

For African American leisure travelers during the Jim Crow era, *The Green Book* was an indispensable part of motoring. Wm. Smith, a frequent purchaser of the guidebook, wrote in a letter published in the 1940 edition of *The Green Book* that “*The Negro Motorist Green Book* is a credit to the Negro race...[and] it is a book badly needed...since the advance of the motor age.”⁷⁴ Smith went on to claim that the guidebook would be nearly or more important to African Americans than AAA was to white travelers (with AAA excluding African Americans from membership).⁷⁵ Smith’s comments echo the sentiments of scores of African American travelers, for whom traveling was often fraught with tension and fear of violence. Throughout its publication, *The Green Book* aided leisure travelers in four main ways.

Primarily, *The Green Book* relieved the need to depend on word of mouth to locate lodging, a process which was often inaccurate and could take travelers hours out of their way, prolonging their journey. Travelers that depended on word of mouth could arrive at a recommended place of lodging only to learn that it had shuttered since its recommendation, that it was completely booked, or that it had changed hands and was no longer African American friendly. For leisure travelers arriving in unfamiliar territory, what might have been an inconvenience for white travelers could quickly become deadly for African Americans as nightfall approached in sundown towns. And, in a point directly related to leisure travel, having made “advance plans to spend the night with friends in other cities...robbed [leisure travelers] of the luxury of spontaneity...[and took] the joy out of gypsying about when [they had] to be at a certain place by a certain time.”⁷⁶ In providing listings of hotels, motels, resorts, and tourist

⁷⁴ Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. "The Negro Motorist Green-Book: 1940," New York Public Library Digital Collections, 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Foster, "In the Face of "Jim Crow," 142.

homes categorized by city and state, *The Green Book* allowed African American leisure travelers to reserve their places of accommodation in advance and provided them with options should they suddenly decide to stop off earlier or later than originally planned, allowing them the same sense of spontaneity that white travelers were accustomed to. Though being able to select a place of lodging spontaneously appears to be rather unimportant in the scheme of things, such an option was not previously afforded to African American leisure travelers. A vacation was to be strictly planned and the schedule adhered to so that travelers could arrive safely at their place of lodging on time. Being suddenly able to refer to a number of listings should the plan change contributed to the normalization of African American leisure travel and mobility.

Though securing lodging via *The Green Book* was more reliable than word of mouth, the guidebook could be (and sometimes was) incorrect in its listings. The majority of listings within the guidebook came from postal workers and other leisure travelers, and the sheer volume of tips meant that Green was unable to personally verify that the information for each listing was entirely correct in regards to exact address or other details. Green regularly warned that “no guidebook is ever perfect with the changing conditions...in the United States...[and that] the listings in this guide are given to [travelers] just as they are given to [the publisher]...[so travelers] might find some discrepancies.”⁷⁷ The fact that the guidebook was only published once per year also contributed to the occurrence of discrepancies, but for the most part *The Green Book* was the most reliable option for leisure travelers when it came to locating and securing lodging during vacations.

⁷⁷ "The Negro Motorist Green Book: 1949," 7.

To continue, *The Green Book* also aided leisure travelers in avoiding sundown towns. In this way, Victor H. Green and his guidebook quite literally saved lives. Courtland Milloy, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, remembers “from his childhood a menacing environment in which so many black travelers were just not making it to their destinations.”⁷⁸ The danger was extremely real. Sundown towns were most heavily concentrated in the South, though they could be located throughout the country. These towns were all-white and often proudly displayed signs that read “all you niggers leave town by sundown,” or “nigger, don’t let the sun go down on you in ____.”⁷⁹ African American travelers that found themselves within town limits after sundown risked intimidation, harassment, violence, and more frequently, death by lynching. Joseph Holloway recounts the story of a trip he made through Texas with his family, during which a wrong turn into a Texas sundown town nearly cost them their lives. He explains that while they were getting gas at a white service station, the owner turned to Holloway’s uncle and warned,

"Boy I'm goin' give you some friendly advice. You niggers be out this town by nightfall. I can't tell you much, but by nightfall y'all better be gone from here." It was nearly dark and we just wanted to get back on the road....Uncle Gus had made a wrong turn by accident...[and] we ended up in the middle of town. Up ahead was a crowd of white people....There must have been 500 people, men and women and children. We slowed the car. It was then that we heard them shouting, "Kill the nigger." We could see a person on fire but still alive and screaming in the middle of the street tied to a big wheel. We could smell the stench of his burning human flesh. Uncle Gus slammed on his brakes and turned full circle in the middle of the road, which now focused the attention of the mob on us. I remember hearing someone shout, "There's some more niggers, let's get them."⁸⁰

Holloway and his family managed to escape with their lives that night, though they spent the remainder of their trip in fear. Other travelers were not so lucky. Compounding the danger of

⁷⁸ Seiler, "So That We as a Race Might Have Something Authentic to Travel By," 1095.

⁷⁹ Castine A. Davis, "Against Timidity," *The Crisis*, February 1935, 61.

⁸⁰ "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow. Jim Crow Stories | PBS." THIRTEEN - MEDIA WITH IMPACT. https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/narrative_holloway.html.

unknowingly entering into a sundown town was the trouble of “figuring out local racial customs and etiquette in unfamiliar locales...[as] segregation practices varied considerably from town to town.”⁸¹ Entering a service station, shop, or eatery through the front door may have been acceptable in one town, but doing so in another could lead to violence. *The Green Book* assisted African American leisure travelers in navigating both situations.

There is no list of known sundown towns in any edition of *The Green Book*. This knowledge, like most pertaining to travel, was passed through word of mouth and through other publications, such as *The Crisis* or *The Chicago Defender*. However, the very existence of the guidebook allowed travelers to navigate their way around sundown towns. If there were no listings for a particular city, state, or town, it was safe to assume that it was either unsafe for black travelers, or that the information regarding suitable lodging had not yet made it to the publisher. Either conclusion led travelers to avoid it completely. Coupled with a map (*The Green Book* always encouraged the use of a map alongside the guidebook), the listings meant that leisure travelers did not have to wander from town to town, looking for a place to spend the night, as they were already armed with a list of suitable cities and towns along the way. Moreso, several editions of *The Green Book* included sections called “Guide Posts for a Pleasant Trip,” which outlined safe and proper ways to act.⁸² These sections are coded; the author presents the information in a way that outwardly appears to prepare the reader for an enjoyable trip, but upon closer reading, the information instead communicates vital tips for comportment that could very well save lives. In the 1963 edition, an author reminds readers that in traveling, “a lot will depend on [the reader.] Knowing what to do and how to do it...can mean the difference between

⁸¹ Foster, "In the Face of "Jim Crow," 141.

⁸² "Travelers' Green Book: 1963-64 International Edition," 95-97.

coming home with the memories of a lifetime or saying, ‘gee, I’m glad to be home.’ Be pleasant...and don’t complain.”⁸³ Other tips suggest speaking to service men and women (here meaning other African Americans local to the area) if questions arise, planning excursions around the time most locals will be at work (to avoid confrontation), and making sure that they are well dressed and mild mannered. These tips do more than ensure that the traveler will have a pleasant vacation, rather, they present the best ways in which to act in order to keep safe and fly under the radar. These tips apply regardless of location, helping travelers to stay safe.

Subsequently, in including listings of local restaurants, grocery stores, service stations, and YMCA’s, *The Green Book* also helped to quite literally lessen the load of African American leisure travelers. Knowing that the majority of service stations, grocery stores, and restaurants would be unwilling to serve them, most leisure travelers loaded down their automobiles with makeshift toilets, water, ice, bedding, gas, and foodstuffs to prevent unpleasant and discriminatory encounters. When taking family vacations from Oklahoma to Southern California as a child, Ron Reaves remembers that his mother “packed a lot of fried chicken, bologna, cheese, and crackers...[because they did not have] money to spend on restaurants...but [they] could not have...dined even if [they] could have afforded it” because of Jim Crow-sanctioned segregation and discrimination.⁸⁴ Travelers that failed to prepare enough food for a trip risked stopping constantly in the hope that a restaurant would serve them, and subsequently enduring discriminatory treatment. J. Saunders Redding, author and professor at Cornell University, wrote that when driving through the Southern United States during World War II, he was rejected numerous times at various restaurants until he “approached a ramshackle greasy spoon

⁸³ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁴ American Public Media. Legacy of Jim Crow | Remembering Jim Crow.
<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/remembering/legacy.html>.

diner...[where the waitress] treated him with thinly-veiled contempt [and served him] a hard curled rind of fried bacon and bacon grease poured over a glutinous mound of gray grits and an egg black from frying in stale grease.”⁸⁵ Those that failed to plan ahead to locate a toilet or bring their own were often made to use the restroom in a poorly built outhouse, in the middle of a field, or on the side of the road.

Though many African American leisure travelers continued to pack their cars with enough food to get them to their destination, *The Green Book* technically eliminated such a need. Its listings included taverns, drug stores, restaurants, grocery stores, road houses, and even Chinese restaurants. Knowing where they could or wanted to stop meant that weighing down the car with supplies was largely unnecessary unless the travelers were crossing through an area unlisted or barely listed within *The Green Book*. To continue to pack their own food during travel became a choice for black travelers at this time, not a necessity. The simple fact that black travelers now had this choice reaffirms the importance of the normalization of black mobility. Travel began to feel like less of a massive production and more like leisure. Many that continued to pack their own food did so as a cost saving measure. Though the guidebook did lessen the need to spend days preparing food ahead of time, it is important to remember that *The Green Book* “told [travelers] not where the best places were to eat...but where there was any place.”⁸⁶ That is, the guidebook did not function as most white guidebooks did in this capacity. The listings pertaining to food did not recommend the best places to eat or categorize restaurants by cuisine or by cost; rather, *The Green Book* told travelers of the few places that they were able to patronize. The distinction is an important one.

⁸⁵ Foster, "In the Face of "Jim Crow," 142.

⁸⁶ Celia Mcgee. "The Open Road Wasn't Quite Open to All." *The New York Times*. August 23, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/23/books/23green.html>.