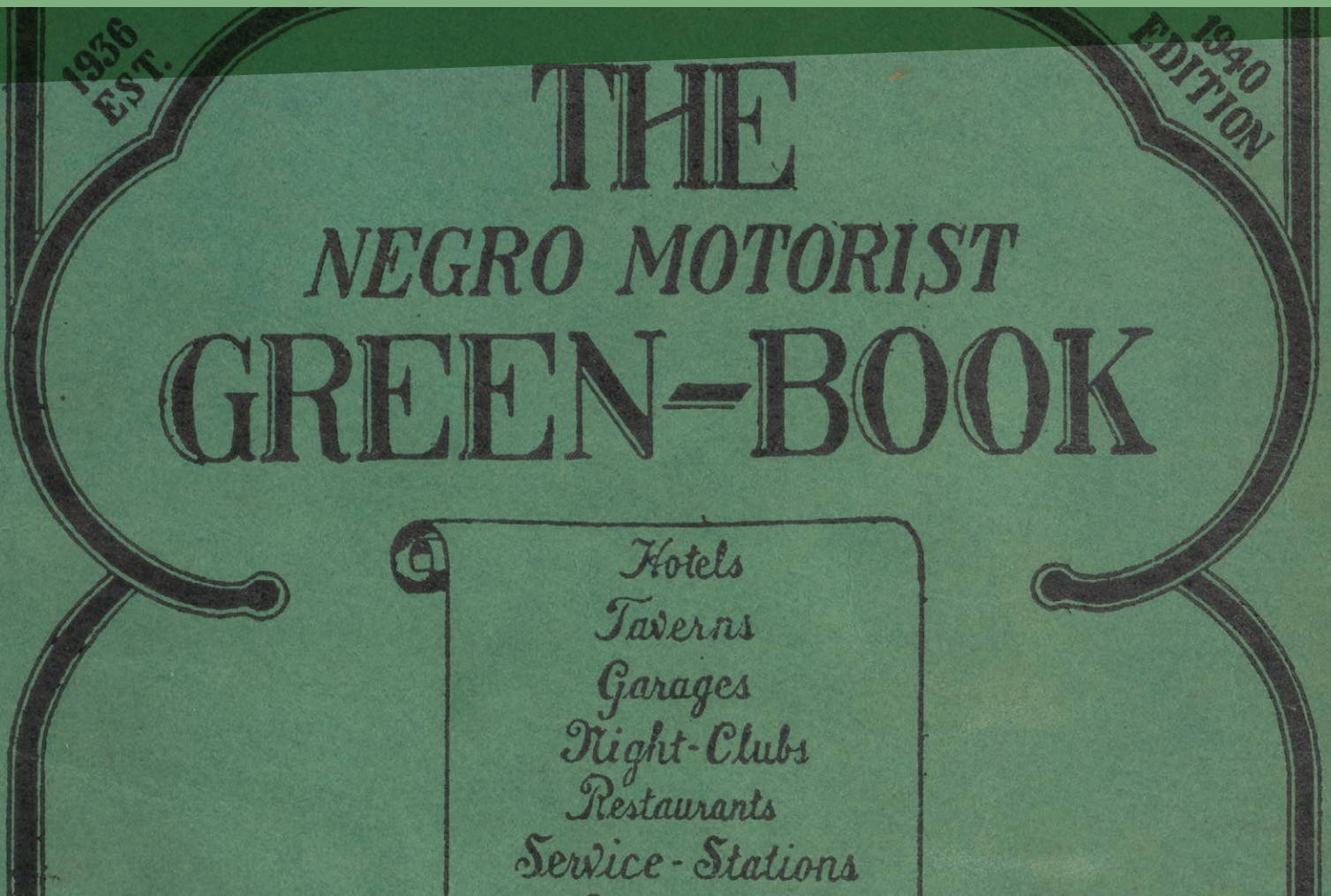


DRIVING WHILE BLACK



Courtesy of New York Public Library Digital Collections

WORDS TO KNOW

Borscht Belt

U.S. Route 66

***The Negro Motorist
Green Book***

THINK BEFORE YOU READ

Have you ever felt unsafe while traveling?

When you need a safe place to stop, what do you look for?

What would signal to you that a place is not safe to stop?

Cover: Cover of *The Negro Motorist Green-Book* from 1940. This guide book appeared annually between 1936 and 1966. It helped Black travelers navigate “sundown towns” which Black people had to leave by sunset.
Courtesy of New York Public Library Digital Collections

ON THE ROAD

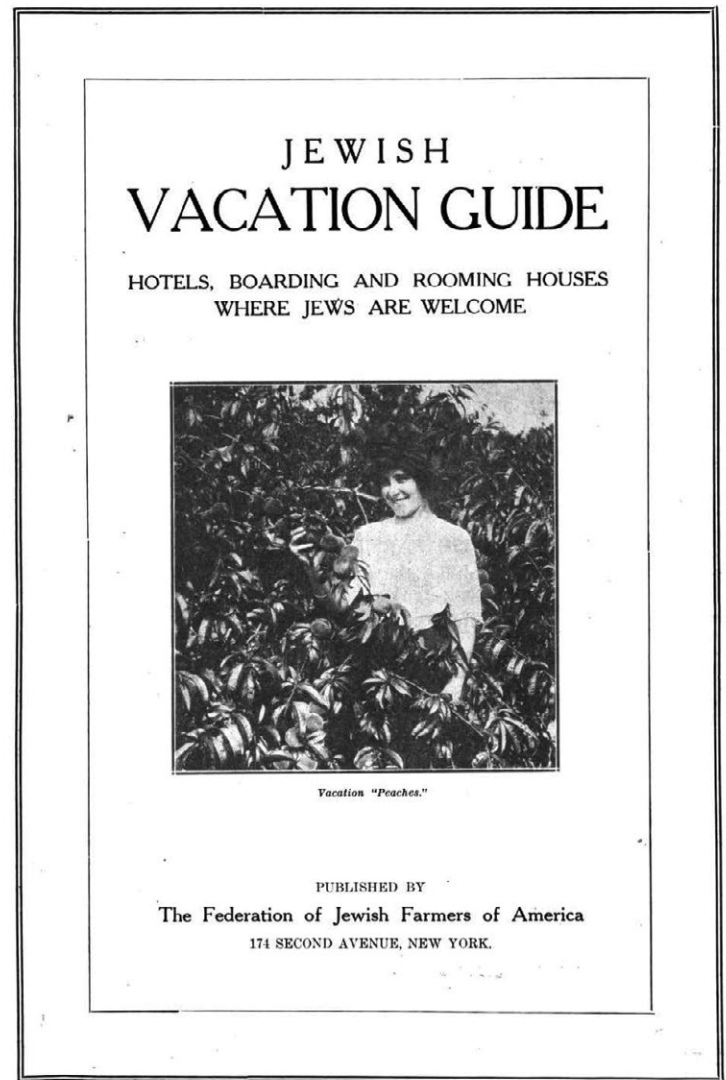
Imagine taking a long road trip in a car. But you don't dare to stop for a restroom break, a meal, or a place to stay the night. For many Black people and other minorities before the 1960s civil rights movement, even the simplest travel was full of risks.

In the mid-20th century, more Americans traveled by car than ever before. New interstate highways, more affordable cars and fuel, and middle-class earning power made it possible for many people to hit the road for work and fun. Most people knew about the segregated boundaries of their own hometowns. But what about when they traveled?

For travelers of color, danger was always just around the corner. Choosing the wrong place to stop for a meal, a night's stay, or a public restroom could lead to anything from a humiliating incident to a physical attack. Families learned to travel with a stash of ready-to-eat food, blankets and pillows for sleeping in the car, gas cans, and portable toilets—just in case.

U.S. Route 66, completed in 1936, was one of the first highways to connect the nation. It ran through 89 counties between Chicago and Los Angeles. Forty-four of those counties—almost half—were all White. Black travelers learned to recognize signs of danger. A business that included three *ks* in its name (such as "Kozy Kamp Kottages") or that advertised "all-American" food was often code for businesses run by a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) member. Klansmen even ran roadside tourist attractions. During the 1920s, the Missouri KKK owned Fantastic Caverns, a drive-thru cave. They used the cave's Grand Ballroom for ceremonies and cross burnings.

Jewish travelers often had trouble finding hotels that would rent them rooms. Starting in the 1920s, the **Borscht Belt** in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York was advertised as a welcoming place for American Jews to vacation. Travelers' information in Jewish newspapers listed restaurants, hotels, and resorts that hosted up to one million Jewish travelers a year by the 1950s. Those community-focused travel guides set an example adopted by others.



This vacation guide first appeared as a supplement in the magazine "The Jewish Farmer," 1917. Courtesy of Ohio State University/Hathi Trust

THE GREEN BOOK

Negro Motorist Green Book, 1948.
Courtesy of New York Public Library
Digital Collections



Victor H. Green, a postal worker from Harlem, launched the most popular Black travel guide in 1936. **The Negro Motorist Green Book** stayed in print until 1967. The *Green Book* and similar guides listed Black-owned restaurants, hotels, barber shops, gas stations, attractions, and even the homes of local Black residents willing to rent rooms. By 1962, two million *Green Books* were circulating each year, thanks in part to an agreement with Esso Gas Stations (known as Exxon Mobil today). Black people supported one another by starting businesses that served tourists. Rooming houses in vacation spots, such as Shearer Cottage on Martha's Vineyard, Rock Rest in Kittery, Maine, or the Oakmere Hotel in Idlewild, Michigan, sprang up to offer Black travelers a safe tourist experience in a segregated land.

WATCH
ORAL HISTORY
"Donald Elder"

NEGROES DRIVEN AWAY.

The Last One Leaves Decatur, Ind.,
Owing to Threats Made.

Special to The New York Times.

RICHMOND, Ind., July 13.--The last negro has left Decatur, Ind. His departure was caused by the 'anti-negro feeling. About a month ago a mob of fifty men drove out all the negroes who were then making that city their home. Since that time the feeling against the negro race has been intense, so much so that an Anti-Negro Society was organized.

The colored man who has just left came about three weeks ago, and since that time received many threatening letters. When he appeared on the streets he was insulted and jeered at. An attack was threatened and he made a hasty exit.

The anti-negroites declare that as Decatur is now cleared of negroes they will keep it so, and the importation of any more will undoubtedly result in serious trouble.


Article describing how Black men were forcefully driven out of Decatur, Illinois, *New York Times*, 1902.


Courtesy of *The New York Times*



Esso Gas Station, Galvants Ferry, South Carolina.
Courtesy of iStock.com/kirkikis




 Florida migrant workers on their way to New Jersey to pick potatoes, 1940.
 Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Negro Travelers' Green Book, 1959. 
 Courtesy of New York Public Library Digital Collections





Obry Wendall "Winks" and Ruth Hamlet built Winks Lodge in 1925 in Pinecliffe, Colorado. Black artists like Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, among others stayed there after performing. Select guest homes and resorts around the country catered exclusively to African Americans to provide relaxation and safety. Courtesy of Lincoln Hills Cares

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are some reasons people in this time period chose to stay in hotels with people of their own race or religion?
- In addition to traveler safety, how else might guidebooks such as this one have helped the community they were written for?
- Would you say that people in the U.S. today have the freedom to travel anywhere in safety? List the reasons for your answer.
- What kinds of travel guides might people find useful today?

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