



Green Book cover / Photo: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

‘Driving the Green Book’ Exposes the Nuances of Traveling While Black during the Jim Crow Era

By **Kwin Mosby**
January 25, 2023



In the summer of 2019, television and radio broadcaster Alvin Hall embarked on a 12-day journey, driving from Detroit to New Orleans with his friend Janée Woods Weber. This wasn't just your regular road trip, though: A few years before, Hall had learned of Victor Hugo Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a series of guidebooks published from 1936 to 1967 that listed businesses where it was safe for Black travelers to rest, eat, and sleep—advice that could be lifesaving during the height of the Jim Crow era. Intrigued, he hit the road to meet people who knew and had visited the places in the guides.



Green Book covers 1940 and 1954 / Photo: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

On that 2,021-mile drive, Hall conducted dozens of interviews, which form the backbone of his new book, *Driving the Green Book: A Road Trip Through the Living History of Black Resistance* (HarperOne). “I was able, I think, to really give people a sense of the individual voices,” Hall says, “and what it meant and how people got through these experiences without bitterness, without rancor, but with a sense of optimism.”

In the book, Hall, who also released a standalone *Driving the Green Book* podcast in 2020, introduces readers to Mary Ellen Tyus, a Columbus, Ohio, resident who recalls visits to Idlewild, Michigan, a popular high-end Black resort town known as Black Eden. Cultural preservationist Denise Gilmore reveals the history behind the A.G. Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Alabama, and Room 30, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, and Reverend Ralph Abernathy met to plan civil rights and voting rights marches. The book also notes remnants of segregation that can still be visited today, including the six-foot-high, half-mile-long Birwood Wall, which was built in Detroit in 1941 to separate the city's Black and white homeowners.



Green Book covers 1956 and 1960 / Photo: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

The stories are as moving as they are informative. Particularly resonant for Hall was former Alabama State Senator Hank Sanders's remembrance of growing up in rural poverty. “I still can't read that chapter without crying—his words speak directly to my own experience,” says the author, who grew up in Wakulla County, Florida, in the 1950s and '60s. “It's a beautiful passage where he shares that, even in poverty, his parents passed on their strength and optimism to their children, while also shielding them from racism.”

For Hall, the stories in *Driving the Green Book* highlight the enduring resilience of the Black community. “Many people will think, and this is correct, that the *Green Book* was a reaction to how we were treated by the white community during the Jim Crow era,” he explains, “but the stories that I took away were the things that we did as African Americans that had nothing to do with the white gaze. It was about our own creativity, our own resilience, our own survival, and, most importantly, our love for our children and our families.”

RELATED ARTICLES



CITY

5 PLACES TO VISIT ON TEL AVIV'S NAHALAT BINYAMIN STREET



CITY

6 PLACES TO VISIT IN CALGARY'S HIP EAST VILLAGE



CITY

6 CREATIVE PLACES TO VISIT IN THE VILLAGE OF WEST GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA



CITY

6 PLACES TO VISIT IN ROCHESTER'S ENERGETIC NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE ARTS (NOTA)