



Louis (Bud) and Temple Abernathy, circa 1910

The Abernathy Boys

By
LeRoy Jones

My guess is that children today are not cut from the same bolt of cloth as were those of a century ago. Maybe it is because of the conditions under which we live today. Maybe our children today have altogether different likes and dislikes than did those of a century ago.

One hundred and one years ago in July of this year, Louis (Bud) and Temple Abernathy set out from their father's Cross Roads Ranch in Tillman County, Oklahoma to ride their horses to Santa Fe, New Mexico Territory to visit Territorial Governor, George Curry, who was a friend of their father.

The boys' father was John Reeves "Jack" Abernathy who had gained a measure of notoriety by his practice of hunting wolves on the plains of southwestern Oklahoma and north Texas. What made his hunting special was that he would catch the wolves by hand having chased them on his horse until he could make a flying leap from the horse onto the wolf, much like a rodeo bulldogger would catch a steer. Word of this means of catching the wolves had carried as far away as the nation's capitol in Washington D. C. President Theodore Roosevelt, a sportsman of some repute himself, made arrangements to come to Oklahoma Territory in 1905 to be a participant in one of Jack Abernathy's hunts. To show his satisfaction with the hunt, Roosevelt appointed Abernathy to be a U.S. Marshall to serve out of the Guthrie, O.T. office.

Bud and Temple's mother had died shortly after giving birth to her eighth child in 1907. Two boys in a family with six sisters surely meant that the boys spent a lot of time out away from the house. Early in the summer of 1909, the boys asked their father's permission to make a horseback trip on their own. Bud, being the older of the two, decided that they should go to Santa Fe if their father would agree to let them

LeRoy Jones, a third generation Oklahoma rancher from Mountain View, received a 2010 Western Heritage Award from the National Cowboy Museum and Heritage Center for his original song, "The Great Western Trail."

go. The boys had showed themselves to be reliable around the ranch. They were both good horsemen. They couldn't think of any reason their father should refuse their request, so one night they asked him.

After talking with them at some length about their plan, he agreed to let them go. He must have had a great amount of confidence in his sons. They were going to make a nearly 1000 mile trip across country, some of which was unsettled. They were going to have to be responsible for their horses' care as well as their own. There were four rules to which the boys had to agree: never to ride more than fifty miles a day unless seeking food or shelter; never cross a creek unless they could see the bottom of it or have a guide with them; never to carry more than five dollars at a time; and no riding on Sunday. Jack had agreed that they would take Sam Bass, his own horse he used for hunting wolves, and Geronimo, a half Shetland pony.

Bud was 9 years old and Temple was 5. Temple was so small he had to mount his half-Shetland pony from a porch and slide down its left foreleg to dismount.

Except for some minor inconveniences, they made the trip without incident. The return trip was a bit more eventful. On the return, they fell briefly into company with what struck them as a slightly odd band of cowboys. In the way of guileless little boys they jabbered out their story and accepted a gruff welcome, only to notice that they were followed at a distance for the next two days by the mysterious men on horseback. When they were safely home, their father received a crude note from the leader of a band of rustlers he had been after for months that said, "I don't like one hair on your head, but I do like the stuff that is in these kids. We shadowed them through the worst part of New Mexico to see that they were not harmed by sheepherders, mean men, or animals."

Jack Abernathy's boys, Bud and Temple, were indeed admired by many when word got around about their horseback trip to Santa Fe. That trip, however, was only the beginning of their rides. Their father, having hosted Theodore Roosevelt for the wolf hunt, had learned well from Roosevelt the lesson of publicity, for Roosevelt seldom missed an occasion to do a little horn tooting.

In 1910, Roosevelt had gone on a highly publicized African Safari that was followed by a speaking tour through Europe, and he was to return to New York City to great fanfare and a grand parade. Jack

Abernathy, with Roosevelt's encouragement and also to take advantage of the notoriety the two boys had gained from their trip the prior year, allowed Bud and Temple to ride horseback from their home on Cross Roads Ranch in Oklahoma to New Your City to join in the welcome home festivities. Just for good measure, the boys would follow a route that would take them eventually through Washington D.C. where they would be welcomed by President William Howard Taft, Roosevelt's handpicked successor. Their stops along the way were carefully planned to be of the greatest publicity value.

They stayed overnight with Quanah Parker, last of the Comanche war chiefs, and were feted by town officials and citizens in places like St. Louis, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Baltimore. At every stop they charmed local reporters, who eagerly wrote up their progress and quoted their childish awe at novelties they encountered, such as automobiles, paved roads, teletype machines, movie houses, and straw hats.

They met Wilbur Wright in Dayton, Ohio and posed for pictures in the cockpit of one of the first production aircraft. Bands sometimes greeted their arrival, and in Washington D. C. they had a private audience at the White House. At church in New York, they sat in the Rockefeller family pew. The photos taken at their stops show boys surprisingly well-dressed and camera savvy for juvenile saddle tramps, and well-aware of the symbolic importance of their Stetsons. Their father even arranged that their horses be at the dock when Roosevelt arrived, and they rode horseback in new cowboy suits on board the U.S. Revenue cutter Dolphin to add to the excitement of their hero's return.

A front page article in *The New York Times* was headlined: "*Millions Join in Welcome to Roosevelt.*" There was no byline but the article was dated June 18, 1910. "Behind the Roosevelt Carriage came the thirteen carriages of the Reception Committee...and after them were the Spanish War Veterans, with the two young Abernathy's riding at their head. The two youngsters were cheered lustily along the line...flags were waved by thousands...along Fifth Avenue."

But the Abernathy boys weren't finished; they began another adventure, driving home in a car, although they had never before driven one. The brothers convinced their father that they should buy a car. They picked out a one-cylinder Brush runabout because it was simple

and was small enough for them to start and to handle. They shipped their horses back home by train, practiced driving a few hours in New York, then headed for Oklahoma with Bud at the wheel and Temple as his helper. Temple was so small that he had to perch on the edge of the seat and lean against the steering wheel to reach the pedals.

The two boys were now 10 and 6. When they met adults, they bragged on their car, saying if a couple of boys could handle it, any adult should be able to.

They made the trip of 2,512 miles in 23 days and, according to a 1910 news story in the Daily Oklahoman, were “petted and lionized” all the way. Their trip to New York had gone according to plan, almost. Because Geronimo had escaped his halter and wandered into a clover field and almost foundered, they had to buy a new horse to replace him.

To help us better understand the notoriety that was given to the exploits of Bud and Temple Abernathy we might do well to remember that it was not until 1927 that Charles Lindbergh made his historic transatlantic solo flight. Wiley Post did not take the cockpit of the Winnie Mae until the early 1930s. The Abernathy brothers’ exploits were a curiosity that drew attention to them everywhere they went. Their trip to Santa Fe had given them a start and the long ride all the way to New York the following year was covered by more newspapers than almost anything else of the day. Everyone who read about them or saw them along the way must have felt a sense of adventure they themselves longed for. The boys were idolized by the public. They were cheered almost as much as Roosevelt in the big New York parade.

Their adventures, however, were not over. Promoters dreamed up schemes they could involve the Abernathy brothers in that would keep them in the public eye and turn a profit for the promoters as well. The brothers were challenged the very next year to ride their horses from New York City to San Francisco in return for \$10,000 if they finished the trip in 60 days. Sixty days seems a long time to us today for a transcontinental trip, but it wasn’t then. When you are going at the speed that a horse can carry you and you don’t change horses along the way, sixty days does not seem so long a time to accomplish the feat.

Perhaps the boys’ spirits were kept high when they remembered the words of Mr. Roosevelt as they had parted from him in New York the

prior year. He had said, "I want to see you game, boys. I want to see you brave and manly, and I also want to see you gentle and tender... Alike for the nation and the individual, the one indispensable requisite is character."

Their route was chosen for them to make the cross-continental trip, but this ride would bring them into situations they had not faced before. They had to cross the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada as they went westward. They made the trip but at the cost of the life of Sam Bass, their father's prized hunting horse. They completed the trip but missed the deadline, finishing in 62 days, which was a record time but not good enough to collect the prize. Although they did not arrive within the prescribed time, they did set a record for a cross-country horseback ride that stands to this day.

Although the Abernathy boys rode an Indian motorcycle from Oklahoma to New York in 1913, their glory days were over. At 13 and 9 they were too old to astound, and America was now more accustomed to marvels of speed. The day of the horseman had passed.

Bud and Temple grew up and did not seem to be overly impressed with the exploits of their youth. Bud became an attorney and a judge while Temple became an oil field wildcatter. They would both marry and have families of their own. Through the years almost everybody outside their family forgot them, but both they and their families treasured their story, which Alta, Temple's wife, recorded in a book entitled *Bud and Me: The True Adventures of the Abernathy Boys*.

Bud died in 1979 and Temple in 1986.

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