

'Green Book' Helped African-Americans Travel Safely

By: Neal Conan

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Listen to this interview on [NPR.org](https://www.npr.org).

The Negro Motorist Green Book was a travel guide that listed lodgings, tailors and other businesses that welcomed black patrons during Jim Crow.

The guide, which was launched in 1936 and published for nearly 30 years, found a readership because while blacks knew which businesses were friendly in their hometowns, it could be difficult to discern which restaurants, beauty shops and night clubs were off-limits or hostile when they were on the road.

Civil rights leader Julian Bond tells NPR's Neal Conan that he remembers his family using the *Green Book* "to travel in the South, to find out where we could stop to eat, where we could spend the night in a hotel or in somebody's home."

Bond, who served as chairman of the NAACP for 11 years, says that though the cover was green, that's not where the book got its name.

"It's actually named after the man who started the Green Book, whose name was Green," he says.

Bond explains that Green was a postal worker "who used his contacts in the postal workers union to find out where black people could stay" around the U.S.

At its height, Bond says, the book covered all 50 states, as well as a few countries.

"It didn't matter where you went -- Jim Crow was everywhere then," he says, "and black travelers needed this badly."

Transcript

NEAL CONAN, host: In part, the Jim Crow era could be defined by the places African-Americans could go and the places they couldn't. In the towns and cities where they lived, of course, blacks knew where they were welcome. On the road, though, who knew which restaurants and hotels, beauty shops and night clubs would slam doors in their faces?

In 1936, a guide was published, "The Negro Motorist Green Book." It was updated every year over three decades. Printed on its cover were the words: Carry your "Green Book" with you. You may need it.

Today, we'll talk with civil rights leader Julian Bond about his memories of the "Green Book." We want to hear from you, too. What role did the "Green Book" play in your family? 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation at our website. That's at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Julian Bond served as chairman of the NAACP for over 20 years. He joins us now from the Lincoln Theater in Washington, D.C., where a play called "The Green Book" opens tonight for one night only. Julian Bond, nice to have you with us today.

Mr. JULIAN BOND (Former Chairman, NAACP): Good to have me with you. I was chairman of the NAACP for 11 years.

CONAN: Eleven years. I apologize for that. And...

Mr. BOND: It's okay.

CONAN: ...former - founding member of SNCC, as well. In the introduction - it's called the "Green Book," but, really, I guess sort of a combination pamphlet might be closer to it.

Mr. BOND: Well, when I - my family had a "Green Book" when I was young, and used it to travel in the South to find out where we could stop to eat, where we could spend the night in a hotel or somebody's home. And I always thought it was called the "Green Book" because it was green. But it's actually named after the man who started the "Green Book" whose name was Green.

CONAN: And do you remember driving in the car and your parents opening the...

Mr. BOND: I don't remember my parents thumbing through it, no...

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. BOND: ...and saying: Oh, we'll stop here. But I do remember that they had it, and they used it.

CONAN: Who was Mr. Green?

Mr. BOND: He was a postal worker, and he used his contacts in the Postal Workers Union to set up - to find out where black people could stay in various spots around the United States. And the "Green Book," at its height, covered all 50 of the states, as well as two - there was Barbados and I think someplace else. So, you know, it didn't matter where you went, Jim Crow was everywhere then, and black travelers needed this badly.

CONAN: That's an important point. Sometimes we think of it primarily in the South, but that's not the case.

Mr. BOND: No, no, no. You know, segregated - segregation reached everywhere in the United States, and even though the laws didn't require it, it was practiced almost everywhere.

CONAN: And do you know how he got the information on his updates? He publish revisions every year.

Mr. BOND: I think from his extensive contacts. Remember, he was part of the Postal Workers Union, and there are postal workers everywhere. And he used them as guides to tell him: Well, here's a good place here, a good place there. And, of course, as you travel, people picked up things and told him things.

CONAN: The "Green Book" reads, in part, in the introduction: It has been our idea to give the Negro traveler information that will keep him from running into difficulties, embarrassments and make his trips more enjoyable. I guess Mr. Green was also a master of understatement.

Mr. BOND: Oh, surely, he was. He's described by people who knew him as an elegant man and the kind of person, when he walked down the street, people would say: Oh, my goodness. Look at him. I'm playing him tonight.

(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: You're playing him tonight.

Mr. BOND: In this reading, yes, I am.

CONAN: And what - can you tell us a little bit about your part?

Mr. BOND: Well, the play opens with me on the telephone with Langston Hughes. I'm in New York, where Victor - where Green was, and Langston Hughes is coming to - oh, no, I'm sorry. I'm in - yeah, I'm in New York, and Langston Hughes is coming to Washington, but he has left his "Green Book" at home in New York. So he has to call Mr. Green to find out places in Washington where he can stay. And even though he has many friends in Washington, they won't take him because he's coming to - he's been subpoenaed to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

And so the play opens with me on the phone talking to Langston Hughes about the House Un-American Activities Committee and about the blurb that Langston Hughes has written to go in the front of the "Green Book" to explain why such a book exists.

CONAN: We're talking with Julian Bond, famous civil rights activist and an actor - tonight. 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org if you have memories of "The Green Book." What role did it play in your family?

Ray is on the line, calling from Kansas City.

Dr. RAY DOSWELL (Chief Curator, Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, Inc.): Hello, and hello to Mr. Bond, as well.

Mr. BOND: Hello.

Dr. DOSWELL: This is Ray Doswell from Kansas City at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.

Mr. BOND: Sure.

Dr. DOSWELL: We were very pleased to host Mr. Bond a few weeks ago during the NAACP convention, and glad to have you on the...

Mr. BOND: Well, you have - don't you have a book on display there?

Dr. DOSWELL: We don't have a book on display, but we do have a mimeographed copy of the book in the archives that belonged to a former Negro League great Buck O'Neil.

Mr. BOND: Oh, wow.

Dr. DOSWELL: He had the book, and - and this version is from the later '50s, early '60s. But I can imagine how he would use it. First of all, for the Negro League players and for jazz musicians who obviously couldn't stay at the same hotels as white patrons could or even some of the places where the jazz musicians could perform but couldn't stay there, the book was quite useful. You know, for baseball players who were traveling to - if you travel to a large -like Kansas City's St. Louis, you knew where the black communities were where you could go and stay. But in between - maybe Muskogee, Oklahoma or those places - you didn't know where you could go. So the book was very valuable.

And then also, for someone like Mr. O'Neil, who, after the Negro Leagues became a scout in Major League baseball, he was one of the few scouts that also traveled to the black colleges in the South and different places. So he could use the book on his way in looking for black athletes to recruit for the Major Leagues by this time. And the book would have been quite useful for him when he had it.

CONAN: It's interesting. As I look through a copy that was printed on the Internet - and, yes, you expect restaurants and hotels and that sort of thing. But beauty shops, barbershops, bars, night clubs, roadside inns, that sort of thing - it was quite extensive.

Mr. BOND: Oh, sure. You think about the things that most travelers take for granted, or most people today take for granted. If go to New York City and want a hair cut, it's pretty easy for me to find a place where that can happen, but it wasn't easy then. White barbers would not cut black peoples' hair. White beauty parlors would not take black women as customers - hotels and so on, down the line. You needed the "Green Book" to tell you where you can go without having doors slammed in your face.

CONAN: Ray, have you looked at a copy of the "Green Book" that you've mimeoed from Buck O'Neil? I mean, did it extend down to gas stations, that sort of thing?

Dr. DOSWELL: It did. And the folks who posted were quite extensive and, of course, there was advertisement in the book. So not just a listing, but there were ads that these black companies can buy, showing, obviously, the commerce and opportunities they had to advertise their own businesses and direct marketing to these customers, as well. So photo ads - and then, occasionally, you have messages from politicians, as well, from the different communities, that they will buy ads in this book. So the Green publishing company was very entrepreneurial in that way, and then, obviously, they helped to produce the book. And it was just a valuable resource.

Mr. BOND: Interestingly, Green got the ideas of this from a Jewish publication printed to tell Jews where they could be welcome when they traveled. And we tend to think of that kind of discrimination as being as prevalent as it obviously was. But it was prevalent enough to give this idea to Green, and he said, well, you know, black people have even more problems, because Jews, if they're white, can blend into the general population. They don't carry their religion on their face the way black people carry their race.

[Listen to the complete interview at NPR.org.]