



## Episode 2: Victor and Alma

### Alvin Hall:

Victor Hugo Green, with his wife Alma, created the Green Book because of their own and their friends' experiences traveling in America. In the guides, they repeatedly stated that they wanted to reduce the frustrations Black people endured while traveling around the country. But where did the idea for the Green Book come from? Why was Victor Hugo Green, a postal worker, especially motivated to publish such a guide? How did he even gather so much information?

This is Driving the Green Book from Macmillan Podcasts and I'm your host, Alvin Hall. Joining me on the road is producer Janée Woods Weber who, like me, traces part of her family to the American South. To learn more about the origins of the Green Book and how it came to be the lifeline for Black Americans traveling during segregation and the Jim Crow era, Janée and I headed to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. It is located in a modern building at the corner of Malcolm X Boulevard and 135th Street in New York's Harlem. The Center contains over eleven million books, manuscripts, paintings, etchings, posters, and pamphlets.

There, we met associate chief librarian Maira Liriano, who oversees the collection that includes the Green Book digital archives. Maira brought the books, all in protective covers, to us and spread them out on the conference table.

By the way, the Schomburg is located mere blocks from the office where Green ran his publishing business.

### Hall:

Maira, when was the first one published?

### Maira Liriano:

We don't own a 1936 edition, but throughout the Green Books there are histories of the Green Books themselves and it's well known that it was established in 1936.

Whether or not there was actually an issue published that year is in question. But the first issue that we own here at the Schomburg Center is the 1937 edition, which is a guide to businesses in the New York City area that welcomed Black travelers.

It's mostly different ads for a lot of car businesses, garages, automobile supply stores. But it does include some other sorts of businesses that you would travel to for pleasure. One of my favorites is a nightclub called Donhaven's in Pleasantville, New York, which is in Westchester county. "For dining, dancing, and rendezvous...."

**Hall:**

"116 Marble Avenue in Pleasantville."

**Janée Woods Weber:**

"Featuring full-course chicken dinners with your choice of wine and liqueur."

**Hall:**

Most people think that the Green Book automatically covered the entire United States from the very beginning. But that's not true. It was more like a rollout, wasn't it?

**Liriano:**

Yeah. And I think it's also interesting to note that a guide was needed even for African Americans living in New York City. We think of segregation and Jim Crow laws being in the South, but it was pretty much—like it wasn't necessarily as...what's the word?

**Hall:**

As prevalent? As obvious?

**Weber:**

Overt?

**Liriano:**

Yes...as in the South. But by practice, there was definitely segregation happening in the North. So there were many businesses in the New York City area that would not welcome Black customers. And so the fact that there needed to be a guide for New York, I think just says a lot about what life was like being a Black person in New York City, that you would actually need a guide like this. But I believe the idea was always

to expand it to include other parts of the U.S., and then the following year it did just that, and included states east of the Mississippi.

**Hall:**

That was in 1938?

**Liriano:**

1938. And then by 1939, just two years later, it included most of the U.S. Then after that it continued to include as many places around the U.S., and eventually even abroad, that would welcome African American customers.

**Hall:**

My late friend John Heyman told me a story that has stayed with me and I was inspired to share it with Maira.

**Hall:**

Your story about discrimination in New York City is too true. A friend of mine who lived in London had Pearl Bailey, Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, and Eartha Kitt as his first press clients in New York. Four African American women. When Lena Horne and Pearl Bailey played the Empire Room at the Waldorf Astoria they were not permitted to stay at the Waldorf Astoria. In fact, they had to often enter the stage through the kitchen because in those days the Waldorf Astoria did not let Black people come through the door. So the idea that New York was this open, vast, liberal place was not true even back then for people as famous as those four women.

They stayed at the Theresa Hotel. That's where they stayed. They would finish there and a car would bring them back up here. The Theresa Hotel is in the Green Book. It's now an office building.

**[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]**

**Hall:**

Maira, how did Victor Hugo Green gather this information? Because there was no internet, right? There was no way you could crowdsource this. So back then, how did he get this information?

**Liriano:**

I believe mostly through networking. Unfortunately, we don't have business records for the creation of the Green Books. So most of what we know about them is what

we can glean from what is written within the guides themselves. Luckily Victor Green and his wife, Alma, over the years do include clues about the way they produced this guide and its history.

What we know from what Victor wrote and other kinds of clues, is that he was a mail carrier and that he relied on his network of other Black mail carriers that were part of a Black union in the U.S. Postal Service. Also, very early on, he partnered with representatives of Esso gas stations, which is part of Standard Oil. The Esso gas stations were the only gas station that really catered to Black customers and also could be owned by a Black person.

The Esso gas stations were known by African Americans to be welcoming. Through the Esso gas stations, you could actually buy the Green Books. As the Green Books over the years became better known through word of mouth, through other kinds of correspondences, I think that's how they got listed. And they would also advertise within the Green Book and would try to get other establishments listed by saying, "Don't you want to be listed in this Green Book?" So it was a combination of ways that they got this information.

**Hall:**

If Victor Green was successful with the Green Book, then other people would have seen that and they would say, "Oh, I can do that, too!" Were there competitors?

**Liriano:**

Yes, there were. The Green Books were not the first Black travel guides. The earliest that I know of is something that was published in 1930 and again the following year in '31, and it was called *The Traveler's Guide* produced by Edwin Hackley and Sarah Harrison. It was kind of short-lived, and I think it's because Edwin passed away in 1930. Then in the late-'40s, there was another guide that was also based in New York called *The Travel Guide*, I think, that was published late-'40s into the '50s. Then there was another guide that came out of D.C. called *Go* that was published in the '50s. But the Green Book—Victor and Alma's Green Books were the ones that were the best known and probably the most popular of these travel guides.

**Weber:**

Were travel guides for Black folks inspired by travel guides for other people who had identities that were discriminated against in the United States?

**Liriano:**

Victor Green himself says in one of or several of these issues, actually it's right here in the 1948 edition of the Green Book. In the introduction, Victor writes, "The Jewish press has long published information about places that are restricted and there are numerous publications that give the Gentile whites all kinds of information. But during these long years of discrimination before 1936, other guides have been published for the Negro. Some are still published, but the majority have gone out of business for various reasons." So he cites that he got the idea of publishing his guide from a Jewish friend who described a similar type of guide that was produced for Jewish Americans.

### [MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

**Hall:**

Over time, people have come to realize that the Green Book is a yearly snapshot of communities all across America. It shows the businesses there, how they expanded and contracted, increased and decreased in quantity, and evolved to meet the customers' needs. It's apparent when we consider that the early issues were mostly devoted to services related to the automobile, gas stations, garages, and places to grab a quick bite. Later issues would include amenities like hair salons, drugstores, social clubs, hotels, and tourist homes.

**Liriano:**

The listings in the Green Books are really incredibly useful for understanding the local history of towns and cities in the U.S., by what businesses are listed in the Green Books and the omissions, like what's not listed and what towns are not included. You have to wonder what was happening there. By digitizing the guides and making them available on our website for free, we're hoping—and I think we've seen some of this play out already—that people will use this information to learn about their own communities and to learn more about African American business history and travel history through what they can learn through the Green Books.

**Hall:**

Who have you seen come to the Schomburg to look at the Green Books and to hold them in their hands?

**Liriano:**

So recently Killer Mike came to see the Green Books because he was promoting his TV show that's on Netflix called "Trigger Warning." In the first episode of that series he references the Green Books because he's trying to live, I believe for a day, by only

going to Black-owned businesses and buying Black-owned and -produced products. He says that he wished he had a Green Book of today so that he would know which businesses in Georgia were Black-owned businesses and he was actually having a very hard time finding Black-owned businesses.

The question that needs to be asked is, when you look at even some of the bigger cities in the North: What's happening there? Why are these businesses concentrated in very specific neighborhoods? And why couldn't you go somewhere in midtown New York? Why aren't there listings there of hotels? I think those are important questions to ask. And I think the Green Books helps demonstrate what we know was happening, but I think most of the time that history does get brushed over because the more extreme cases of violence and discrimination are in the South. It really was way more difficult to be traveling in the South than it was in the North. But I still think that there's still a lot we can learn from the Green Books about the history of being Black in the North and in the West, and what that was like.

### **[AD BREAK]**

#### **Hall:**

The Green Book may have appeared to be just a travel guide but it was a lot more—just not in ways that are obvious. In addition to being an archive about business, it was a political statement about the structural apartheid at every level of society in the U.S. at that time.

Victor Hugo Green wanted to help people negotiate difficulties and dangers. Thinking about it more personally for Victor: Imagine if his white boss in the postal department in New Jersey had gotten copies of a guide talking blatantly about racism. To be blunt, it would have been incendiary and would have cost Victor his job. So, his activism in creating the Green Book was tempered by pragmatism. But in his writings in the pages of the Green Book, we get a sense that his hope for equality among the races would render his very own publication obsolete.

Here is Maira Liriano with some insights on that.

#### **Liriano:**

Victor Green passed away in 1960, but in the introduction of 1948 he does lay out what he thinks will be the future and what he hopes the future will be. His future is that he hopes that the Green Book will not have to be published. So I think that for him he wanted this guide book to become obsolete. That eventually sort of plays out even in the last couple of issues of the Green Book where they talk about the Civil Rights Act and they say: "The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a new Bill of Rights for everyone, regardless of race, creed, or color. Public accommodations: Effective at

once. Every hotel, restaurant, theater, or other facility catering to the general public must do exactly that.”

So they're stating right up front that they know now that this act is the law of the land, that you can no longer discriminate, that it's against the law, and that Jim Crow laws are basically made up.

**Hall:**

But I think what's really important about this spread is the title of the page: “Civil Rights: Facts versus Fiction.” And then they have a listing of thirty-one states, I think they have here, showing the rules in every single state. For example, Nebraska: “Violators subject to criminal punishment for discrimination. Court proceedings.” Nevada: “Law declares: Jim Crow in recreational facilities to be against public policy. Administrative investigating machinery.”

So, what it sounds like is that a lot of states recognize [the Civil Rights Act], but did not put into place real legal remedies, but instead put into place more bureaucratic remedies.

**Weber:**

Exactly. This is the distinction between de jure policy—policy which is legally required—and de facto policy—what actually happens in real life. What these pages in the Green Book show us is that Victor Hugo Green and everybody who purchased and used the Green Book was well informed of their legal rights. However, the Green Book still needed to show folks where they were welcome.

**Hall:**

Our discussion with Maira came back to me while Janée and I were talking with Dr. Eva Baham, assistant professor of history at Dillard University in New Orleans. We met her on the last stop of our road trip.

**Dr. Eva Baham:**

Students want to know more [about history] than just slavery. Because they are experiencing a world that shows them resistance and that shows that they don't have to be passive. All they know is what has been glossed over in schools and what they have seen on TV. And what they have seen in the movies and in stories are images of people of African descent being squashed.

So the Green Book is an act of resistance. But the point is that this was an act of resistance, of taking the bull by the horns. And that this was not only one, but it was

one of many, many acts of resistance. That's what's important about teaching and sharing information about the Green Book, because it is an act of resistance, and acts of resistance infer, if you will, that these are people who did not take their condition lying down.

**Hall:**

Using the word “activism” may surprise many people when they think about the Green Book, but the Harlem from which it arose was a cradle of activism when Victor and Alma lived there.

Here's Maira Liriano with some insights on that.

**Liriano:**

The fact that Victor and Alma moved to Harlem in the 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance—I always try to think of them as a young couple being influenced by this really powerful movement that inspired a lot of people to activism. I think a lot of young Black couples and people living in Harlem were thinking about how they could help their community and what contribution could they make. And for Victor and Alma, I think this was their contribution, and they saw it as a way to help in their travels, going to visit Alma's family in Virginia. And also, Victor Green's family originated from Virginia, so they were part of the Great Migration. Also, Alma's brother was a jazz musician and I'm sure they heard about his travels and the difficulties that he would have had traveling around the country, especially in the South. That also influenced them wanting to create something like this.

Working in Harlem and living in Sugar Hill, which is where Victor and Alma lived—they lived just a couple of blocks away from where I live now—and just thinking about their lives here and how they had to work with each other to make their lives better. They had a sense of an obligation to their community to do something to make their lives better, so that they weren't constricted by these unfair and unjust laws that segregated people, [whether that be] through Jim Crow laws or by [discriminatory] practices that they found around the U.S., including in the North.

**Hall:**

In 1960, Victor died, but his wife, Alma, continued to publish the Green Book until 1962. Then two men, Langley Waller and Melvin Tapley, took over for the final two editions, ending publication with the 1966-67 edition. Maira, at the Schomburg, is one of the few people who have looked through every edition of the Green Book. She probably has the closest sense of Victor's aspirations for his guide and its users.

**Liriano:**

In the introduction to the 1948 in 1949 edition, it's the same introduction. The last paragraph—and I'm assuming Victor wrote this, but it might have been Victor and Alma because I know they worked very closely together on things—he writes, or they write, "There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published. That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication, for then we can go wherever we please and without embarrassment. But until that time comes, we shall continue to publish this information for your convenience each year."

**Hall:**

Though the Green Book served the function of a travel guide and a survival tool, the content of the book showed us that it was so much more than that. In the face of segregation and violence, the Green Book helped Black travelers stay informed, find comfort, and stay alive while at the same time it recorded history. That's why Dr. Eva Baham called its creation, publication, and distribution "an act of resistance."

Victor and Alma saw their publication as a necessary, sustaining, and temporary solution in the progress toward a hoped-for freedom: equal opportunities and privileges in the United States.

As Janée and I left the Schomburg Center we acknowledged that, intentionally or not, the Green Book had also recorded a difficult truth: No single moment in history or piece of legislation would instantly end discrimination. It would be a long process and African Americans would need guidance for traveling safely for a long time.

Green hoped for the day when the Green Book would no longer be necessary, but have we reached that moment? Will we ever reach that moment? These are the questions that surfaced in the mind of every single person we interviewed during our road trip. Keep listening in the weeks to come as we try to find answers on this journey.

That's all for this episode of Driving the Green Book. Join us next week as we head down to Jackson, Mississippi to learn from locals what life was like along the bustling black business district on Farish Street.

**CREDITS**

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Safe travels.