

Green Means 'Go'

By Sheila Johnson

Historically, railroad traffic lights originated in the 1830s in England, and in 1865 their use transferred to the road because of a growing concern for pedestrians crossing the roads in the midst of horse drawn carriages. In 1920, William L. Potts, a Detroit Michigan policeman invented the four-way, three light traffic signal using all three of the colors used in the railroad system—red, yellow, and green. Over time, and as automobile production increased throughout the world, the use of traffic signals in most developed countries became a critical tool to control motor and pedestrian movement on streets, highways, and byways. Yellow means slow down, red means stop, and green means go.

In addition to the invention of three-way traffic lights, the 1920s ushered in dramatic social, political, and economic growth in the United States. There were more people living in cities than on farms, the national wealth doubled between 1920 and 1929, and America became a consumer society. The power of the almighty “green” dollar spiraled to record heights. Green means go. And despite the anti-Negro policies of the Jim Crow laws, Negroes were also able to benefit from this economic boom. We could purchase deeds to land, invest in Mom and Pop stores, and satisfy the hunger of the automobile industry. We were able to make and spend more money. Green means go.

As cross country travel increased for Negro families, so did our visibility and so did the danger of being stopped, robbed, or even killed on the road. There was a need to identify which establishments were “safe” and willing to serve Negro families. In 1936 Victor Hugo Green published The Negro Motorist Green-Book, which contains a list of hotels, taverns, garages, night clubs, restaurants, service stations, automotive care, tourists-homes, road houses, barber shops, and beauty parlors that welcomed our business. Green means go. My parents loved to drive, and it was the only affordable way to visit family and friends. As a six-year old girl born in 1951, sitting in the back of our Studebaker, I can remember my mother reaching for the “green book” before Daddy would stop the car anywhere. Green means go.

I had long forgotten about the “green book” until last year, when my dear friend stumbled upon a copy that his parents had in their home. After their death, he placed and kept it on his bookshelf to remind him of the progress that has been made over decades of segregation and racism. He quickly called me and asked if I knew what The Negro Motorist Green-Book was, and I discovered the innocence of a child coupled with the disgust of an adult abiding in my spirit. But I, like my friend, am grateful for the willing hearts, obedient minds, and kind spirits who availed themselves and their businesses to a people traveling to and fro on

roads lined with green trees and green grasses. Thank you Mr. Victor Hugo Green for your contribution. Green means go.