



Episode 4: Mother Wit

Alvin Hall:

Last summer as I drove from Detroit to New Orleans stopping at Green Book locations along the way, people shared reflections on their own experiences, stories from their parents, and insights pulled from collective knowledge. For generations, Black people have called this “mother wit.” It’s practical. It’s common sense. And it feeds your intuition just when you need it.

In this episode, we’ve collected some of our favorite mother wit moments so that we may learn from the wisdom that’s passed down from our elders.

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. We’re starting this episode with how travelers got ready for their road trips. Some things are ubiquitous: packing fried chicken, biscuits, tea cakes, often in a shoebox, and sodas in a cooler; making sure the car was serviced, gassed, and ready; and if you were traveling with children, bringing things to keep them entertained: games, puzzles, and Bible lessons.

Once on the road, Black travelers had to be mindful of what was going on around them. Not just road conditions and changing weather, but also the white traveler’s gaze. Sidney Cates, in New Orleans, recalled an experience driving to California years ago.

Sidney Cates:

When CB radios were in use they were very popular. Truckers used them all the time.

We were driving to Los Angeles and we had a brand new Cadillac with a CB radio in it. I got on the CB radio and I said that I was driving a brown Cadillac and was on the way to Los Angeles. I wanted to know if [anybody] saw any trouble with the police up ahead to give me a call back and I told them my call sign number. Then my wife jumped on me and said, “Don’t use that radio, man, because somebody’s going to

hear it. You've identified the car that you're driving in. They going to give you some trouble."

Well, I didn't worry about that because I was a cop. I had a pistol in my car with me. I figured I could protect us if we had to be protected. So we were driving along and all of a sudden they interrupted the program again on the radio and a guy said, "Well listen, when you get up to mile marker number so-and-so, watch out because they got a smokey giving out green stamps up here." Now, this was verbiage for when the police were giving out tickets. Then, after a little while, he came on the radio again and said, "Well listen, I'm up at that mile marker now that you told me about, but I don't see no smokies up here. All I see is a bunch of rubber lip porch monkeys in a school bus."

Hall:

Rubber lip porch monkeys?

Cates:

Yeah. That meant Black kids in a school bus being transported somewhere. It was stupid, but it happened.

Hall:

I have never heard that phrase in my entire life.

Cates:

Well, you heard it today.

Hall:

Astonishing.

Hall:

Clearly, the guy on the CB radio didn't realize he was talking to a Black person. And Sidney's wife was concerned that giving away too much information about their nice Cadillac would make them vulnerable. While driving the Green Book, we heard stories like this one repeatedly—mostly from Black people who drove Cadillacs, as Vernetta Sheppard in Detroit confirms.

Vernetta Sheppard:

My daddy drove Cadillacs. And my uncle drove Cadillacs. I didn't know how they bought those Cadillacs until I was grown. I went home and Daddy was going to see this man. He always went to visit this man at his car dealership. I said, "Daddy, why do you always hang around him?"

He said, "I buy my car from him."

I said, "Oh, why don't you go to the dealership?"

And he said, "I can't; they won't sell it to me." They sold it to the white man who owned the car lot and daddy bought it from him. He could not go in and buy a new car, although Daddy every two years bought a new Cadillac. I hate Cadillacs to this day.

Hall:

But in truth, any nice car could draw unwanted attention from police and civilians alike. It could have been a Lincoln Continental, a Buick deuce and a quarter, or a Cadillac Eldorado.

Eric Finley:

Most of the time we would travel at night and sleep during the day, 'cause going through Texas and them little towns with a Lincoln, we were bound to get stopped. Almost every picture that we have from that route was from us stopping to pay a ticket 'cause you used to get tickets and you would pay them at a constable which would be on the road somewhere.

Hall:

That was Eric Finley in Mobile, Alabama, recalling childhood trips to California. Not only did Black people have to be careful of owning nice cars on the roads, they also had to be careful in their own cities. Hezekiah Jackson, in Birmingham, Alabama, recalled the mother wit his father and his father's friends demonstrated in the pragmatic ways they avoided the dangers of the white gaze.

Hezekiah Jackson:

And back then, the car was for special occasions 'cause my daddy rode with other fellows to work. He was like most men of his time in that Daddy didn't believe in his wife having a job. So Daddy worked two jobs. He rode with his friends and they rode in old raggedy trucks. They were afraid to carry their good cars around the white people on the job. We didn't have garages too much in the Black neighborhood back then, so the white people started selling car covers or you hid the car behind the house. 'Cause if the people saw you had a good car, it was going to be a problem.

Hall:

It's amazing, isn't it?

Hall:

Sometimes, light-skinned Black travelers could deploy an unexpected tactic, as Eric Finley in Mobile remembers.

Finley:

We took a vacation that year to California. When we were stopped to go into a hotel, my daddy and I would go in.

Hall:

Why?

Finley:

Because he looked white and I look kind of whitish or Mexican. My mom, my brother, and my little sister would stay in the car.

Hall:

Because they were darker?

Finley:

They were darker. And so we could get the hotel room and stay.

Hall:

But you had to sneak them in then?

Finley:

Right. So, one hotel we went to the guy and he says, "Listen, I see the rest of everybody out there in the car. Y'all stay in the room and don't come out." That's how we got to California. But we were fortunate, because of myself and my dad. A lot of people didn't have that luxury, and to be honest with you, I don't know what they did. I don't know if they slept in the car or if they knew people. We did know some people along the way, like in Houston and some other stops, but in most cases, we would sleep in a hotel with just myself and my dad going in [at first] and they didn't know [we were Black] because we were passing, so they would let us stay.

Hall:

Sidney Cates of New Orleans, Louisiana, told a similar story that still makes me shake my head at the irony of the situation and their humor about it.

Cates:

My wife, [my mother], and I were coming back from Los Angeles and we stopped in Texas at a service station because they had to use the restroom. They got out the car and they were walking inside the service station and saw a big brown dog laying across the entranceway to the service station. My mother asked the guy who was the service station manager if was the dog gonna worry them.

And he said, "No, no ma'am, he don't worry nobody but n****s." And they went in and they used the restroom.

When they came back out I had to use the restroom. I was getting ready to go, and my mother started laughing and she said, "You better hurry up and use the restroom before that dog finds out you're Black and finds out you're a n****r."

That was a comical situation, but it actually happened. And you ran into those kinds of things on the road.

Hall:

Black travelers had to plan in advance not only their safe passage but also how to deal with basic human needs on the road.

Jesse Turner, Jr.:

My mother's parents lived in New Roads, Louisiana, which if you go down Highway 61 is still there. And my father's parents lived in West Point, Mississippi over near the Alabama line. So our trips were primarily going to visit them. And one of the things that I remember vividly, especially on the trip to New Roads which took about eight to ten hours, was wondering where would we stop for gas when everything had colored and white restrooms.

So my father found a service station in Vicksburg, which was about halfway. They didn't have separate restrooms and it was white-owned. I know there were Black folks that worked there, but because it had no colored and white signs anybody could use the same restroom. So essentially, that's what we did.

Hall:

That's Jesse Turner Jr., a banker in Memphis, Tennessee.

Turner:

And then our folks would try to keep us from drinking a lot of water or liquids—so we wouldn't have to go. At the time, the first three children were all boys, so they bought us little urinals. We'd have these little urinals and we'd be in the backseat [of this] old car that had the hump in the back, which would get kind of hot sometimes, but you could worm your way since we were small, little kids. So you could stand on or sit on the seats and kind of half-stand and use urinals.

But that didn't work when my sisters came, but they didn't come until '61 and '63. By the time they were able to travel, you had better and more options.

Hall:

Looking back over the trips his family took from his early years to his teens, Jesse realized there was a simple but powerful lesson about the value his family placed on their hard-earned money and how they spent it.

Turner:

Even after the public accommodation laws got passed—Civil Rights '64—we would travel. We used to make the same trip, particularly to my grandmother on the West Point as teenagers. When we would stop we got trained by our parents to first of all ask where's the restroom. Don't get the gas. You get out. I even do that now almost by instinct if I'm not using a credit card. We'd ask, "Where's your restroom?"

If they say they don't have one, we said, "We'll get our gas down the street," because we knew nobody would stay there all day without a restroom. So they didn't want you using the restroom. If they wouldn't let us use the restroom, then we're not spending our gas money there. We'd go to the next one and ask, "Can I use the restroom?"

"Yes." And that restroom, once you got there, it better not have a white and colored sign on it.

Hall:

'Cause you'd just turn around, walk out, and drive away?

Turner:

Well, at that time, we were teenagers so we'd probably just go to the white one. It's hard to grow up in the environment that my father and these other guys and ladies were in and not have a certain amount of rebellious streak in you.

Hall:

When we come back from the break, we'll hear more about how a strong support network helped guide Black American travelers through encounters with the police on the road.

[AD BREAK]

Hall:

There are countless stories of driving during Jim Crow and segregation with mother wit as a passenger sitting silently and knowingly in the car. The strategies that families used on trips were surprisingly consistent. Basically, it was: get on the road as early as possible, make no unnecessary stops, and arrive at your destination before sundown. For most people, this meant driving without stopping.

Dr. Noelle Trent, in Memphis, Tennessee, told us how her own family's travel habits from long ago are still being used today.

Dr. Noelle Trent:

My grandfather was a Mason, so he would put his ring on when they traveled and his Mason seal on the back of the car. My mother said that she remembered that the car would get pulled over occasionally and my grandfather would just make sure that the ring would be on the steering wheel and make sure that the police officer could see it.

If he didn't see the seal on the back of the car, he would rub [the ring] to make sure that [the officer] would see it, and somehow they didn't seem to have any problems.

Hall:

Isn't that amazing?

Trent:

I was like, "I don't understand what was going on here," but there's this subtle etiquette that helped them negotiate these things. My grandmother and my mother were just telling me the tactics that they used in terms of how they would negotiate traveling. They would leave, everybody in my family, even to this day if we're doing a road trip, I don't understand it, but we'd get up at 5:00 a.m.

Hall:

To this day?

Trent:

To this day. Especially if you're going north to south. You're up at five because you want to travel during the daylight. Nobody's traveling at night, especially when you don't know the route. There are all these habits that are ingrained from that generation that was traveling during that time period. I remember very distinctly family road trips being mapped out and knowing where you're going to stop. And this is like twenty years after the Green Book's heyday, but this is what my parents were doing. So these are all habits that were taught generationally out of the need for safety.

Hall:

Fraternal organizations, like the Masons, had separate Black and white divisions. Black Masons, along with African American fraternities and sororities, were among the many organizations that were an essential part of the word-of-mouth network that people used when planning a trip and while on the road. This next story from William Williams, an architect who teaches at the University of Cincinnati, illustrates how members of Black fraternities, as well as sororities, were ready to provide support and safety to travelers, especially their fellow brothers and sisters and their families.

William Williams:

You just did not know where it was going to be a safe place to stop. Particularly if you had a family or if you had kids. If you're by yourself, maybe that's okay. Probably not. But when you have kids, you want to work out a plan and say, "Okay, we're going to stay at this hotel."

I know in my family, my father was an Omega and he didn't use the Green Book so much, but he definitely used his fraternity brothers. When we were traveling through Alabama and everything else, he always had a list of fraternity brothers' names he could call if something happened.

Once our car broke down, so he called a fraternity brother and they came out, got us, took us in, fed us. No questions. That's just what you did. That was just a different time. Things are better [now], but not great because I'm still not trying to drive through Vidor, Texas to this day.

Hall:

While that story was from William's own youth, he recalls a more recent situation when he stopped on the road with a group of young people he was chaperoning.

Williams:

We needed some gas, so we decided we're gonna pull over and get some. We talked to all the kids and they were all hungry. They were like, "Hey, we want to get something to eat."

So we're thinking, "Let's all go in. There's a diner here. We'll get our gas, get some food." It just made sense. But when I and a couple of the other adults went in the place, there was a guy at the counter who looked at us and was like, "I'm not sure if you're in the right place." And I remember asking him, "Well, do you think we should just get our gas and go?"

And he's like, "Yeah, that would be best."

And so we did. I mean, in some ways we were kind of like, "You know what? They don't want our money and we certainly don't want to give it to them." So, we just took off and left.

Let's say that was in the late-'80s maybe early-'90s. I mean, that wasn't that long ago.

Hall:

What Janée and I heard, again and again, is that certain encounters that people's parents experienced repeat in different ways today. Carl Westmoreland, in Cincinnati, Ohio, remembers an incident in his father's life.

Carl Westmoreland:

When I was younger, I would watch my father negotiate and use a Green Book. He was a Mason and he had contacts. He was also a CPA who was also a municipal official, and then he was a well-placed democratic official. So he traveled a lot.

He met with Hubert Humphrey in Minneapolis in the early '50s. He went for a municipal finance officers' meeting. He had his reservations and everything. But when he got there, they said he wasn't registered, and he was the only Black person there.

So he was in this situation that was potentially explosive. He'd been driving all by himself and Mama was a mess about Daddy. She loved him to death. So, she'd always ask "Does he have this, does he have that, and will you call me when you get there?"

And when he finally called, he said, "They didn't want to let me in."

The mayor of Minneapolis's name was Hubert Humphrey and he said, "He's my guest and I'll take him home if necessary, but he's going to be a part of the program."

Then Humphrey called someone back here called Laughlin and asked them about my dad. Then they started talking about where he'd gone to school and how smart he was and all that. And Humphrey told him, "He's going to be on the program."

Hall:

Decades later, Carl found himself in his dad's shoes, having an experience that was so similar that it felt like he was reliving something that should have been history, like little had changed.

Westmoreland:

I spoke at the Hotel del Coronado in San Diego for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. My name was on the billboard. So they fly me in and I walk up and I introduced myself as Carl B. Westmoreland. And they said, "We're not hiring today."

Janée Woods Weber:

When was that?

Westmoreland:

Twenty years ago. So I said, "That's me" and I pointed to the billboard. And the guy got all flustered and he starts scratching and he says, "Well, I can't find your reservation."

I said, "Get Mr. Biddle."

Well, Biddle was married to a DuPont, and both Mr. Biddle and Ms. Dupont-Biddle came to see what was going on. And Biddle says, "If you don't get this straightened out immediately, this is the last time the National Trust will come to this facility."

I don't know if you've ever seen the Hotel del Coronado.

Hall:

I've been there. I've stayed there.

Westmoreland:

Well, you know it costs a fortune to stay in that place, and I don't have that kind of money and I was lucky enough [to be put up there]. But that's the other thing, to be

sheltered by someone who had influence and power. It's ridiculous that that's what it took.

I've had the same experience at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. And it is something that I think we've made the mistake of not sharing with the young people.

Hall:

I agree.

Westmoreland:

So that they understand how tenuous our status is in this country.

Hall:

Carl's reaction is totally understandable to me. It's not just this incident, it's the accumulation of every time this has happened to him. But when his son, a new generation who doesn't have the same history, witnessed a similar encounter involving his father, he reacted very differently.

Westmoreland:

We were on 285 going around Atlanta. My youngest son was going to Morehouse in the '90s. I needed gas from a Shell station and I needed to go to the bathroom. But the man didn't want to let me go to the bathroom, but he'd already put my gas in. We got into it—and here I am in my sixties or my late fifties [at the time]—and I'm about to go to war with a guy in his late twenties, and I didn't care.

Weber:

In the 1990s?

Westmoreland:

In the 1990s. The dude got in my face and the only thing that kept me from taking him out was my son figured out what was going on. My son is a wide receiver and he presses 350 or 360 pounds. When he walked in, he suddenly had me behind him and he said [to the man], "You need to understand, he'll try you, but I'm gonna knock you out."

Weber:

So you got some muscle behind you.

Westmoreland:

Then [my son said], “Daddy, go to the bathroom.”

Hall:

Having endured the road trip, which was certainly tiring for the vigilant adults, they were relieved to arrive at a hotel or tourist home listed in the Green Book, or a relative's house where they were welcomed. As they settled in, some travelers, like my relatives, would say “The Lord brought us safely through.” I've often thought that this was also a reference to the power of prayer and mother wit.

Westmoreland:

If you look back on it, it was miraculous to watch our parents and the elders make adjustments and develop networks of contacts so that they could move around. That they could balance the ugly we saw en route with decent places to sleep or warm places to eat, and be received with courtesy and what I call “sugar smacks.”

Hall:

What are sugar smacks?

Westmoreland:

Well, sugar smacks are the bosomy ladies that pull you up to them and say, “Give me some of that sugar, boy,” or “My, you've gotten tall,” or “I hear you're going to go to school and, of course, you're going to do well.”

There was this kind of anticipation that when we [arrived somewhere] I was going to get some sweet potato pie and some homemade ice cream.

Hall:

In towns and cities across America, African American entrepreneurs saw travelers coming into or passing through their cities looking for services that white establishments would not provide. And they knew that these travelers were willing to pay. One of the most successful entrepreneurs was A.G. Gaston in Birmingham, Alabama.

Weber:

He was a remarkable man.

Denise Gilmore:

Absolutely.

Weber:

He built an empire.

Hall:

Here, Janée and I are talking to Denise Gilmore, Director of Cultural Preservation for the City of Birmingham, who oversees the restoration of the historic A.G. Gaston Motel.

Gilmore:

The interesting thing is [A.G. Gaston built] this in the '50s. Think about that: A Black man, a millionaire in the '50s. He was so ahead of time.

Hall:

And he wasn't an educated man, was he?

Gilmore:

Well, my mother used to say, "Common sense goes a long, long way and mother wit goes a long, long way." So, a formal education? Maybe not, but good old common sense, mother wit, and just that good basic intellect? He had it all.

Weber:

Street smart and business savvy.

Gilmore:

Absolutely.

Weber:

How did he make his millions?

Gilmore:

He made his millions in industry. So it was the motel, he had an insurance company, a bank, funeral parlors.

His motto was: Find a need and fill it. So when he looked throughout the Black community and saw that so many things that we deserved and literally should have a right to—services that the white community would not permit Black people to have access to. He said, "If I see a need, I'm going to fill it." And so he created funeral parlors, insurance plans, a penny savings bank. So there were a number of things that he did, and because quite frankly, he was the only one doing this, that's how he created his millions.

Hall:

A.G. Gaston's story highlights how the entrepreneurial spirit of many Black people, coupled with deep mother wit, ended up in not only providing safe, comfortable places for travelers, but also services and accommodations that were first-class. It also shows how some people dreamed big and refused to let other people and their restrictive laws and racist practices dictate what they could or could not have.

Whether through entrepreneurial efforts like Gaston's, or other ways of using the spur-of-the-moment problem-solving that comes out of mother wit, Black people have always found strategies to survive and create pathways to the promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" with dignity.

That's all for this episode of Driving the Green Book. Join us next week as we head to Nashville to trace the legacy of Jim Crow and segregation through three generations of one family and pay tribute to the women entrepreneurs who have gone unrecognized throughout history.

CREDITS

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Safe travels.