

# Green Book gets Oscar gold

## African-American letter carrier created the book that helped inspire the movie



*On Feb. 24, actress Julia Roberts announced to the world that “Green Book” was the winner of the 2019 Oscar for Best Picture. The movie tells the story of a black musician and his white driver who travel through the segregated South, based on the true tale of Don Shirley, a Jamaican-American pianist.*

*What makes the movie noteworthy for letter carriers is that the Green Book would not exist without another true story, that of the late **Victor Hugo Green**, a 39-year letter carrier, an NALC member and the creator many years ago of the travel guide known as the Green Book.*

*Here is his story.*

**T**he 1940s and '50s are remembered as the birth of the great American road trip. President Dwight Eisenhower championed the creation of a system of interstate highways that crisscrossed the nation, fueling the construction of service stations, roadside diners and motels. The growing middle class was getting out and seeing the United States.

But that was also still the time of Jim Crow laws in the South and racial discrimination in other parts of the country. The laws and practices were designed to keep African-Americans from voting or even patronizing businesses, including many restaurants and hotels. Some towns had what were known as “sundown” rules, meaning African-Americans had to be out of town by sunset, or else.

For many, traveling wasn't an adventure to be filled simply with awe and pleasure, but also with embarrassment and fear. Imagine not

knowing where you could stop, where you could eat, where you could stay.

An entrepreneurial letter carrier from New York City's Harlem neighborhood saw a need and created *The Negro Motorist Green Book*—commonly referred to as simply the “Green Book”—a travel guide for black- and white-owned hotels, inns and even private residences that would accept African-American travelers. He used his NALC and other postal contacts to find the listings all across the country. For example, in 1949 for Montgomery, AL, the guidebook recommended the Douglas Hotel and Bonnie's Restaurant as safe places. In 1956, travelers to Hartford, CT, could stay at Mrs. Johnson's house at 2016 Main St.

The guide was the creation of Victor Hugo Green, a native of New York. In 1913, at the age of 21, Green was living in Hackensack, NJ, and went to work at the local post office as a letter carrier. With schooling that extended only through seventh grade, Green—as did many African-Americans—found a



Victor H. Green as pictured in the Spring 1956 edition of the *Green Book*





The 1940, Spring 1956 and 1949 editions



managing Duke, Green heard many stories of humiliation and violence from members of his community. He looked to other travel guides for inspiration on creating a tool for helping African-Americans.

“The Jewish press has long published information about places that are restricted and there are numerous publications that give the gentile whites all kinds of information,” he wrote in his introduction to the 1949 edition, recounting why he had created the guide.

The idea crystalized in his mind in 1932 and would see its first edition printed in 1936, covering just New York City. The demand was so great that the following year it became a national guide, and eventually expanded with international listings. To this day, people who used the guide speak about its importance in providing information and reassurance to African-Americans far from home.

“It didn’t matter where you went, Jim Crow was everywhere then, and black travelers needed this badly,” Julian Bond said in a 2010 interview when he was president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). “It was a guidebook that told you not where the best places were to eat, but where there was any place.”

Bond spoke from personal experience. “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 someone’s home,” he said. “I always thought it was called the *Green Book* because it was green.”

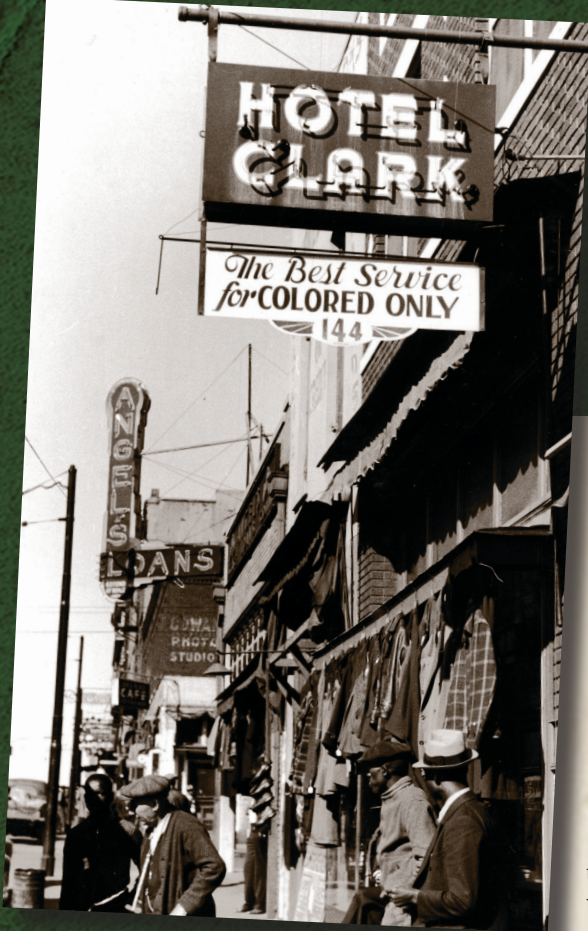
good, dependable, federal job with the Post Office Department, even if the pay was low (see NALC’s history book *Carriers in a Common Cause* for more on letter carriers’ experiences at the time). Green also joined NALC’s Hackensack Branch 425, now known as Bergen County Merged. By 1933, he continued his route in New Jersey but had moved to Harlem, just over the George Washington Bridge.

There the Harlem Renaissance was still in swing, rich with culture, music and art, when important writers and social activists including W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes were attempting to redefine what it meant to be a black American, creating a new racial pride. Green must have been attracted to this new spirit, as by 1933 he was managing musician Robert Duke, his brother-in-law.

Green was described as a man of “tremendous drive and energy” by Novera Dashiell, an assistant editor, in the 1956 guide: “Tall, well-built, always impeccably groomed, with an easy affable manner.” People who knew him said that whenever he was out and about, he always dressed fashionably and would change into his uniform only once he got to work.

As a union member and a civic leader, and perhaps because of his work





The Hotel Clark in Memphis, TN, in 1939 specialized in lodging for “Colored only.”

“The *Green Book* was, I think, an institution in black life,” Ernest Green, no relation, said in a 2011 interview. “It was one of those unknown survival tools for black people that had to move around the country.”

Ernest Green was one of the Little Rock Nine, a group who became the first African-American students at Central High School. He remembers his family using the book to travel from Arkansas to Virginia in the 1950s. “I knew the *Green Book* was a necessity for us to have a place to stay.”

The guide was especially popular with African-Americans who traveled frequently for work, such as jazz musicians and ballplayers in the Negro leagues. The Negro Leagues Baseball Museum has a copy of a *Green Book* that belonged to the legendary Buck O’Neil—a player, scout and manager for the Kansas City Monarchs and a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Victor Green set up extensive contacts to get his information, including using his NALC connections. “There are postal workers everywhere,” Bond explained. “And he used them as guides to tell him: ‘Well, here’s a good place here, a good place there.’”

Green’s most important partnership was with the Esso (now Exxon) gasoline station chain. Esso, a subsidiary of Standard Oil, was progressive for its time, selling franchises to and employing African-Americans in its corporate offices. Esso sold the guides in its service stations and advertised in the guide’s pages, along with helping Green finance the publication.

People in Harlem and the broader African-American community knew the importance of what Green had created, and some supported it financially. Author Langston Hughes took out an ad in the 1947 edition proclaiming,

“To live in a country where we’re not hardly welcomed anywhere and where our money is no good and our dignity is trampled on daily says a lot about us as a people and not giving up our right for full citizenship.”

While the book’s main goal was to offer protection and reassurance, it resembled, and offered the services of, a travel guide. (In St. George’s, Bermuda, for example, the 1949 guide suggested renting bicycles from Dowlings’ Cycle Livery on York Street.)

In 1947, Green expanded the book to include a vacation reservation service, to help travelers make advance plans. And by 1952, as the book had broadened its scope from mainly hotel and restaurant listings to include barbers, beauty salons, bars and nightclubs, it was renamed *The Negro Travelers’ Green Book*.

“White barbers would not cut black people’s hair. White beauty parlors would not take black women as customers,” Bond explained of the need for expanded listings. “You needed the *Green Book* to tell you where you can go without having doors slammed in your face.”

Victor Green believed that the entrepreneurial spirit that propelled his guide could be a driving force for advancing the black community, especially through the expanding use of advertising that marked the late 1950s and early 1960s while he was still alive. “If Negro-owned business is good, it can be better with advertising,” Assistant Editor Dashiell quoted him as saying in the 1956 edition. She explained, “His philosophy is that we can create our OWN ‘name brands.’” He encouraged youngsters to enter the advertising field and noted to his readers that white-owned businesses had seen the power of advertising in the guide and “have come to value and desire your patronage.”

Green worked on the annual guides



**ROCHESTER**  
HOTELS  
Avalon—103 North Broadway

**ST. CLOUD**  
HOTELS  
Grand Central—5th & St. Germaine

RESTAURANTS  
Spaulding—11-5th Avenue, N.

**ST. PAUL**  
TOURIST HOMES  
Villa Wilcox—697 St. Anthony Ave.

RESTAURANTS  
V. & G. Bar-Cor—391 No. St. Albans  
Jim's—St. Anthony and Kent  
Carter's—356 West Central  
Nilly's—Rondo and Kent

SERVICE STATIONS  
Gardner—Western and Central  
Otto's—Rondo and Arundel

GARAGES  
Milligan's—1008 Rondo Ave.

TAILORS  
Deer—1597 University Ave.

LIQUOR STORES  
Rond—371 Washaba  
First—Robert at Fifth  
Seven Corners—158 West 7th St.  
Swoboda—678 University Ave.  
St. Paul—200 East 7th St.  
City—244 St. Peters St.  
Sitz—442 Washaba  
Jack's—517 Washaba

**MISSISSIPPI**  
BILOXI  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. G. Deane—430 Main St.  
Mrs. A. J. Alcina—443 Washington

SERVICE STATIONS  
Dales—111/way 49 So.

**CANTON**  
RESTAURANTS  
TOLLIVER'S CAFE  
Was You Efer in Kanton?  
TRAVELING PEOPLE WHEN HUNGRY OR  
THIRSTY THINK FIRST OF TOLLIVER'S  
L. M. Tolliver, Prop. 115 N. Hickory  
Canton, Miss.

**NIGHT CLUBS**  
BLUE GARDEN NIGHT CLUB  
61 Highway  
Meals of All Kinds—Refreshments  
Open Daily 1 P.M.—2 A.M.  
Sat. and Sun. All Day  
5 Liberty St. Canton, Miss.

**FUNERAL HOMES**  
PEOPLES FUNERAL HOME  
116 N. HICKORY

**CLEVELAND**  
SERVICE STATIONS  
7-11—Highway 61 at 8

**COLUMBUS**  
HOTELS  
Queen City—15th St. & 7th Ave.  
TOURIST HOMES  
M. J. Hamilton—315 N. 14th St.  
H. Sommerville—206 N. 14th St.  
Mrs. L. Alexander—242 1/2 St.  
Mrs. I. Roberts—12th & 5th Ave. N.  
Mrs. Cheryl—1425 11th Ave. N.

**GREENVILLE**  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. E. E. Clark—288 Ohio St.  
Mrs. L. Alexander—242 1/2 St.  
Mrs. I. Roberts—12th & 5th Ave. N.  
Mrs. Cheryl—1425 11th Ave. N.

SERVICE STATIONS  
Peoples—Nelson & Eddie St.

**GRENADE**  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. N. D. Fisher—72 Adams St.  
F. Williams—11/way 31 & Fairground Rd.  
Henry's Lodge—11/way 31 & Fairground Rd.

**HATTIESBURG**  
TOURIST HOMES  
W. A. Godwin—409 E. 7th St.  
Mrs. A. Crosby—413 E. 6th St.  
Mrs. S. Vance—536 Mobile St.

**JACKSON**  
HOTELS  
SUMMERS HOTEL  
619 W. PEARL ST.  
EDWARD LEE HOTEL  
141 W. CHURCH ST.

TOURIST HOMES  
WILSON HOUSE  
154 W. OAKLEY STREET  
STEVENS TOURIST HOME  
HWY 49 WEST

RESTAURANTS  
TIP TOP CAFE  
WHITEFIELD MILL ROAD

**JACKSON (Cont.)**  
SHEPHERDS KITCHENETTE  
691 N. FARISH ST.  
THE CHOP HOUSE  
703 N. FARISH ST.  
STEVENS BAR-B-QUE INN  
HWY 49 WEST  
BRADY PARLORS  
Davis Salon—703 N. Farish  
BARBER SHOPS  
City—117 N. Farish

**TAILORS**  
PARIS CLEANERS  
800 N. FARISH ST.  
DRUG STORES  
PALACE DRUG STORE  
510 N. FARISH ST.  
SERVICE STATIONS  
Johnson—236 N. Farish

**GARAGES**  
Farrish St.—248 1/2 N. Farish  
TAXI CABS  
VETERANS CAB CO.  
116 W. AMITE ST.  
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49 Highway N.

FOR EXERCISE AND PLEASURE—SKATE  
Finest of Musical Entertainment  
Refreshments  
Willie Miller, Prop. Jackson, Miss.

**LAUREL**  
HOTELS  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. S. Lawrence—602 Meridian  
Mrs. E. L. Brown—522 E. Kingston  
Mrs. F. Garner—509 Joe Wheeler's Ave.  
Mrs. S. G. Wilson—802 S. 7th

**MACOMB**  
HOTELS  
Lovers—534 Summit St.  
TOURIST HOMES  
D. Mason—213 Deawide St.

**MENDENHALL**  
SERVICE STATION  
BOBS SERVICE STATION  
HIGHWAY 49

**MERIDIAN**  
HOTELS  
Beales—2411 Fifth St.

**TOURIST HOMES**  
W. Williams—1208-31st St.  
Mrs. M. Simons—5th St. betw. 16 & 17 A.  
Charter Leigh—5th St. & 6th Ave.

**MOUND BAYOU**  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. Willie Price  
Smith's  
Mrs. Charlotte Strong  
Liddie's

**NEW ALBANY**  
HOTELS  
Foot's—Railroad Ave.  
TOURIST HOMES  
S. Dreyer—Church St.  
Patt. Knox—Cleveland St.  
C. Morgenthaler—Cleveland St.

**YAZOO CITY**  
HOTELS  
Caldwell—Water & Broadway St.  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. A. J. Walker—321 S. Monroe

**MISSOURI**  
CAPE GIRADEAU  
TOURIST HOMES  
G. Wilson—108 S. Frederick St.  
W. Martin—38 N. Haver St.  
J. Randle—422 North St.

**CARTHAGE**  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. H. Webb—3. Polton St.

**COLUMBIA**  
HOTELS  
Austin House—108 E. Walnut St.  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. W. Harvey—417 N. 3rd St.

**CHARLESTON**  
TAVERNS  
Creole Cafe—211 Elm St.  
EXCELSIOR SPRINGS  
HOTELS  
The Albany—408 South St.  
Moore—502 Main St.

**HANNIBAL**  
TOURIST HOMES  
Mrs. E. Julius—1218 Gerard St.

**JEFFERSON CITY**  
HOTELS  
Lancola—500 Lafayette St.  
Booker T.  
TOURIST HOMES  
Miss C. Woodruff—418 Adams St.  
R. Graves—314 E. Desha St.

while continuing to deliver the mail, though records suggest he didn't profit much from the guides. In 1940, he reported his income as \$2,100, which was the average pay for a letter carrier at the time. By 1942, he had a route in Leonia, NJ, where he worked until 1952, when after 39 years of carrying the mail, he retired at age 60. With help, he continued publishing some 15,000 guides annually until his death in 1960. The guide remained in publication by others, with the 1959 guide listing his wife, Alma, as the editor and publisher, and the 1966 edition lists two publishers who weren't related to Green. A printer who printed the *Green Book* said that a daughter of Victor's brought him the master pages of the last several guides, until about 1966, after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act had made discrimination by businesses illegal.

In the more than 60 years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the *Green Book* had largely been forgotten except by older generations whose families may have used the guides. But interest in the guide has seen a resurgence. The New York Public Library recently created a digital library of the guides allowing historians and researchers to make use of the data.

For example, early editions of the *Green Book* reveal that most of the listings where African-Americans were welcomed in New York City were in Harlem. Over the course of the guidebook's run, hotels in Manhattan started to be listed as well, documenting the spread of the rejection of segregation.

As interest in the *Green Book* has grown, stories incorporating the publication have been made into illustrated books for children, plays and even documentary and fictional films.

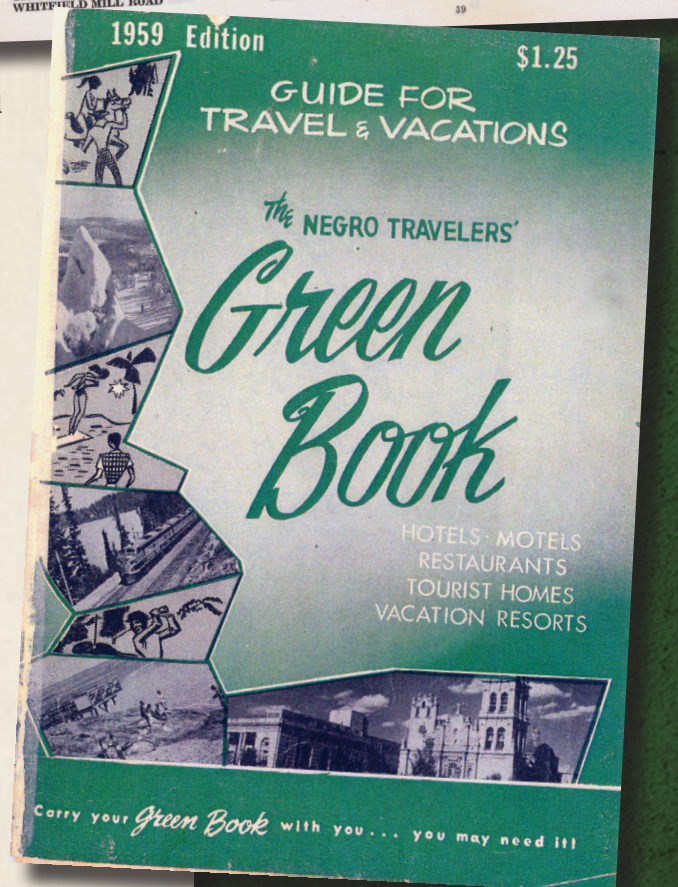
Not much is known about Green, the man, other than what was written about him in his guides and the historical facts NALC was able to track down. We were not able to locate any

of Green's relatives—and have yet to find any documentation on the daughter mentioned by the printer.

But for the tens of thousands of travelers who used the guides during the three decades they were in circulation, their importance was known firsthand. They were truly a roadmap for friendly faces in hostile territory.

It's likely that Green would not be too upset about his guide being relegated to history books. He often said that he looked forward to the time when the *Green Book* would no longer be necessary.

"There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published," he wrote in 1949. "That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please." PR



Listings from the 1949 edition of the *Green Book* and the cover from the 1959 edition.