



A TRIBUTE TO AB

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Note from March 23, 2015: After the “Tribute to Ab banquet” at Banita Creek Hall last week several of you asked if I would post my script. So, I emailed Ab last Thursday and queried him if he thought that was OK. He came back with a yes. “Put it in the New York Times as an article and we’ll have an autograph party”. Then, Friday night, March 20, 2015, Ab said goodbye. To me, there’s some rather amazing karma in how Ab showed all of us how to exit in style. We are so blessed to have had his character in our midst. Ab represented the last great generation well. I’m totally convinced no one could ever have left the scene more gracefully.



Thank you, Jeff. Wow. Look at this room. First, let me thank Diana Walker, Jackie Warthan, Camille Bollinger, Francis Shofner and all the others who pulled this remarkable event together. They get an A+ for event organization. Folks, this crowd of 400 souls is proof positive this community gets it. Ab, this is your fan club – at least those who could afford thirty dollars a plate – and we’re here to

celebrate you - and your amazing gift to the City – the LaNana and Banita Creek trails.

Let me assure all of you, being a trailblazer is not what why Ab received the Regent's Professor Emeritus status in English at SFA. That title came because of his body of work in English – journal articles, popular press, poems, lecturing widely, the Texas Folklore Society, and books . . . one of which is the just published “Let the Rivers Run Wild – Saving the Neches”, which is on sale at the back of the room. That's what earned him this top award at SFA which means he gets an office, a telephone, postage and email for life – and he knows the secret handshake.

Ab grew up in rural Oklahoma, West Texas and East Texas – doing time as a cowhand and fence builder on his grandfather's ranch – and shuffling back and forth between Dallas and Palestine. The Depression was not kind to his family but – like my mom here - he survived. Even at a young age, Ab liked to make things. He had a penchant for building skate scooters, slingshots and kites. He developed an interest in Paramecia, photography, arc lights and making gun powder. That last interest ended when he burned down his parent's garage. He's a self-taught biologist, ecologist and naturalist. He's seined salmon in Canada for a living. He's been a lifelong spelunker. He learned to be a tree climber as a lineman for Gulf States Utility. He worked on a shrimp boat out of Morgan City, Louisiana. As part of the East Texas String Ensemble, we all know he plays a mean guitar and bass and can sing like a bird.

When WW2 arrived Ab jumped in to serve our country as a sailor on the USS Harkness and he was part of the occupying forces in Japan. As a sailor, he learned the fine art of cursing. If you've not suffered the wrath of Ab, I say skip it. Blistering is too kind a word. Jeff and I call it our rite of passage. I would call it Ab's power of positive discontent.

When the war ended, Ab did a short stint as a hobo. He slept in barns, behind stores, and God knows where – picking up work every now and then to keep going. He swears he was robbed by another hobo but he only had a dollar in his wallet so the fellow let him keep it.

Now at this point, some of might be thinking why can't Ab hold a job? Why can't he focus? When the heck is he going to get it together?

I'm pleased to report - Ab did see the light – he came to his senses. He married Hazel in 1948, enrolled at SFA on the GI Bill and ended up with a Masters and PhD from LSU in 1956. After that, he was a faculty member at Lamar State College for nine years – where he taught Janis Joplin English – and how to play guitar and sing. I'm not so sure about that last part. Finally, he arrived at SFA in 1965, settled into the 1888 home on Pillar Street next to the creek he came to love. Here he raised his family where he could walk to and from his work at SFA. He's been here ever since.

Now, John Anderson tells me the vision for the Trails really goes back to 1974. The Bicentennial Commission added the LaNana Creek Trail to its projects – I'm sure Ab's prodding helped. For Ab, this was an official sanction. To Ab, there would be no additional paperwork ever needed. He was good to go and permitted for the next thirty years. I suspect some of you may already know that Ab is not fond of rules, regulations, policies and procedures. It's not his talent. I'm afraid Ab thinks that if a project is relegated to being important enough to have a committee, then, well, it's probably not worth doing. I've watched him for years at SFA. He's my hero. He's gotten away with stuff that would get a normal person prison time. For instance, many years ago, I remember Ab was especially frustrated with a few obstacles and roadblocks to building what we call the Park Street Plaza - that retaining wall is an interesting piece of architecture – Anyway, Ab finally threw up his hands, said to heck with it. He got a big truck and trailer and headed to the lumber yard, picked up posts and lumber, told the sales crew to bill it to the city - and waved goodbye. I'm not sure how that got worked out.

Folks, for all those early trail building years – the army was small - Ab, John Anderson, Archie McDonald, and Carol Schoenwolf – but it wasn't long before there was a trail moving north. This was a tough patch to work and the privet was thick. There was hauling out a century of trash dumped in the creek by some of our ancestors; cars, refrigerators and other items we can't talk about was one chore. Building the trail was another. A pattern developed. If you wanted to visit with Ab about one thing or another – trail related or not - he often suggested to meet somewhere on the trail at some set time. Just by chance, he always had an extra brush axe or machete or shovel and before you knew it you were persuaded – kind of shamed - to actually do something, run a wheel barrow, knock some brush down, build something, or move some dirt around. Ab's philosophy is simple.

“We can talk while we’re actually getting something done”. I guarantee Ab is looking at this crowd right now thinking what a pity it is that all this machete labor is going to waste.

Jeff and I remember when Ab found the Eyes of Father Margil, the spring that sprung from the rock smacked by the padre about three hundred years ago - which saved our valley and its citizens from the grips of a horrible drought. It’s a great legend and this spot of Nacogdoches is really a beautiful vista. There’s Shady Grove Cemetery just a hair to the west – and the springs flow through and under that landscape - to seep out from a steep bank that falls into the bottom land. When Ab located the spring, he carved out a basin in the slope, a board walk followed, he parked some rocks around it, and planted some ferns, liriopse and I think a few azaleas. Everyone was pleased. On my first visit there after the find, Ab encouraged me to take a drink which was OK with me. I wasn’t too crazy it was right next to a 500 grave cemetery but I have Shelby county genetics so what the heck. I took a good swig and swirled it around in my mouth. I can report that I found the bouquet interesting, reminiscent of a typical East Texas shallow well; a bit of iron, perhaps a twinge of sulfate and only the tiniest hint of embalming fluids. Now, let me add that Ab drinks there all the time, which is perhaps a partial explanation for his long life and tough disposition. Jeff Abt just shrugs his shoulders and says, “Ab’s well preserved.”

Those of you who have worked with Ab know it’s not always a walk in the park. I tend about a mile of LaNana Creek, the part that runs from Starr to Austin through SFA. It includes the Mast Arboretum, Ruby Mize Azalea Garden, the Pineywoods Native Plant Center, and our newest feature, the Jimmy Hinds Park. At the west entrance to the Ruby Mize Azalea Garden right next to the creek we created a weeping bald cypress alee, a first in the USA. It’s a green tunnel that leads folks back and forth between the Mast Arboretum and the Ruby Mize Azalea Garden. This bald cypress is a special variety called ‘Cascade Falls’ - and those with taste and culture think of it as one of the most graceful weeping trees available. This tree has fans. Ab isn’t one of them. He doesn’t like this tree. I’ve tried to persuade him. I even had Ab to the middle of the treehenge Cascade Falls circle on Austin and yes, he agreed that the place is shouting karma, he could feel the energy. So, I thought, hey, this is great. I have a convert! Well, here’s a recent email I want to share with you.

Dear Brother Dave,

God and I got together and discussed your introduction of the syphilitic cypress on the SFA campus. We agreed that you have done so much for the campus that you need to be rewarded. We concluded that you could put them where they would give you some kind of satisfaction, BUT NOT ANYWHERE ON THE LA NANA AND BANITA CREEK BANKS OR ALONG EITHER OF THE CREEK TRAILS. God is just and merciful to those who heed his commandments but extremely wrathful to those who say "Nay!" Sincerely, Ab, and oh yes, Jehovah.

Ouch. Now, my first reaction was to negotiate an actual distance from the creek this tree could call home - but I've thought better of it - and I agree to Ab's - and God's terms. But, Ab, that green tunnel at Ruby Mize stays.

The value of this resource is that it's all about critical mass. The trails are now big enough and wonderful enough to draw visitors from afar. At the same time, the LaNana and Banita creek trails add immensely to our quality of life. As citizens, it's a shared resource we can all be proud of. It's a plus for our ecological and cultural environment. Most of us in this room understand the value of tourism and what it can do to a community. But there's a problem here. We're three hours from Dallas, two from Houston, an hour and a half to Tyler, Longview and Shreveport. People will not drive three hours to take on a 30 minute trail or garden walk through. You **have** to be big enough for them to spend some time, spend the night, and enjoy our restaurants. An eight mile all day walking, jogging, biking adventure on a diverse trail is a draw. What Ab created here is the bones of a bigger vision. Ab wants to turn all of us into trailblazers. Take what he started and carry it to the next level.

I've been on many urban trails – and some are better than others. To me, the best are those that are broken up by what we call "points of interest" - a spot in the trail worth wandering around and taking a look. I call those points of interest the Jewels of the LaNana and Banita Creek necklace. Think about the lineup. We've got Liberty Hall, El Camino Real Park, Shady Grove Cemetery, the Eyes of Father Margil, Zion Hill Baptist Cemetery, Pecan Acres Park, the

Goodman Bridge, SFA Mast Arboretum, Ruby Mize Azalea Garden, Gayla Mize Garden, the Pineywoods Native Plant Center, to the new Jimmy Hinds Park on Austin. Head West on Austin and connect with Banita Creek and go south to Ab's Park, Banita Creek Park North, the Farmer's market, past this fine establishment, down to Banita Creek Park South to end up at Hoya Soccer complex, Coy Sims softball field, and the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden. Wow. Folks this is an opportunity for serious tourism - the critical mass is here to attract tourists interested in a day long or longer adventure – an opportunity to absorb the gardens, ecology, history and culture of this special patch of the Pineywoods.

It's all about plans, plants and people.

Thank you, Ab, for having the vision, character and perseverance to make it all happen. Let's keep planting.

David Creech

