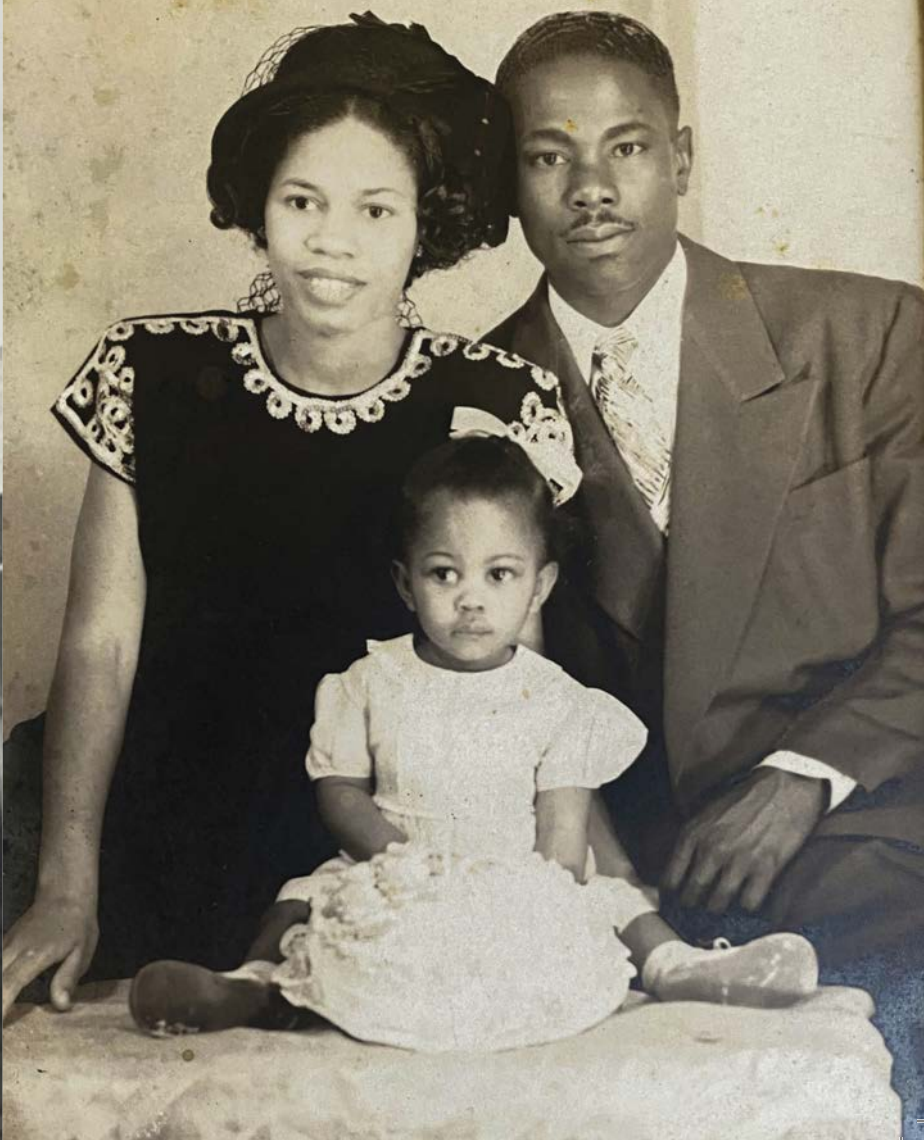
LEFT: The author's maternal grandfather, Wilman Earl Dean;  
ABOVE: The author in front of his grandmother's house, August 2023 (Zaire Love);  
BELOW: Wilman Dean (l) with a friend and fellow WWII veteran



Sadie



ABOVE: Sadie Dean at lower left; RIGHT: Sadie and Wilman Dean with Renae Dean, the author's mother, on her first birthday, Nov. 8, 1947 (Family photos courtesy of Sadie Dean and Derek Hicks)



she utilized an abundant spirit and pots of stew, fragrant gumbo, or beans to nourish and activate hope in those still suffering indignities associated with being encased in Black flesh.

Even after Emancipation, when things were supposed to be better, Black Americans experienced unprecedented debasement. Still limited in agency, Black people created portals of cultural expression to enhance their lives. Having cultivated a potent culinary and religious culture that nourished them while under the duress of enslavement, Black people strengthened themselves through the transformative and restorative power of their own cultural innovations. Although they couldn't grasp the exact meaning of freedom, they understood the significance of what they had created.

African Americans retained jazz-like improvisation as a central driving force within their cultural practices. The era of Jim Crow and the Great Migration it spurred represented an expansion of their innovative cultural self-care beyond the South. For this reason, places like El Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Watts, just up the road from my grandparents' house, recreated an entire culture of the South within its community. The congregation plucked its pastors directly from the South. El Bethel's worship and fellowship table were steeped in a Southern decorum that was familiar to the palate of the migrants



filling its halls. Sometimes, the smell of ham hocks flavoring a pot of greens wafted from the church kitchen, greeting my grandmother and me as we entered on Sunday morning, .

Black people responded to debasement with a trope of *nourishment* residing within the structural forms of complex religious expression and culinary culture. Confronted with the novel manifestations of maltreatment in postbellum America, Black people both established and reshaped practices of self-sustenance in a quest to manifest a more enriched existence. A diverse spectrum of performances in Black religious and gastro-nomic cultural life nourished their communities, fostering vitality in regions spanning the South, North and West. This vitality radiated whether in locations as distinct as Coushatta, Louisiana, or Coffeenville, Alabama. Southern-influenced religious and culinary practices were emulated to fortify Black people through meticulously orchestrated performances on porches, in social halls, and in churches, whether situated in Chicago or Los Angeles.

## Fish Fries Don't Lie

On occasion, Mama Dean hosted Friday night fish fries. These gatherings exemplified how the confluence of distinct Black Southern cultural performances manifested in the West. What I would witness on those Friday evenings was a comingling of cultural expressions that didn't seem to neatly fit together. At any given moment, you might hear debates about frying techniques coleslaw recipes. Fish fries were serious affairs for these central-Louisianans. The fish being served—cat-, buffalo, and Gaspergou, a freshwater drum fish—were treasures to this crowd. None suited my adolescent palate, which made the old folks' love for them all the more fascinating to me.

Stories always accompanied the food at these gatherings. Nothing was off-limits, from contentious church splits to whether Mama Dean's grandfather, the Reverend Lester Lee, was the best preacher; to a roll call of deaths followed by stories of the ancestors. Tears of remembrance flowed. Testimonies were shared. Elders warned children about the bones in the fish. And then the blues would emerge, replacing the gospel hymns. The rhythms of B. B. King and Bobby "Blue" Bland from the record player enticed dancing that induced sweat dripping from scalp to brow to floor.



**SOUTHERN-INFLUENCED RELIGIOUS AND  
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Sisters previously praying and speaking utterances of the spirit were now swaying their hips to the music in ways the church would not allow. Theirs was a celebration of food and spirit and Southern roots and culture. What was happening on and around Mama Dean's porch were intentional acts of revitalization for debilitated flesh through the performance of the South in another place.

Mama Dean's task of nurturing elsewhere-debased flesh often unfolded as a multifaceted challenge for those navigating the unfamiliar terrain of the urban West, where newfound freedoms coexisted with the burgeoning Jim Crow political system. In 1950s through 1970s Los Angeles, Mama Dean encountered many of the same dilemmas that had confronted Black women who

preceded her at the turn of the twentieth century. Migrating Black folks endeavored, to the best of their abilities, to transport religious and culinary cultures along highways and aboard trains departing the Jim Crow South, bound for the North and West. Of paramount concern became preserving some semblance of authenticity, as it was intrinsic to their ability to thrive in new surroundings. Their mission also encompassed the aspiration to reshape the tide of racial mistreatment in the North and West. One shake of Louisiana Hot Sauce on pinto beans at a time, we were encircled by Mama Dean's love. We were somebody. On that porch she prayed, then fed, then preached, then encouraged, then prayed again. Flesh and spirit were fed, marrow deep. 🍷

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