



Episode 10: The Lorraine Motel

Alvin Hall:

After driving 2,021 miles and conducting many interviews, one place continues to stand out to me. That place is the iconic Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Most people will forever, and rightly, associate the motel with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968. However, the motel is also noteworthy because it stands out as a microcosm of the incredible social, historical, and entrepreneurial contributions Black Americans made that were captured in the pages of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. Over the many years that the Lorraine Motel advertised in the Green Book, it evolved, became a local and national destination, and survived urban renewal pretty much intact. Indeed, the full history of the motel and its founders reflects the complex story of America.

During our visit to Memphis, my producer, Janée Woods Weber, and I met with Dr. Noelle Trent, the director of Interpretation, Collections, and Education at the National Civil Rights Museum, which is located at the motel.

The emotions I felt visiting the Lorraine ranged from immense reverence to profound grief and sadness. As we toured the site with Dr. Trent, she unraveled some of the motel's complicated history for us—with some delightful, as well as some somber details.

Dr. Noelle Trent:

We are located in the historic Lorraine Motel. This is the location where Dr. King was assassinated at 6:01 p.m. on April 4th, 1968. But we are also so much more than that. We are a historically African American hotel that was owned by Walter and Loree Bailey. They purchased it in 1945.

People like Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige all stayed here, in the Lorraine Motel. A lot of people don't know that two songs were written here in the Lorraine Motel: "Wait Til the Midnight Hour" and "Knock on Wood" were written here.

Alvin Hall/Janée Woods Weber:

Oh my god! Really?

Hall:

You better knock **knock knock knock** on wood

Trent:

I've always loved that song. Then when I learned that, I was like, "Oh, this has a special meaning." So those were written here, but I don't know what room.

Hall:

This is Driving the Green Book and I'm your host, Alvin Hall. As Janée and I traveled the country on our road trip, a James Baldwin statement kept coming to mind:

"A journey is called that because you cannot know what you will discover on the journey, what you will do with what you find, or what you find will do to you."

The discoveries we made at the Lorraine Motel were some of the most surprising and unforgettable.

While it's now part of the National Civil Rights Museum and is often thought of as a place of mourning, during the civil rights era, the people who stayed at the Lorraine were symbols of Black excellence and creativity. It was *the* place to stay if you were a Black person traveling through Memphis.

Hall:

It's crazy, but it's wonderful, because those songs: Shaft, Hot Buttered Soul, right? All of those albums that were released during that period of time, the people hung out here.

Trent:

The people hung out here. Mavis Staples and the Staples Singers used to stay here. Just so many people came through the Lorraine Motel. So it was so much more than the place where Dr. King was assassinated. And we've worked really hard, especially in the last few years, to allow people to understand how much of a place of activity the Lorraine was before that fateful moment.

It was listed in the Green Book and when it was renovated in 1964, if you go through the Green Books you'll notice in '64, there's a brand-new ad in there for them that says "air-conditioned." So that's the big thing. You can come to the Lorraine Motel

and guess what? It's air-conditioned. And today we kind of take that for granted. But if you ever travel through Memphis or the south in July, the humidity is very, very special. So I can understand why air conditioning would be a very hot commodity.

Hall:

What I find amazing is that this Black family held on to this place all those years. How did they manage to do that?

Trent:

Well, the Baileys were really business-minded. When we look at the oral histories of Walter Bailey, he and his first wife, Loree Bailey, really were partners. Traditionally people will think that he was the business owner and that tends to be the patriarchal, misogynist version of history, that the man is the business owner. But he's very clear in how he talks about his wife that they went into this together in 1945 when they had the opportunity to purchase the motel. They said, "We're going to do this together. We're going to purchase this and we're going to start this business together." Not only did they own the motel, but they also owned a farm further out in Shelby County that supplied the produce to support the restaurant here.

Hall:

Early farm-to-table.

Hall:

Dr. King's assassination at the Lorraine Motel impacted the Bailey family in a private way that is heartbreaking. Listening to Dr. Trent recount what happened, I had a very difficult time containing my emotions. It's just too painful.

Trent:

Loree Bailey was actually at the switchboard on April 4th. So when they pick up the phone to call emergency services, she makes the call. And she's handling a lot of these initial calls and then she's on the phone with a friend and says, "I'm not feeling well." And she goes to her room, which is on the floor above us and she lays down and she never wakes up. She suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and ultimately passed away on April 9th, 1968.

Hall:

The day of the funeral.

Trent:

So for the Baileys, April 9th is also a tragic day for them because she passed away as well as the tragedy that happened on the property. So it's a hard time in the history of this building and the history for the family. But Mr. Bailey was able to continue business even though the hotel went into decline for about twenty years afterward.

I think it was just his determination and community support around him. I think what's also really important around the story of the motel is the community's dedication to memorialize this to Dr. King. Very soon afterward, people started leaving flowers on the balcony. Almost within twelve hours flowers are being left and a memorial is being formed. And then there's a concrete slab that's currently outside that's dedicated to Dr. King that's put up there, it's held in the window for a period of time. And room 306 is really this place of honor for years—even before the museum is formalized as a concept. And then in the late 1980s, there's talk of what to do with this property because it's falling apart and people are like, "Well, maybe we should make it a parking lot or we should tear down the Lorraine?" And the African American community in Memphis said: Absolutely not.

So there are campaigns by A.W. Willis, Chuck Scruggs, and D'Army Bailey to pull together funds. So people are dropping money off, pulling their pennies together, and saying, "We're going to save the Lorraine Motel." Business owners are pulling money together. They did fall short, but the state steps in and helps bridge that gap and that's how we're able to open up the National Civil Rights Museum in 1991.

So it's a beautiful story of this building evolving as a marker for not only a safe space for African Americans during a time when the country's hostile for travel, but also a safe space for us to memorialize a history that's significant to us and for us to continue to deal with these moments in our country where there's continued hostility. And I think that's the beauty of this building. That's the beauty of being here in this space.

[INSERT AD BREAK]

Hall:

The Baileys's tragic story makes me think of all the other motels in the US where Black travelers may have experienced violence and trauma. I thought of all the stories that no one will hear. As we drove the Green Book, I thought about those voices, those people. How many travelers come to the Lorraine Motel carrying those private stories that connect them personally to the events here?

Trent:

We're aware that this place, people come in already keyed up from the moment you see the marquee. People anticipate, they know what happened here. What they don't know is how we're gonna unpack that story for them.

The people who become the individuals that we know as the leaders of the civil rights movement—the ancestors of African Americans—were not blank slates, they were not primitive folks. They are descendants of individuals who had sophisticated languages. They were descendants of people who had practiced various religions, [created] artwork. They came to the Americas with a whole system of thinking and philosophies, and they bring that to them, but there's a fundamental resistance to oppression that exists within the human spirit and that is brought with them as well.

Hall:

I think the place always feels more intimate than people expect because of the scale of the buildings. I think when people hear "motel," they think something different. When they see the famous photograph, they think it's larger than it is.

I still remember my first visit here. I saw it in the evening, near sunset. I will always remember, I just thought: it's so small. Everybody who stayed here couldn't avoid encountering the other people who stayed here. And so often, I'm sure, families stayed here, people would come in big groups and stay here when there were conferences for the Baptist church or a home economics teachers' conferences—I can see all of that taking place in this spot.

Trent:

It's funny that you mentioned that because, in March of '68, Dr. King was planning his Poor People's Campaign. And it was this campaign where he was calling for the country to radically reimagine how we dealt with poverty. And he was asking for poor people—all whole across the country of all backgrounds—to descend on Washington and camp out there until Congress did something.

He had all of his lieutenants here at the motel—strategizing in the conference room. And there was a choir from Prairie View A&M, which is an HBCU here, and their choir director—you mentioned how small it feels—the choir director found out that Dr. King was on site and it was the middle of the night because, you know, Dr. King's always busy. And he heard Dr. King was in the conference room.

So he woke up, got all the students together, told them to put their clothes on. And it's so funny cause you look at the film footage of that moment—some of them still are kind of groggy, some of the girls still have curlers in their hair—but he rounds them up and they sing for Dr. King.

Hall:

That's so beautiful.

Trent:

But that's the idea of this space being so intimate that you couldn't help but be inside. You can only imagine that the director ran into—maybe ran into Ralph Abernathy or somebody who's like, "Yeah, Dr. King's here."

"You think I could have my students come sing for him?" And he's running up and down the hallways grabbing the students and saying, "You got to go sing. Let's go. We're going to sing this song. Everybody tune up. Don't embarrass me."

Weber:

Do you know what they sang for Dr. King?

Trent:

It was a classical piece. Goodness, I don't know it off of the top of my head, but I think it's like "Jesus, Love of Man" or something like that. But it's a really beautiful piece and they sang it a cappella in the middle of the night.

[Clip of Prairie View A&M Choir singing for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.]

Hall:

The joy of Dr. King receiving that late-night serenade, to me, is fraught with deep irony given what comes later. No one could have foreseen it. And the Baileys lives would be affected by the assassination in unimaginable ways.

Hall:

So after King was assassinated, did Mr. Bailey lock off that room?

Trent:

Yes.

Hall:

And it was never rented out again?

Trent:

It was never rented out again.

Hall:

And left exactly the way it was?

Trent:

Yeah. Pretty much.

Hall:

That's amazing.

Trent:

What we have now is a reproduction of how it was set up, because we have so many photographs of the room. But yes, Mr. Bailey was very particular about honoring that space. He had a deep sense of the moment.

But, you know he and his son-in-law were also the ones who had to clean up the balcony. People forget that when a crime is committed the police come in, they do what they need to do, but the police don't clean up. Law enforcement never cleans up. They take all the evidence that they need, but whatever's left over is the responsibility of the property owner to clean up. So once law enforcement leaves, Mr. Bailey and his son-in-law had to clean everything up. So there's photographs of Mr. Bailey in the middle of the night having to clean up.

There's a gravitas of that moment that I don't think any of us will ever truly understand.

Hall:

I agree.

Trent:

But Mr. Bailey and his son-in-law, Dr. Champion, because I think there's an intimacy and there's a sacredness in cleaning up the remains of the dead. There's an honor in that. Dr. Champion is still alive today, and there's something there that even when I've talked to him about it, that you can tell he's willing to talk about certain things. But there's an emotionality there that I don't think we'll ever really see revealed because that space, that moment is filled with is levels that cannot be excavated.

Hall:

Yes. Deeply personal. Beyond philosophical. It's at the core of who he is and that some things can't be shared. They just can't be shared.

Trent:

You can't, you can't.

Hall:

The Lorraine Motel had to be preserved. How to do it was *the* challenge. We have to remember that this was a time in America when a lot of places like it were being erased in "the name of progress."

Hall:

It's still surprising to me that this place survived urban renewal or as we call it:

Hall/Weber:

Negro removal.

Trent:

Well, you know what? I think the way that it was able to survive was very unique in that downtown Memphis in the '70s and '80s was going through a big transition. At the point when that was happening, it could have gone the other way. But because there was this big community preservation effort, it really did stop that. So it's really exciting that we were able to do that and that we were able to create a footprint for the museum to be preserved, because the state owns the museum and it's on the [National Historic] Register. It protects the facade of the museum. In 2002, the museum bought the boarding house across the street, so that expanded the footprint, as well as the park across the street so it protects the view.

So there's a lot of work being done to help ensure that, as well as there are other efforts happening, to further protect this area. This sort of preservation is long term, but you have a lot of stakeholders involved, and people really committed to making this work happen.

The goal with historic building preservation is not just to preserve the building, but to preserve the area around it, to protect that for generations to come. The highest level of preservation in the world is World Heritage status. And that's given by the United Nations to recognize the value of that [location]. And they want to know that your state and local communities and your federal government are around to

understand that level of protection. But that you can make a case that's beyond one person, that you can relate this story beyond that moment.

And so it's not just about April 4th, it's about the work of the Baileys. It's about how we mourn and how we choose to commemorate a movement that looked at a community in the United States that's been historically oppressed and has continued to have to fight to be seen as human, and whose work in that arena has inspired generations of people throughout the globe, whether it's resistance in Central America, Latin America, or decolonization in Africa. Heck, even folks in the solidarity movement in Poland. I was surprised to learn that they were like, "We modeled what we did to kick out the communists on what John Lewis and everybody was doing in the '60s in the Southern U.S." I have modern politicians who told me that. We have a way to say[share that legacy]. So our goal is just to get other people to recognize that and say, "Let's build the protections around [the Lorraine] and save this place."

Hall:

The Lorraine Motel, like the many other places we visited and the people we met on our journey, is a testament to the rich and inspiring legacy African Americans have built in the face of centuries of injustice and discrimination.

Our trip exploring Green Book locations has been much more than a drive from Detroit to New Orleans. It has been a journey not just to places, but into people's rich memories, experiences, and insights. We hope you found a connection to the people we featured—their voices, their stories, their down-to-earth wisdom. And in listening, we hope you found connections to your families, your friends, to your communities, and maybe even someone you've had trouble connecting with in the past.

Many of the stories we heard were difficult, painful, and shocking. While others were funny and told with a dose of irony and wit. But most importantly, nearly every story ended in a way that showed how the storyteller had made his or her peace with what had happened—without forgetting it. Happily for us, these storytellers chose to share the most important thing: the wisdom they gained about themselves, about others, and about America.

That's all for this final episode of Driving the Green Book. I, along with my producer, Janée Woods Weber, thank you for joining us. *The Negro Motorist Green Book* inspired the route we took and connected us to the people along our journey. I truly marvel at the people who lived through such difficult, mean-spirited times in America and *still*, like Victor Hugo Green, maintained their spirit of hope and optimism. I want to leave you with the words of wisdom Frank Figgers shared with us and I hope they, too, inspire the same hope in you: "I'm going to do what I can with what I have, where I am in order to make a better life and a fair deal."

CREDITS

Special thanks to Dr. Noelle Trent, the Lorraine Motel, and the National Civil Rights Museum.

The Lorraine Motel is already designated a National Historical Site, but its leaders want to have it assigned World Heritage Site status. And you might be able to help. Dr. Trent encourages people to send in letters of support to the museum explaining what the motel means to them, how it has affected them. Please send letters to fmorris@civilrightsmuseum.org.

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If you'd like to share your own stories about the Green Book with us, email us at greenbook@macmillan.com. We would love to hear from you.

I'm Alvin Hall. Thank you for listening and safe travels. As we sign off, we leave you with the full version of the movingly elegant original score from the sound designer, Cedric Wilson.