Dearing’s Tea Room
Hill District, Pittsburgh, PA.
c. 1928–1948

As the African American community in Pittsburgh’s Hill District grew in the 1920s and ’30s, many restaurants appeared on Wylie Avenue. Toward the west end of Wylie near downtown, Smitty’s served chicken dinners. Up the hill, near Herron Avenue, was Hart’s Place, where people ate hot cakes and sausage for breakfast, beef stew for lunch, and breaded pork chops for dinner. There were many other establishments in between, including those operated by Sarah Dearing.

Sarah Dearing likely entered the restaurant business with her husband, Ulysses. In 1928, they opened Dearing’s at 2325 Wylie Avenue, and they moved a few buildings east to the Calloway Hotel in the spring of 1930. Sunday evening dinners featured chicken and steak, pureed asparagus tips, jumbo soft shell crab, cauliflower au gratin, and strawberry parfait. During the holidays, the couple showcased their culinary savvy. For their 1930 Christmas Dinner, they not only roasted turkeys but also capon and Long Island duck. Their “grapefruit en supreme”—sliced fruit mixed with powdered sugar—may have imitated that of San Francisco’s tony St. Francis Hotel. They also brought favorites like baked southern corn pudding to customers’ tables.

Launching a business during the Great Depression could not have been easy when so many Hill residents, like people around the city and country, were lucky to find irregular, if any, employment. Dearing’s husband left the Hill in search of work elsewhere and eventually settled in Cleveland, opening restaurants there.

By April 1932, Sarah Dearing had taken over the Wylie Avenue restaurant, and she pledged to sell her best dishes for as little possible. By 1934, she had relocated again a couple more blocks up the hill, this time to a building on Wylie between Junilla and Watt streets. At Dearing’s Tea House, her 35-cent Sunday dinners variously included roast; stuffed Long Island duck; chicken in styles such as fried a la Maryland, roasted and stuffed, and half-smothered; top sirloin or porterhouse steaks with mushroom and drawn butter sauces; vegetables such as corn on the cob, creamed early June peas, and green beans; and green apple pie. A quarter bought family dinners of stewed chicken with drop dumplings or steamed rice, fricassee chicken with rice or on toast, roast loin of pork with brown gravy, roast prime ribs of beef au jus, roast leg of lamb, lamb chops with bacon, and vegetables. Some customers enjoyed fresh chopped combination salads and kale. Dearing sometimes informed customers when she was making mashed potatoes with new potatoes or snowflake potatoes.
Dearing's Tea Room had a cuisine and an ambience that encouraged the Hill's middle class to book private events there. In 1935, a dinner was held to honor Richard Robert Wright, Jr., the president of Wilberforce University. A number of bridge clubs—such as the M.R.S., Utopia, Argonauts, Moderns, and Jonquil clubs—occasionally met there. Social groups like the Gardenia Club, the Fontanne Club, the Fashionettes, the Joseph Seaman Workman Club, as well as several college fraternities held lunches, meetings, and celebrations at the Tea Room. The Just Friends Club chose Dearing's as the venue for their 1941 New Year's Eve dinner and dance. An insurance agency celebrated its anniversary at Dearings, and the Independent Funeral Directors’ Association held a banquet there as well.

In the 1940s, Sarah Dearing worked to attract more customers with simpler dishes. Advertisements in the Pittsburgh Courier emphasized her beef and chicken meals. When her customers had used up their meat rations during the war, they could visit Dearing's for a choice of two meats. Sarah Dearing died at age 46 in 1948, before her recipes could win her more recognition and as the Hill District continued to change in the 1950s.

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All of the buildings in which Dearing operated have been razed, including this Wylie Avenue lot where her Tea Room was located. Photograph Nicole Reading.