



Episode 1: In the Time of the Green Book

Hezekiah Jackson:

I recall seeing these two white officers and they said something to daddy like, “You lost, boy?”

My brother almost lost it ‘cause he was like, “That white man, just called daddy a boy!”

We had to show some respect for our dad. He didn’t allow nobody to disrespect him. It was almost traumatizing to us. Daddy was looking at the ground and [the officers] were looking right at him through the car window and [dad] said, “No sir, I’m not lost. I’m here to pick up a package.”

And one officer said, “You ain’t here to steal, n***a? You ain’t stole this good looking car? What you do for a living? You work for some rich white folks? Did they loan you this car?” I can hear all that in my mind. And mother kept putting her finger up to her lips to indicate to us that we weren’t to make a sound. Not to make a sound.

Alvin Hall:

That was Hezekiah Jackson, now in his early 60s, a local activist and minister in Birmingham, Alabama.

I met Hezekiah and his long-time friends, Paulette Roby and Danny Ransom, in a community center in the historic Black business district along 4th Avenue in Birmingham. He recalled traveling north with his family, during some of the most dangerous times for Black people around the country, to go to visit family and friends for vacations, marriages, births, reunions, funerals, or simply to connect.

The roadways of the USA have long been a symbol of openness and freedom—one of the expressions of the American Dream. For African Americans who wanted to participate in this dream, their travels required caution, preparedness, and planning.

Welcome to Driving the Green Book from Macmillan Podcasts. I'm Alvin Hall, broadcaster and author. Last summer I drove from Detroit to New Orleans with producer and activist Janée Woods Weber. Together we stopped at some of the locations listed in *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, the historic travel guide Black Americans used during the height of segregation. Along the way, we interviewed the people who used and relied on the guide, listened to their stories, and unpacked the many meanings of the publication and how its history resonates with the fight for racial equality today.

On one level, this guide—commonly called The Green Book—told Black people where to find safe havens that would help reduce the likelihood of danger while traveling in America. But this publication's listings, guidance, and insights were gathered from the ways African Americans had to negotiate life where they lived and worked every single day.

In this series, you will hear stories—remembered, lived, and survived. Some may shock you; some may make you laugh. Not all of these recollections will be about history; some will be about recent experiences.

Just a quick note: Occasionally, you will hear strong language and the n-word as people share their lived experiences that reflect the need for and the impact of the Green Book.

Jackson:

It was very traumatizing.

Hall:

This is Hezekiah again.

Jackson:

So the white man said, "I'm going up here, boy, and if I find out you lying, I'm taking everybody in this car to jail!"

And we're saying, "To jail!? What we did?"

So [the officer] went up and knocked on the door. And whatever he said to the person who came to the door, [that person] gave the police officer the envelope. Then [the officer] told daddy to get back in the car and he dropped it into daddy's lap.

And then we wanted to know what had happened. But daddy wouldn't say a word and mother said, "No, we can talk about something else. We'll talk about the Sunday school lesson." She just changed the subject. So we couldn't get the gravity of what had happened, why it had happened, what we were supposed to have done? 'We

were like, “What did we do? I mean, what did daddy do? He didn't do anything. We don't get it. Is there some kind of rule that we can't come into this neighborhood because it's so pretty, so nice?”

Janée Woods Weber:

Have you ever had to give the talk about what to do when approached by a police officer to a young person? Or do you ever feel echoes of that moment?

Jackson:

Oh, I feel many echoes [of that moment] and a lot of times it really upsets me.

My sister and I, we raised our three nieces and she also had a son who was in the same age category as them. And it's always been more acute for Black males. So, we had to give him the talk, because he was like most young people today. He thought it was some kind of fairy tale until the police stopped him. He called on his cell phone and he said, “The police have stopped me right here, before you get on the freeway.”

And we said, “We are on the way.”

And he said, “I don't know what to do.”

So, I said to him, “Put your hands on the steering wheel and don't move. I don't care what they tell you to do. Don't move. Don't move.” Because it was always our biggest fear that he would be trying to get his license or something, and someone would say he was trying to get a gun.

I said, “Put your hands on the steering wheel and don't move,” because we was just five minutes away from where he was. He had just left the house.

So we had to have the talk all the time. And the same thing with the girls, we had to have the talk.

Hall:

These two incidents occurred decades apart. Yet the parallels between Hezekiah's and his nephew's experiences are striking and shocking, but unfortunately for many, not surprising. Simple actions, like driving down a street in an unfamiliar neighborhood or forgetting to use your signal—things white travelers would think of as harmless—could back then, and even today, suddenly escalate into a dangerous confrontation for African Americans.

When postal worker Victor Hugo Green and his wife, Alma, began publishing *The Negro Motorist Green Book* in 1936, they knew all about these on-the-road dangers and

frustrations, particularly the lack of services available when they drove south to Virginia to visit Alma's family. They knew that other Black travelers, like themselves, simply wanted to drive safely and peacefully on the highways and byways of the U.S. They wanted to find welcoming, courteous, and clean services. They didn't want to be stopped just because they were Black people in a nice car.

In short, they wanted the same freedoms white travelers take for granted. So, Victor and Alma created and published the Green Book to reduce these travel frustrations and fears.

Looking through the Green Book today, the publication captured something important about the lives of Black Americans. It not only revealed the injustice they experienced, but also the creative, persistent strength that emerged in Black communities in the face of this discrimination.

I wanted more people to know about this remarkable publication—its history, its impact, its cultural significance, its connection to today. So, I decided to take a road trip with Janée from Detroit to New Orleans, covering 2,021 miles in twelve days in an SUV.

We visited historic places from the Green Book, met descendants of travelers who used it and people knowledgeable about some of the pioneering business owners featured in it.

We wanted to bear witness to their stories and share examples of African American ingenuity and resilience. We wanted to learn from the people we met and let their words show us how the Green Book and the knowledge it contained was used, while we ponder the connections between their past experiences and events today.

Hall:

So Hezekiah, you have a copy of the Green Book in your hand and you're going through it page by page. What's going on in your mind?

Jackson:

I'm thinking about my father and my grandfather because they swore by the Green Book. My mother had a brother who left Alabama when he was very young and he moved to New York.

Hall:

Part of the great migration?

Jackson:

Definitely. And so he was very "refined," as Mother would say. He would always bring the publications and other things, and every day after Christmas, my mother

would bundle all us up and we would hit the road for New York to see our Uncle Jerome.

So daddy had his Green Book and his little pocket bible, but we didn't find out until later years that it was because of segregation and fear that the book existed. We just thought that it was a great guide for us to patronize Black people, because during the time when I was growing up we were very sheltered. We found out about civil rights and all of the turmoil from coming to where we are now, down into 4th Avenue business district. Everything in our world seemed okay with us, 'cause we very seldom saw anybody that wasn't Black and we traveled in a small circle—like a five-mile radius. We went to school there, we shopped there, we lived there, and most of our friends were there. We didn't travel as a general rule until there was a major death in the family.

Hall:

It was very important for families to pay their respects to loved ones. Yet they knew the risks they faced in stepping out of the protective world that African Americans created for themselves to endure and survive segregation. But being among relatives, even at a funeral, gave them the sustaining love and strength to keep striving. It gave them the ability to face those risks of being on the road. The worst part of it wasn't the risk you could anticipate; it was the random capricious risk that you could never be fully prepared for.

This next story from Paulette Roby, now in her 60s, illustrates this wholly. We met Paulette in Birmingham in a building on 4th Avenue. She was a local activist during the Civil Rights Movement and she retains her keen, bemused sense of the irony of life.

Hall:

Was your family ever stopped on the road?

Paulette Roby:

I can remember as a child, my uncle picked us up and my grandmother lived in Collegeville over where Reverend [Fred] Shuttlesworth lived. My aunt didn't live far from there—my grandmother's sister—and we was on the backseat of the car and we went over the railroad tracks. As soon as we went across those railroad tracks the police stopped my uncle. And my uncle had a gun, but it wasn't loaded.

And [the officer] took that gun and he put it to my uncle's head and he went *click click*, "N***a, if this gun was loaded, you'd be a dead n***a." And all three of us in the back seat were just holding on to one another, afraid.

And I also remember times that my mom has been stopped. We traveled to Chicago one time and [some officers] asked my mom, "How's the cotton down south?" And my mother said, "The same way it was when you left it."

Hall:

Paulette's story exemplifies how adults had to express a duality. On the one hand, they had to recognize the personality they had to adopt—a subservient personality in order to stave off harm. But they also had to, often in nonverbal ways, reassure their children. What's clear from all of these stories is that they did not want the hate and the prejudice that they experienced to infect their children at such a young age. In so doing, relatives made themselves human shields.

And what they also did was set the stage, like Hezekiah Jackson did for his nieces and nephew. They set the stage for a time when the children would be confronted by similar prejudice. Adults knew that they would eventually have to have what's come to be known among Black people as "the conversation."

When we come back, we'll learn about the strategies Black people used to avoid stopping and getting harassed during long-distance road trips.

[AD BREAK]

Hall:

There was a great deal of word of mouth in the Black community and the Green Book was an extension of that network. One of the strategies travelers used included always leaving before sunrise, no matter the distance. As we drove the Green Book, we heard stories of people driving twenty-four hours straight, only stopping for a bathroom break. They would eat in the car, play in the car. They always had the names of relatives or family friends along the way who they could call in case they were stopped or if there was an emergency.

Another part of the strategy, if you were not driving continuously, was to try to arrive at your destination before sundown.

Danny Ransom:

We drove that car to New York, my uncle, my father, and I. Daddy asked me, "Do you want to go with us?" I was 11 years old. That's when I learned how to read a map. And I can read a map today and I love maps! I always get a new atlas every year and it was just fascinating.

Hall:

That was Danny Ransom, who we also met in Birmingham. His face brightened at the memories of the trips he took with his father and how much they sparked his love of geography and the pleasures of a road trip.

Ransom:

We didn't stop, really, at any eateries and no hotels. I mean this is in the '60s when my dad and uncle drove up there. We had fried chicken [in the car]. Mama had cooked fried chicken and little sweet snacks, pound cake and stuff. All we ever stopped for was gasoline.

But [the trips] really energized me because I loved a subject that most kids didn't like when I was growing up. And what's that? Geography. I love geography and I can remember even some of the cities we were going through back then, Roanoke, Virginia, and the Blue Ridge mountains, and what have you. It was beautiful traveling. And all I had to do was just look, you know? I didn't have to do the driving. I love traveling and that just built my interest in wanting to travel. So anytime daddy would say, "Oh, I'm going to so-and-so." I said, "Well, I want to go!" And I'd go with him.

Hall:

Looking at it simply, the Green Book is a travel guide, but in reality, it is an artifact of entrepreneurship—especially among African American women—and an artifact of the resilience and culture that existed during that period of time. And it's an artifact of how, even in segregation, Black people embraced the American dream of prosperity, of better education for their children, and a brighter future for themselves. In the process, they made their country stronger by demanding that it rise to meet its higher moral calling.

The Green Book shows the joy of day-to-day life in the Black community. There wasn't this sense of doom and oppression. Black Americans lived full lives in their communities in ways that some outside [those communities] couldn't imagine.

The Green Book as an artifact has also inspired art. While in Birmingham, we met Tony Bingham, an artist, under the marquee of a former theater during a summer thunderstorm. Tony's artwork mines history to provide insights into the connection between the past and today. One of his latest projects is a body of work built around the Green Book. Like many people, including myself, Tony discovered the guide by accident.

Tony Bingham:

I'm from Atlanta. I lived there about ten years ago. Now, I've been teaching at Miles College here in Birmingham for the last ten or eleven years. But when I was in Atlanta and in school at Georgia State University in their sculpture graduate

program, that school's studio happened to be just around the corner from Auburn Avenue in Birmingham. So there was a time when there was a building there that was being torn down and I investigated it and found all kinds of documents and papers, old *Jet* magazines, and things that were just going to be tossed back into some dumpster. So I checked out these 1950s *Jet* magazines and I came across this book, it said "Negro Traveler's Guide," and I thought, when you find something and it has the word "negro" in it in print, even if you're not quite sure what it is, you should go for it.

Hall:

Tony's artwork uses large-scale photographs of places related to the Green Book as a starting point. He then collages or paints an abstract form on the photograph that evokes a cultural or personal connection to the past. His work quietly opens the viewers' eyes and emotions to that connection.

As we drive the Green Book, we're treating it not just as an archival document, but as a living history. And while it's no longer published, all of the practical wisdom and strategy that people gained from that time are still in use.

Hezekiah, who we spoke to earlier, still carries the wisdom that he gained from his family's use of The Green Book. For me, Hezekiah represents a trait that is widespread among African Americans: the ability to see the truth, but not to be hostage to its dark side.

Jackson:

I was way out in the suburbs. And a little fellow who is a friend of mine works for a cleaning service, we were at an affair, and he had missed his ride from the affair—the Martin Luther King breakfast. So he wanted to know about if I would carry him to work. The service that he works for, they clean up a lot of big white churches. So this church [we were going to] was way down in the suburbs. So I carried him down there to this huge church with all this property and everything, and it was on a cul-de-sac. This was just like two years ago. So I dropped him off and I turned around and, when I got to the top of the hill, the police surrounded me.

I was looking in the rearview mirror and I put my hands on the steering wheel. They seemed to have a drill, like they had practiced it. Two came this way, two came that way, two came this way, and one was in the back of the car.

Since I had been to this affair, I had on a suit, tie, and everything. So, one of the officers said, "Are you lost, reverend?"

I said, "No, I'm not lost."

He said, "Well, can we help you with something?"

I said, "Well, I just gave someone a ride to work." And he acted like he didn't believe me.

He said, "So, where do they work?"

And I just had happened to look at the big marquee on the church because it's a non-denominational church and he said, "Oh, okay." Then he said, "Well, we will help you get to the expressway. We will help you."

Hall:

As if you weren't capable of doing it on your own?

Jackson:

"We will help you." So they escorted me all the way to the on-ramp. I didn't say anything but thank you 'cause I was in this unfamiliar place that was obviously unfriendly, and all I wanted to do was get out of there.

He wanted to lead me to the place, so I said, "Thank you very much." And then when I got on to the on-ramp of the expressway, he said, "All right reverend, you can go on home now."

Hall:

Hezekiah's tone of voice has stayed with me since we talked to him. Because in that tone I heard a recognition of the reality that he has faced. He knows how to negotiate his way through this. He knows how not to be trapped by this. He knows the strategies that help him to get through this without losing his life. It is a testament to African Americans that in the face of all we have experienced, we have been creative, we have been insightful, and we have been forgiving. And our collective knowledge and hard-won wisdom was captured in the Green Book.

That's all for this episode of Driving the Green Book. Join us next week as we head to the Schomburg Center in Harlem to learn more about The Green Book's creators and their hope that one day there would no longer be a need for it.

I also invite you to explore further, by visiting the Schomburg Center where physical copies of the Green Book have been collected. Or you can browse the New York Public Library's digital archive of the Green Book at: digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections, then search for The Green Book.

CREDITS

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Safe travels.