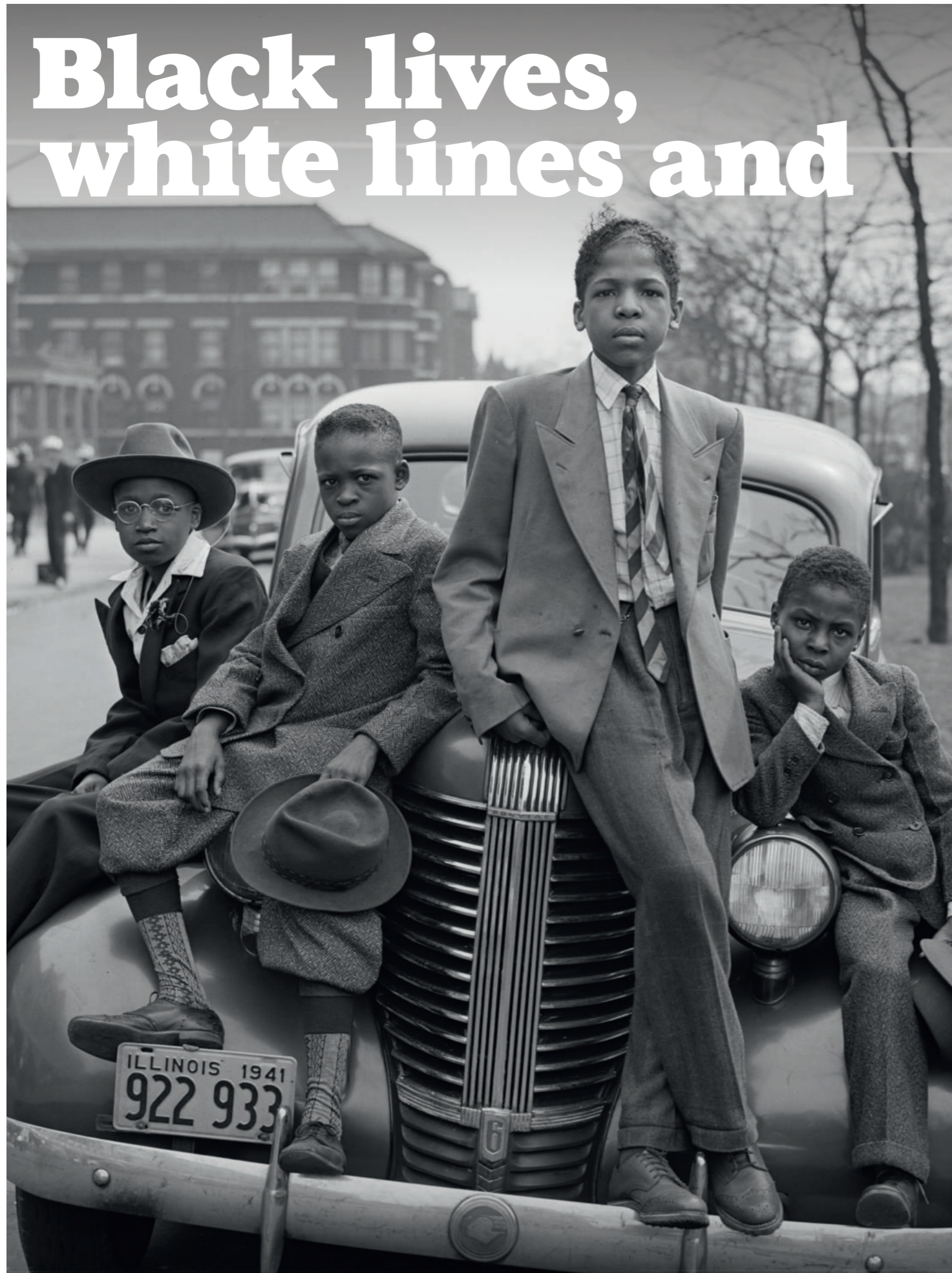


# Black lives, white lines and



# THE GREEN BOOK

**One US highway stands alone for its legendary contribution to the rich tapestry of Americana – but as Sarah Lee, author of Black historic novel *An Ocean Apart*, explains, Route 66 could be an uneasy ride for some.**

For 100 years, Route 66 has been celebrated as a road of possibility – carrying hopes of escape, prosperity and the promise of the American Dream.

In reality, the Mother Road didn't offer freedom to everyone. Travelling on Route 66 could be challenging and even dangerous for Black families.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Route 66, and there are many reasons to drive it. Yet dig below the neon-lit nostalgia and there's an at times dark history – marred by segregation, sundown towns and perilous journeys.

From the 1920s through to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, most Black motorists were barred from staying in white-owned motels, eating in their restaurants or getting fuel from certain petrol stations. 'White Customers Only' signs were common, even on Coca-Cola machines at service stations.

Of 89 counties along the route, 44 enforced sundown laws banning Black people from remaining in town after dark – Edmond, Oklahoma being a prime example. In the 1940s, the Royce Café, which sat right on Route 66, had postcards heralding Edmond as 'A Good Place to Live. 6,000 Citizens. No Negroes.'

Many travellers were harassed, or worse, by Ku Klux Klan members who saw the open road as their domain, while many white-owned lodgings proudly advertised their supremacy. Take Kozy Kottage Kamp in Adrian, Texas – which, at 1,139 miles from both Chicago and Los Angeles, was known as the Midpoint of Route 66. The triple Ks in the

accommodation's name provided little cover for its Klan associations.

Meanwhile, some roadside attractions were associated with the Ku Klux Klan. This included Fantastic Caverns in Springfield, Missouri; now a kitschy cave experience, it is alleged that it was owned by the Klan in the 1920s, who were rumoured to burn crosses inside.

There were attacks too – one of the most horrific of which took place in 1921, four years before the route opened, but it remains seared into the consciousness of Black America. A white mob in Tulsa, Oklahoma, dubbed the Capital of Route 66, massacred an estimated 300 residents of its prosperous Greenwood district. The area, described as 'Black

Wall Street' by commentator Booker T. Washington, was burnt to the ground across 35 blocks. There were no convictions and no one was ever held responsible. Though among the most appalling, this was just one of countless attacks on the freedoms, safety and lives of Black Americans.

Despite these dangers, Black travellers did journey on Route 66 and came up with ingenious ways to shore up their defences, from travelling with all the supplies they would need for the whole route – food, fuel and even portable toilets – to disguising themselves with chauffeur hats when driving premium cars. As columnist George Schuyler wrote in 1930: "Black people who drove expensive cars offended white sensibilities."

Many deliberately chose older vehicles to avoid appearing 'above themselves', while others opted for a disguise, placing

Photos: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/Owl Collection, Route History.



**The Mother Road didn't offer freedom to everyone**

Left to right: Boys on Easter morning in Southside, Chicago in 1941; A Green Book display in the Route History Museum. »

“That road was never meant for us”

themselves in a subordinate social role in the eyes of white police officers they might encounter while driving.

From 1936, Black motorists found themselves ably assisted by the annual *Negro Motorist Green Book*. More than just a travel guide, *The Green Book*, as it became known over numerous iterations during its 30-year run, gave families a blueprint to survive in unknown and often dangerously unfriendly territory.

Created by Harlem-based postal worker Victor H. Green and his wife Alma, it featured accommodation, petrol



### Green Book sites on Route 66



If you wish to visit some of the locations listed in *The Green Book* that still exist along Route 66, head to two Arizona sites: the beautifully restored La Posada ([laposada.org](http://laposada.org)), a hotel, restaurant, museum and gardens in Winslow; or stay at Du Beau's Motel ([modubeau.com](http://modubeau.com)), established in 1929, in Flagstaff.

Alternatively, there is the DeAnza Motor Lodge in Albuquerque, New Mexico: a mid-century motel listed on the State Historic Register and one of only six per cent of the 100 motels on the city's Central Avenue that would admit Black people before 1964.

You can also dine at Clifton's Republic in Los Angeles, formerly Clifton's Cafeteria, to evoke the history of Black travel and the convivial, public dining that was available even during segregation. Spread over five floors, with taxidermy, a giant fake redwood tree running through the middle of the building and a 250lb meteorite on the bar, it offers the right measure of the oddball and gaudy for kitsch Route 66.

Finally, absorb more of the Black Route 66 experience at the Route History Museum ([routehistory.net](http://routehistory.net)) in Springfield, Illinois, or on a self-guided Green Book Historic Walking Tour ([flagstaffarizona.org](http://flagstaffarizona.org)) of motels, eateries and historic buildings in Flagstaff, AZ.

stations, restaurants, salons, barbers and shops willing to serve Black travellers – not only on Route 66 but across America. The Greens enlisted postmen across the country to contact Black entrepreneurs on their routes, inviting them to list their businesses within the guide and sell it to Black travellers.

It was also sold at Esso filling stations. According to Joe Sonderman, author of *Route 66 Then and Now*, Esso was one of the few petrol chains that went out of its way to assist African Americans, and in the early 1940s, 312 out of 830 Esso dealers were Black – a proportion of staffing that was unusual in large corporations at the time.

As stated in *The Travelers' Green Book* of 1960: "The car industry created a new path to prosperity for Black Americans. In a Jim Crow world, where policy limited access to affordable housing and neighbourhoods of choice, having a car opened your world. It was a prized possession, as thrilling as it was useful."

The book served as just one of many strategies and landmarks that African Americans created to overcome socially and legislatively established racism, affirm their humanity and take to the road.

Today, Route 66 is celebrated – not only in this centenary period – as the ultimate road trip for all. Indeed, the homepage of the Route 66 Centennial website ([route66-centennial.com](http://route66-centennial.com)) sports an image of a road-tripping Black family.

However, Martinique Lewis, president of the Black Travel Alliance and founder of the ABC Travel Green Book and app ([abctravelnetwork.com](http://abctravelnetwork.com)), which connects destinations to Black travellers, offers a more nuanced view.

"The story that gets lost in Route 66 is that Victor and Alma Green created this guide so that we could go up and down it. But that road was never meant for us, so Black travellers are not embracing travel on Route 66."

While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 legislated against segregation and circumstances improved, issues created by 'travelling while Black' have not been relegated to the past.

However, as Mark Twain said, "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness", and Black travellers are exploring the world in ways their ancestors could never have contemplated.

Lewis said, "Today, Black travel is at an all-time high, partly because we finally see ourselves in spaces and places where we normally would not. That is down to social media, where you can see a Black person in Petra, at the Great Wall of China or in the Swiss Alps. This gives encouragement to see yourself in those spaces."

"The reason things like the ABC Travel Green Book and app are so instrumental to that narrative is because when we go to spaces and places, we seek out ourselves – Black businesses, cuisine, clothing stores and more."

Clockwise from left: La Posada hotel in Winslow; A Black Wall Street memorial sign in Tulsa; Racist segregation signs at the bus station.



Photos: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, Dreamstime, An Pham.