



## Episode 9: Ghost Towns

### **Jamon Jordan:**

But at that time the African American dollar in the city of Detroit turned around ten times within the community before it left the community. You spent that dollar at your local chef or baker, or your local convenience store, or your local candy store, or your local grocer. You went there and bought all of your goods. That grocer took that dollar and went to hire an African American painter to paint the outside of his building and make signage for him. And then that African American painter would take that dollar and then go to a place that will allow him to package his paint inside of barrels. So that would be an African American barrel maker. So you got all of this money transferring from one African American hand to another African American hand and building wealth for the African American community.

### **Alvin Hall:**

That was Jamon Jordan, a former teacher turned local tour guide and avid Detroit historian. We met Jamon in front of a row of stores on a street near downtown Detroit.

That day it was pouring, but that didn't stop him from joining us in our car and guiding us through a tour of historic Black sites like Paradise Valley.

This is Driving the Green Book from Macmillan Podcasts and I'm your host, Alvin Hall. When my producer, Janée Woods Weber, and I began our journey, our starting point was Detroit because of its significance in the Great Migration. In 1910, Detroit's African American population was 1.2% of the total. By 1970, it was 43.7%. Many of these new Detroit residents were from towns and cities across the South. We know that a majority of them made trips back home regularly to visit family members and close friends who remained. By starting in Detroit and heading south, Janée and I were shadowing a drive many African Americans would have made.

### **Jordan:**



African Americans came into the city of Detroit in large numbers first in the nineteen-teens. After 1914 Henry Ford offered \$5 a day to all workers. He built his Model T factory to create the Model T on the assembly line and he partnered with five Black institutions in the city of Detroit to help recruit African Americans to take some of those jobs.

Which really, with all of the faults of Henry Ford, places him as a progressive in comparison to the other factory owners who were in the city of Detroit, who weren't hiring African Americans at all or only hiring African Americans as strikebreakers. And so Henry Ford who at one time practiced those same things, has now moved much further in hiring African Americans than any of the other factories. And he's now going to begin paying them an equal wage to the white workers, which is \$5 a day, which is double what most factories are paying in the city of Detroit at that time.

So now you have African Americans coming from Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, who were working as tenant farmers and sharecroppers in many cases or some form of low-skilled labor and not really making that much money or in perpetual debt as a sharecropper on a plantation. They're now coming to the city of Detroit making a living wage, more money than they ever would have made as a sharecropper in Mississippi.

**Janée Woods Weber:**

What did they do with that money?

**Jordan:**

So what they did with that money are two things: One, they became customers of businesses they never would have been able to be customers of. And many of these businesses, of course, are African American-owned businesses.

**Weber:**

In Paradise Valley?

**Jordan:**

In Paradise Valley. The second thing is: they're using their money that they have now, that disposable income, to start businesses. So they work at Ford, but they are also starting their own businesses because they work at an auto factory on the assembly line. But what they really are, are blacksmiths or tailors, they're seamstresses, or they're cobblers, or cooks, or they know how to do some other skill. And now they have the money to finance this other skill, this other business that



they can be a part of. So they're starting their own businesses, many of which will be in Paradise Valley

**Hall:**

Higher wages and skilled work meant that many African Americans in Detroit were experiencing a level of prosperity in a short period of time that was transformative. I heard so many stories during our trip about people returning South with their new cars, wearing stylish clothes, not only showing off what they had earned, but also saying: "You should come North with me, you don't have to live down here in this grinding poverty."

The new arrivals used the money to unleash their entrepreneurial spirit. They may have been working in factories, they may have been working as maids, they may have been working in restaurants, but they were accumulating money in Black-owned banks, with the idea of taking control of their own financial fate by setting up their own businesses. They saw the demand and knew the supply was inadequate. Paradise Valley in Detroit developed to satisfy the demand.

**Hall:**

Is there any of Paradise Valley left? Looking around here the answer is no.

**Jordan:**

Yeah, that's what it looks like. And so what happens is African Americans, as they're becoming more and more wealthy, and more and more prominent—[I'm talking about] the business owners in Paradise Valley, 350 Black-owned businesses either in or very close to Paradise Valley, during that high period of Paradise Valley. So you have a thriving business district right here in the city of Detroit. Because of segregation you have prominent African Americans and musicians like Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Count Basie coming to the city of Detroit, and they're playing everywhere. They're playing in the white clubs, they're playing in African American clubs. They're playing everywhere. But they cannot *stay* everywhere. So if they're gonna stay at a hotel, they can't stay in the white-owned hotels.

Where do they stay? Well, using the Green Book, they stay in the upper-class, African American-owned hotels: The Gotham, The Carlton, The Carver, The Mark Twain. These are the upper-class Black hotels, many of which are right here in Paradise Valley. The Norwood Hotel is around the corner from where we are right now.

So they're performing in these areas, as well. And not only are African Americans coming to hear them play, it's the pop music of that day. This is the Beyoncé and Katy Perry of the 1920s, '30s, and early-'40s. And so whites are coming to Paradise



Valley to hear them, too. So Paradise Valley is not just taking in Black dollars, it's taking in a large amount of white dollars, too.

**Hall:**

Black business owners knew that the world they were creating and the businesses, especially entertainment, would attract white people who wanted to have a good time. So in their thinking they were pragmatic, which is not surprising given that most of them came from jobs in the South that required very common-sense skills: like being a farmer, a blacksmith, or a maid in a white household. They knew that to be successful they also had to be savvy.

**Jordan:**

And so these businesses did not discriminate. They're Black-owned, but customers could be of any color. They're fully integrated, also known as "black and tans." A "black and tan" is a fully-integrated club or bar where Black people and white people perform on stage together. They sit in the same booth with one another. It's fully integrated and that means the cash is fully integrated. The business owners aren't practitioners of segregation. They don't perpetuate it.

**Hall:**

What Jamon helped me understand is why the car was the vehicle, pardon my pun, for Black economic achievement and social mobility. For the first time, more Blacks had control of their time, when they could leave home to go to work, when they could go shopping, when they could go out at night, when they could go to visit relatives. And their car was something valuable that *they* owned.

**Jordan:**

The automobile is a center of this African American business activity in the city of Detroit during the Paradise Valley age. Of course, having a car meant something. It's very important for African Americans. It means you've arrived. It means you now have the freedom of movement to be able to go from one place to another and to visit family.

**Hall:**

And not to endure the indignations of using public transportation, which were largely segregated, dictated by Jim Crow laws.

**Jordan:**



That's right. One of the important things about having a car is that it allows you to access, to be able to go from place to place and not be inconvenienced or in some cases, threatened by what can happen to you in segregated areas. You can drive right through a town that you know you're not welcome in. You can drive right past a place or a hotel that will not serve you. You can't do that when you're at the mercy of public transportation.

**Hall:**

When I asked other people in Detroit about Paradise Valley, few remembered it. Some had never heard of it. I wanted to know what's left of Paradise Valley.

**Jordan:**

So where the marker sits was where one of the most famous clubs sat. The 606 Horseshoe Lounge sat where the marker is at the foot of St. Antoine. St. Antoine is the street right in front of us, and Adams Street. There is no Adams Street that runs this way anymore because the football field blocks where Adams Street would've been. This football field, all of it would have been Paradise Valley. On the other side of it is the baseball field. Most of that would have been Paradise Valley. Behind us—these businesses that are behind this office building on the left of us—there would have been Paradise Valley clubs, restaurants, and shops there. And on the other side of the office building is the freeway.

**Hall:**

The story of the decimation of Paradise Valley repeats itself in Black commercial and residential areas across America. When we visited Louisville, Kentucky, we heard a similar story from Kenneth Clay, a lifetime resident and author.

**Kenneth Clay:**

There was an area called Walnut Street. It's now Muhammad Ali Boulevard. But Walnut Street ran through downtown Louisville—east and west. It began up on the east side of town and went all the way to the west side. Black people lived in the west side, west Louisville area.

But this strip between 6th and 13th street was *the* strip. It was the entertainment strip, it was the Black business strip. It was where the professional doctors and lawyers all had their offices. It was like our Harlem. It was like our Beale Street. For years that was the place that I just loved to be.

As a youngster I used to go there. They had these movie houses—three Black-owned movie houses. There were two Black-owned banks, three Black-owned major



insurance companies, and a whole assorted grouping of restaurants and eateries and places you could buy clothing, records, and stuff.

In terms of the Green Book, Walnut Street, of course, was where there were some hotels. There was the Hooks Hotel over on 7th and Chester, a block away from Walnut Street. There was the Brown Derby Guest House, there was Laird's Hotel.

**Hall:**

When we come back from the break we'll hear the lengths the Black community would go to in order to shelter travelers and keep them safe on their journeys.

**[AD BREAK]**

**Hall:**

During our time in Louisville, we visited with Mervin Aubespain, a former associate editor at *The Courier Journal*. Mervin lives on a quiet, leafy street lined with beautiful houses and apartment buildings. When we arrived at his house, he was cleaning and organizing his front porch as he waited for us. Mervin grew up in Opelousas, a town in southwest Louisiana and he vividly recalls the anxieties he and his family felt while driving in the South.

**Hall:**

Did you ever encounter anything that was really unpleasant?

**Mervin Aubespain:**

Just going down there, because sometimes the idea that it *could* happen and the knowledge that it *has* happened to others made you feel awful. If you were driving, you were so tired when you got to the end of your trip from watching to see if the car that just pulled behind you was a sheriff's car or somebody who was just gonna irritate you. If you're driving on the highway not bothering a soul and somebody passes by and waves their pistol at you, that's not good at all. So when you got to where you were going, you were tired and you needed rest, and then you had to think about going back through it. So it was not nice.

On the other hand though, you met people who were willing to give you everything they have to keep you safe, to feed you, they'd put you in a guest bedroom they had. They'd move Uncle Joe out so you could have the bedroom. You know, that kind of thing.

**Hall:**

Although, you weren't a relative?



**Aubespain:**

No. It was just the way things were done. Because somebody there would say, "Oh no, no, no. We're going to call sister so-and-so. We know she's got an extra bedroom because her son is in the service." And there you found your extra bedroom. Also she would feed you. So I gained weight.

But to see what people were willing to do, because they knew that if we didn't make the changes we would never, ever survive. And so that was everybody's way of giving their dime to the collection plate.

**Hall:**

Janée and I decided to ask Mervin about his home, Opelousas, Louisiana, a place he described as "a small town made up of Creole people of color."

**Hall:**

And what did your family do in this town?

**Aubespain:**

Well, just about everything. They cooked. I had one relative who had a restaurant that sold only to whites, as a matter of fact. Because she did a lot of specialty stuff and they would put their order in and go over to her restaurant and get the dishes and bring it.

I had another uncle who worked for the lumber company and was very close friends with the man who owned the lumber company, and as a result got set up and built a motel with his wife called the Sid Silvia motel.

That motel was one of the rare few places that people of color could stop on their way from Baton Rouge to the Texas line. At the motel you met everybody who was coming through, because they were wise enough to have billboards that suggested very strongly that this may be the only place you can spend the night until you hit the Texas line and you may not find a place after you do.

**Hall:**

Can you remember what the Sid Silvia Motel looked like?

**Aubespain:**

Oh yes. I spent a lot of time there.



**Hall:**

Describe it for us.

**Aubespain:**

Keep in mind that most of the men in my family on my mother's side were bricklayers. So when they got ready to build the Sid Silvia Motel, they got together on weekends and built it. It looked just like a regular motel with a lawn. You could park outside and you could walk right in, and it was right across the street from a nice little restaurant that was African American-owned. So you could get food and find a place [to rest].

They were wise enough to have billboards on the road between Baton Rouge, which was the capital and Texas. You would see these billboards and they would use my Aunt Silvia's picture. Rather than saying, "This is a motel that welcomes Coloreds," they used Aunt Silvia's picture and said: "You need to come to the Sid Silvia Motel." And they showed you the route from the highway to this motel, which was located in an African American neighborhood.

And so we took care of each other and in the process what you did was you overlooked the racial problem by having your own. It may not be as fancy as the one down the street, it may not be as large as the one down the street, but we were welcome because our family owned it.

**Hall:**

Whatever happened to the Sid Silvia Motel?

**Aubespain:**

My Uncle Sidney died early and his wife, my Aunt Silvia, ran it for a number of years and it got to be a little difficult. So she sold it to an African American who lived in Lafayette, Louisiana, and she moved to California where her sister lived and she was glad to [move]. But that motel had given her a nice retirement and a comfortable way of life.

**[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]**

**Hall:**

While many communities were destroyed during the period of urban renewal and the building of the interstate highway system, there are notable exceptions all across America, primarily where well-educated, successful Black people lived. For example, in Louisville.



**Hall:**

As your career was rising here in Louisville—the area where the majority of African Americans lived along Walnut Street was being attacked and gradually broken apart.

**Aubespain:**

Now that you say that, two things were happening there. The area you're talking about is just one of the things. But on the other side, was the area of the Southwestern Parkway, near the river, the Russell neighborhood, and [that's where] other things were happening.

**Hall:**

What was happening there?

**Aubespain:**

People were buying houses.

**Hall:**

Black people?

**Aubespain:**

Yes. That's where we lived before we came down here. They were buying houses and they were taking very good care of those houses. They were out there mowing those lawns, cleaning those windows, and putting new shutters in. They stayed and those little communities on Southwestern Parkway and the Cherokee area grew. Black folks still are the majority there. Those were choice houses.

How many houses can you go to in Louisville where you can walk at the end of your backyard and there is the Ohio River passing? Only down there.

**Weber:**

That must be prime real estate these days.

**Aubespain:**

It is.

**Weber:**



So those families that were able to scrape together the money to make those investments have really built some wealth?

**Aubespain:**

Exactly. And it became the place where the African American lawyers, African American doctors, and African American businessmen who were successful started buying. They started on Southwestern Parkway.

**Hall:**

And they're still there today.

**Hall:**

These professional Blacks lived in comfortable, well-cared-for areas, some of which were relatively unaffected by urban renewal. But where did they drive when they went on vacation and did they use the Green Book?

For that answer, we spoke to Mary Ellen Tyus, who lives in Columbus, Ohio. She's a long-time resident of Idlewild, one of the remaining historic upper-class Black communities in Michigan. The other two are Oak Bluffs in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts and Fox Lake in Angola, Indiana.

**Hall:**

When did you first go to Idlewild?

**Mary Ellen Tyus:**

When I was an infant.

**Hall:**

An infant. That long?

**Tyus:**

Yeah. And my mother was the same way and my grandmother.

When I started working at the [Idlewild Historic and] Cultural Center, I was telling some people about our displays. We have these banners, there are about a dozen of them that tell the history of Idlewild from 1912, when it was started. It wasn't even anything but woods. But that was when the corporation set it up.



I was telling my first group of [visitors] about them and I looked at the bottom paragraph of one of the banners and it was about my grandmother. I hadn't read them all and I said, "Oh, that's my grandmother!" And it explained how she happened to come [to Idlewild]. She was a school teacher here in Columbus and she had asthma and hay fever. One of her friends, I think probably somebody from Chicago said, "You ought to go up into Michigan. The air is better and it's cooler and you might do better with asthma up there." And she came and she liked it, and she took my mom who was a baby. She liked it enough that she kept going back and after several years she built a cottage around 1920 or 1921.

**Hall:**

How did Idlewild survive during the time of Jim Crow and restrictive legislation?

**Tyus:**

Well that's why there was Idlewild. And when people talk about Idlewild, a lot of people will say, "Well, Idlewild's dead." They even had a documentary on TV about twenty-some years ago that said that Idlewild is just a ghost town, which isn't true. It was started in 1912 for families.

**Hall:**

African American families?

**Tyus:**

African American families who could not go anywhere in the country without being hassled and turned away. And these would be sort of affluent families, professional families that could afford to take a vacation. Doctors, teachers, lawyers, social workers, and that kind of thing. After it started to be developed you could go to Idlewild.

When I was growing up, that's where people went for vacation. And usually it was the moms and the kids that would go, and the dads who would come on weekends or for a week or so in the summer, because they had to work the rest of the time.

**Weber:**

What was a perfect day like at Idlewild?

**Tyus:**

Hanging out with my friends. We'd have breakfast and then everybody was turned loose. And you had to be home when the fire department's siren went off at six



o'clock. You knew when you heard the siren that you better get home. Everybody just went home—that was it—and had dinner. Then we'd get together again in the evening if we were a little older and party. We'd go down to the beach and cook hot dogs and marshmallows or just have dance parties at somebody's house. There was always something going on, card games or just whatever kids do.

Everybody had either a rowboat or some of the boys had a boat with a motor on the back. You couldn't really call them speedboats, they were just boats with motors, but they made the most of that. We always had transportation, some people rode bikes, but mostly we were on the water or in the water. And that was our typical summer. We could go up to an area called the Island where they had concession stands, so for a dollar and a quarter we could have a hamburger, fries, and a milkshake.

**Hall:**

And were these Black-owned concession stands?

**Tyus:**

Yes. Everything was Black there.

**Hall:**

For these high-achieving African American professionals, Idlewild represented the fulfillment of the American dream that they built parallel to the dream that whites in the U.S. were also striving for. And, like the overall U.S. society, there were similar entry requirements: you had to be Idlewild royalty. So, in essence, these places were havens that people returned to year after year, generation after generation, for the solace and affirmation they offered.

**Weber:**

Did you ever miss a summer at Idlewild?

**Tyus:**

No, I don't think I've ever missed a summer.

**Weber:**

You should get your perfect attendance award. When you show up this summer you should say, "I want my gold star."

**Tyus:**



Except I'm not the only one. Most of us do that.

**Weber:**

What keeps you going back year after year? When you're a kid, you go because your family goes, but you're an adult now and you continue the tradition.

**Tyus:**

This is where peace and beauty and friends are. Thinking about when I missed a year, I did not totally miss it, but I think I was only at Idlewild a few days the year that mom got sick and died. I just have to go. I feel like I'm tapping into life to be there. Even if it's just touching base. I get to see the people that I care about.

Idlewild has been the consistent home all my life. Even though it's just a couple months in the summer, this is where I can always come back. That is home and that is where most of my lifelong friends have always been. And I have this sort of superstitious feeling that if you don't make it to Idlewild you're going to croak.

**Hall:**

On this road trip we heard repeatedly that where there were concentrations of Black people, many local governments made efforts to either remove or erase thriving African American communities. Part of the underlying reason for this was re-directing Black dollars out of Black neighborhoods and into white businesses. The larger U.S. society, however, was unaware of the negative impact of this process on those communities because of segregation. Still, many African Americans were able to find places away from these urban areas that allowed them to enjoy their rich, vibrant lives without restrictions—if only for a summer.

Just as Mary Ellen goes back to Idlewild every year to reconnect to part of her family history and part of who she is, I know families who go back to Oak Bluffs in Martha's Vineyard every summer. Their return is a touchstone, going back to a place where they're welcome, where they don't have to negotiate anything about who they are, where they're understood and can be completely comfortable. These are places where their world is knowable and safe.

That's all for this episode of Driving the Green Book. Next week, we come to the end of our journey with a final episode in Memphis, Tennessee. We visit the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King was assassinated and learn about its complicated legacy as a symbol of both Black excellence and mourning.

**CREDITS**

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Safe travels.

