

How Curious – Abernathy Boys

MUSIC: How Curious theme

Rachel Hopkin Script

Hello. Welcome to KGOU's How Curious. I'm Rachel Hopkin.

Rachel-in-situ

So I'm standing here on the land where we think the Abernathys lived. Well, we know they lived here, we don't know exactly where on the land they lived. And it's very hot and it's very flat with big, big skies. I can imagine living here and imagining other places because the skies are so big and it's so flat, you can see a long way.

Rachel Hopkin Script

That was me around a month ago on a broiling August day. I was near the small southwestern Oklahoma town of Frederick, standing on land which is now owned by Virginia Walker, but which once belonged to the Abernathy family. At the time we're concerned with them – starting around 1909 – that family consisted of the father, four daughters, and two little boys named Louis or Bud and Temple. Their mother had died of a kidney disease a couple of years earlier.

Although Bud and Temple are to be the focus of today's episode, their father needs some attention too. He trained to be a cowboy when he was just a child and grew into a larger-than-life character according to Oklahoma historian Joe Wynn.

Joe Wynn

Jack Abernathy was known for being able to catch wolves with his bare hands. The story, as I understand it, is the first time that it happened. Some wolves were attacking his dog and he jumped off the horse and jumped in to rescue the dog, and he discovered that he could put his gloved hand down the wolf's throat. And the wolf was then immobilized. And this was remarkable. He became called Jack "Catch-Em-Alive" Abernathy.

Rachel Hopkin Script

His fame became such that even President Theodore Roosevelt – an avid hunter himself - caught wind of it and arranged to go on a hunt with Jack Abernathy back in 1905. After that the pair were firm friends and Roosevelt made Jack a deputy then full US Marshall. Jack would become no stranger to friends in high places. Another was Governor Curry in Santa Fe who would show Jack all round his luxurious new mansion.

Jack evidently regaled his children with news of his exploits here and there and he must have spoken in vivid terms. Temple later recalled what happened next. His words are here read by an actor.

Temple Abernathy [words read by Ryan Williams]

One day Bud and I decided we had to go see these things for ourselves. (...) So, in June of 1909, when Bud was 9 and I was only 5, as soon as school was out, we began planning a trip – a ride that is. Night after night we studied Dad's maps by the light of the kerosene lamp. Finally, one

night when we felt our plans were ready, we waited for dad to come home from work. The minute he walked in the door, I grabbed the map from Bud and waved it in Dad's face.

Rachel Hopkin Script

These two little boys – aged 5 and 9 – had planned to make a horseback journey on their own to Santa Fe in New Mexico territory, and back.

Now most parents – even back then – would have balked at such a proposal. But Jack Abernathy was cut from a different cloth.

Eddie Stewart

And he told them they could go.

Rachel Hopkin Script

This is historical interpreter, Edie Stewart.

Eddie Stewart

He set up a checking account for the boys and gave them their New Testament and reminded them to pray every night.

Rachel Hopkin Script

In addition he told them not to cross any water they couldn't see the bottom of, and he gave them a shotgun in case of emergencies.

Eddie Stewart

Bud's horse was a big Arabian named Sam Bass and then Temple, he was very small, he had a part Shetland pony named Geronimo, but he still had to climb up on something to get on the horse.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Once they were all kitted out, off they set. It was quite the trip.

Eddie Stewart

There was a hailstorm and they had to seek shelter. A kind of a crazy donkey chased them for miles. One night, wolves surrounded them and Bud stayed awake the whole night, keeping the fire going and firing his gun to keep the wolves at bay. They ran out of food and... this is another thing about this story that is heartwarming and amazing to me is the way the people who lived out in these remote areas welcomed Bud and Temple into their homes. The boys would go knock on a door and "can we sleep in your barn?" And they might just let them sleep in the house instead. You know, they gave them food, let them come in and rest. Things like that. So the boys just were taken care of.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Once they got to Santa Fe, their father was there to meet them as was Governor Curry. Curry was a former Rough Rider – i.e. part of the volunteer US cavalry regiment, famously led by Theodore Roosevelt. He evidently made quite the impression on Temple.

Temple Abernathy [words read by Ryan Williams]

Governor George Curry made us welcome in his elegant new house, even to the extent of letting me slide down the polished stair rail until I bruised my rear a bit. At dinner, we swapped yarns. Governor Curry told us about the gallantry of the Rough Riders as they fought the mosquitoes, mud and malaria, in addition to Spanish soldiers. We told him about the perils of gyp water and mad jackasses.

Rachel Hopkin Script

After a few days sightseeing, the boys were ready to make the return journey. That trip was just as eventful as the ride out, according to Joe Wynn.

Joe Wynn

Before they got back to Oklahoma City, they encountered cattle rustlers. They came up on a group of men camping, and uh... they ended up approaching them and camping with the men during the night. Of course, the boys had no idea that these were cattle rustlers, but the cattle rustlers looked out for them. And then the boys went on their way back in toward Oklahoma City or Guthrie. Unbeknownst to them, the cattle wrestlers did follow them for a time and ensure that they were safe. One of the cattle wrestlers later sent a note to Jack Abernathy saying, “you have good boys. We don't like you. We hate you, but we love your boys. You have good boys”

Rachel Hopkin Script

A parade was held to welcome the boys home and at it took place what apparently Temple found the scariest part of the whole trip, according to Frederick local Greg Mason.

Greg Mason

He said he was standing there and this lady comes through the crowd and grabs him up and says, “I cannot believe that you did this on you, you and your little brother,” and grabs them up. And he and she says, “son, where is your mother?” And being five years old, he answered her truly. Ma'am, she's dead. And the lady put him back to the ground, twirled around and walked off.

Rachel-in-situ

And he said that was scarier than the journey.

Greg Mason

She scared him to death. [Laughing]

Rachel Hopkin Script

Greg Mason is a member of the Tillman County Historical Society. Headquartered in Frederick, the society has embraced the story of the Abernathy Boys and has dedicated a good section of its Townsite Museum to it. Meanwhile, there's a statue of the boys across the way outside of the courthouse. Another member of the Historical Society– Sue Kauffman – showed me around.

Sue Kauffman

The courthouse is here. This is the townsite. I'll take you to the general store for a quick peak.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Once inside, Sue started bringing out some photos of the boys and their father. You can see copies of these on this episode's webpage, just search for KGOU and How Curious.

Sue Kauffman

There's Bud. Here's Jack with the wolf hunt and Teddy.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Teddy Roosevelt – in a slightly roundabout way – would be at the heart of the Abernathy Boys' next journey. By this stage he was no longer president and had taken an extended trip abroad. He was due to return in the summer of 1910 and his old friend Jack Abernathy promised to be in New York City to greet him. That got Jack's sons' fertile imaginations whirring. They'd made it to Santa Fe and back. Why not NYC too where they could meet Teddy alongside their father? After all it was only around 4 or 5 times the distance away, plus they were now the great ages of 6 and 10. They made a plan, took it to their father, and again Jack Abernathy said yes.

Joe Wynn

At the time they left, they were not well known. However as they made this trip, the news media picked up on these two little cowboys from Oklahoma and they became celebrities. They became well known.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Unfortunately, Geronimo – Temple's trusty pony – became ill early on and had to be sent home, so using their emergency funds, the boys acquired a paint horse whom they named Wylie Haynes after one of the men who'd help them secure him. Then their adventures began in earnest, aided by the increasingly avid news media. Here's Edie Stewart again.

Edie Stewart

And the boys got to do amazing things. The mayor of St. Louis met them in an automobile and they took their very first ride in an automobile there. In Indiana, Temple got to drive a train. In Cincinnati, Ohio, they were You know, they got to sleep in a firehouse and go out on a fire call, ride on the, you know, I'm sure it was like a wagon kind of thing. In Dayton, Ohio, they were greeted by the police chief. They were sworn in as deputies for the day. They had badges and they even got little nightsticks that they gave them. Wilbur Wright met them and gave them a tour of their airplane factory. I mean, these boys were a sensation. Everyone in the United States knew who Bud and Temple Abernathy were.

SEGUE

Joe Wynn

When they got to Washington, D.C.,

Rachel Hopkin Script

We're back with Joe Wynn

Joe Wynn

they had an audience with President Taft. They were also introduced to the Senate and the House. So they were really treated like dignitaries.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The fact that they were now celebrities had its downside, as Temple laid out when recalling trying to get through their New York Hotel.

Temple Abernathy [words read by Ryan Williams]

We knew there was a big group of people waiting in the lobby and finally dad said we'd better go and talk to them. The minute we got off the elevator a woman cried, "Oh you sweet thing!" and charged towards me with her arms outstretched. I changed my direction and shifted into high gear to escape her. Bud didn't like it any better than I did when the ladies hugged and kissed him, but he let them get away with it. I absolutely refused. As far as I was concerned, the whole kissing business was disgusting.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Good to know. But what of Theodore Roosevelt?

Joe Wynn

On the President's arrival in New York City, there was a huge ticker tape parade that was planned. At that point, it was the biggest ticker-tape parade that had ever been held in New York City. And Roosevelt was, of course, in the parade. Roosevelt's Rough Riders were in the parade. The two boys from Oklahoma were given a position of honor in the parade behind the President, but ahead of the Rough Riders.

Rachel Hopkin Script

You'd think that'd be enough excitement. The boys were ready to go home. However ...

Eddie Stewart

They didn't want to ride the horses. They didn't want to ride the train. They'd gotten the automobile bug back in St. Louis and they wanted to drive a car. So turns out in 1910, you didn't have to have a license or even training to drive the vehicle if you felt like you had the ability to do it. So they went to their dad.

Rachel Hopkin Script

He was in New York too, though he'd got there by train.

Eddie Stewart

He said, "okay. If you can find a car that a 10 year old and 6 year old boy can drive and it's for the right amount of money, I'll buy it for you." Now he never dreamed that they would find such a car but they took out on the streets of New York looking for cars. They were about ready to give up when they saw a young boy driving this little car and they chased him down. What kind of car is that? Tell us about it. So the boy took them to the dealership and it was called a Brush. That was the brand of the car and just the right size actually for a kid to drive and it was 485 dollars. So the dealer taught Bud how to drive the car the boys go and say "dad, guess what. We found the car." Well, Jack held up his end of the deal.

Rachel Hopkin Script

He bought them the car. Bud was the primary driver but Temple got a look in too.

Temple Abernathy [words read by Ryan Williams]

Bud gave me a turn at the wheel every so often, and I could drive easily except that reaching the pedals was a problem. My legs were so short that I had to sit way up on the edge of the seat, with my body next to the steering wheel. It was awkward, but I still thought driving was just about as much fun as anything I had ever done.

Rachel Hopkin Script

There weren't much more than 100 miles of paved road in the US at that time, but the pair made it safely back. And that wasn't even the last of Bud and Temple's great adventures. The following year they rode from New York City to San Francisco. There was also a motor cycle trip. And then the two evidently settled down. Bud later became a lawyer and Temple an oilman.

Still, their early lives were so incredible that several times in the making of this episode, I found myself Googling "Are the Abernathy Boys a hoax?" They're not. There is so much documentation proving that their travels did take place. But it seems almost unbelievable today, as I commented to Edie Stewart.

Edie Stewart

It's hard not to put our 2026 views on something that happened in 1910, but people were living much more isolated, remotely, and when they had children, those children were expected to carry part of the responsibility of taking care of the home and the farm and the animals. You know, you just had jobs that you had to do. So people did see children in a completely different light than we see them today. I kind of think people saw more potential in the children too.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Let's leave the final words to Temple, here in reflective mode.

Temple Abernathy [words read by Ryan Williams]

We learned to look a man in the eye, and judge him by the grasp of his hand. Wealth and education aren't as important as the way a man approaches life, and we came to appreciate a willingness to help. Some of the people who had the least to give, were the ones who gave us the most along the road (...) We'd always faced the question of whether it was worthwhile to go on. I'm glad we always pressed ahead. That is where the future is.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Thanks to all the contributors to this program, including Ryan Williams who read Temple Abernathy's words. A big extension of gratitude also to Sara Cowan, who suggested today's subject.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

As ever, if you too have an idea for a future episode, we'd love to hear about it so please drop us a line at curious@kgou.org.