

## Francis E. “Ab” Abernethy

3 December 1925 – 21 March 2015, 89

William R. Elliott, 21 September 2019



Dr. Abernethy was an English professor from Stephen F. Austin University, and a close friend and colleague of Texas Tech University cave biologist, Robert W. Mitchell. They went on caving trips to Mexico and Belize from 1960 to 1977. They did significant work in the Xilitla area, including the first descent (1960) of Sótano de Huitzmolotitla, and in the Sierra de El Abra during Mitchell’s research on *Astyanax* cavefishes, ricinuleids, and other cave fauna in 1968-1969. Many of these adventures are retold in Ab’s unpublished memoir, which includes a 90-page section, “Caving with Mitch.” He was a widely read folklorist, editor, photographer and naturalist.

One of Ab’s many talents was music. He was the bassist for the popular East Texas String Ensemble, who recorded some LPs of old country and hillbilly music. See photos below.

Francis Abernethy passed away in Nacogdoches, Texas. Funeral Home Services for Francis were provided by Laird Funeral Home, Inc. The obituary was featured in The Daily Sentinel on March 28, 2015.

### Services set for Dr. Frances “Ab” Abernethy, a Nacogdoches icon

By Donna McCollum | March 25, 2015 at 7:38 PM CDT - Updated July 11 at 1:31 PM

NACOGDOCHES, TX (KTRE) - Services have been scheduled for Nacogdoches icon Dr. Frances “Ab” Abernethy, who died at his home Saturday. He was 89. His funeral is scheduled for Saturday, April 4, 2015, at 2 p.m. Services will be held at Nacogdoches’ Banita Creek hall.

His death comes within two weeks of having over 400 admirers honor him with a dinner on Ab Abernethy Day. Two days earlier, the First United Methodist Church of Nacogdoches celebrated his accomplishments, and there are many.

However, Abernethy is best known as the “Trailblazer of Nacogdoches” for beginning the Lanana and Banita Creek Trails in Nacogdoches.

He was also a former director of the Texas Folklore Society, historian, Stephen F. Austin State University professor, naturalist, actor, entertainer, veteran, husband, and father.

Abernethy was also a musician who helped begin the Texas Folklife Festival in San Antonio where the East Texas String Ensemble often played.

Abernethy was honored just two weeks ago for a resolution passed by the Texas House and Senate that declared March 10th “Ab Abernethy Day.”

<https://www.ktre.com/story/28615072/services-set-for-dr-frances-ab-abernethy-a-nacogdoches-icon/>

### **Francis’s Obituary**

A memorial service for Dr. Francis “Ab” Abernethy, age 89, of Nacogdoches, Texas will be held on Saturday, April 4, 2015 at 2:00 p.m. at Banita Creek Hall in Nacogdoches. Dr. Abernethy passed away on Saturday, March 21, 2015 at his home. Interment will be at Sunset Memorial Park Cemetery next to his beloved wife of 63 years, Hazel Shelton Abernethy.

Dr. Abernethy was born in Altus, Oklahoma on December 3, 1925 and grew up in the Palestine community. The Abernethy family moved to Nacogdoches when he was a senior in high school. He graduated in 1943 and joined the Navy two weeks later, serving in the South Pacific during World War II. After the war and hitchhiking around the country for several months, Ab obtained his BA from Stephen F. Austin State University, and a Master’s Degree and a PhD. from Louisiana State University.

Dr. Abernethy began his career at SFA in 1965 where he taught for the next 32 years. He retired in 1997 as a member of the Texas Institute of Letters, Distinguished Regents Professor and Professor Emeritus. Ab was a long-time member of the Texas Folklore Society, succeeding such greats as J. Frank Dobie, Wilson Hudson, and Mody Boatright as Secretary Editor of the organization. He was a Master Mason as well as a member of many other organizations.

Among Ab’s many interests were hunting, fishing, spelunking, traveling, music, history, storytelling, and teaching. He was always teaching and sharing his extensive life experiences.

Dr. Abernethy was preceded in death by his wife, Hazel (Shelton) Abernethy and his parents, Talbot and Aileen (Cherry) Abernethy.

Survivors include his children: Luanna (Abernethy) Cole and spouse, Charles, of Nacogdoches; Robert Abernethy and wife, Kim, of Boerne; Sarah “Deedy” Abernethy and spouse, Todd Weidner, of Austin; Margaret “Maggie” Abernethy-Duffin and spouse, John, of Nacogdoches; and Ben T. Abernethy and wife, Penny, of Nacogdoches. Grandchildren: Elizabeth Reeves, Edward Cole, Leslie Cole, Patrick Abernethy, Sarah Abernethy, and Jack Duffin, as well as four great-grandchildren. In addition to many colleagues and friends, Dr. Abernethy is also survived by his dear friend and “Sweetie,” Lola (Lemkowitz) Pogue.

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made to the Lanana/Banita Creek Projects in care of Friends of Historic Nacogdoches, P.O. Box 630411, Nacogdoches, Texas 75963 or to the Lamp Lite Playhouse, Sarah McMullen, 4128 Old Tyler Road, Nacogdoches, Texas 75961. To convey condolences or to sign an online register, please visit [www.lairdfh.net](http://www.lairdfh.net)

### **Two Books by Francis E. Abernethy**

**Juneteenth Texas: Essays in African-American Folklore**

by Francis E. Abernethy (Editor), Patrick B. Mullen (Editor), Alan B. Govenar (Editor)

*Juneteenth Texas* explores African-American folkways and traditions from both African-American and white perspectives. Included are descriptions and classifications of different aspects of African-American folk culture in Texas; explorations of songs and stories and specific performers such as Lightnin' Hopkins, Manse Lipscomb, and Bongo Joe; and a section giving resources for the further study of African Americans in Texas.

**Let the River Run Wild!**

by Adrian Van Dellen (Photographs), Francis E. Abernethy (Editor)

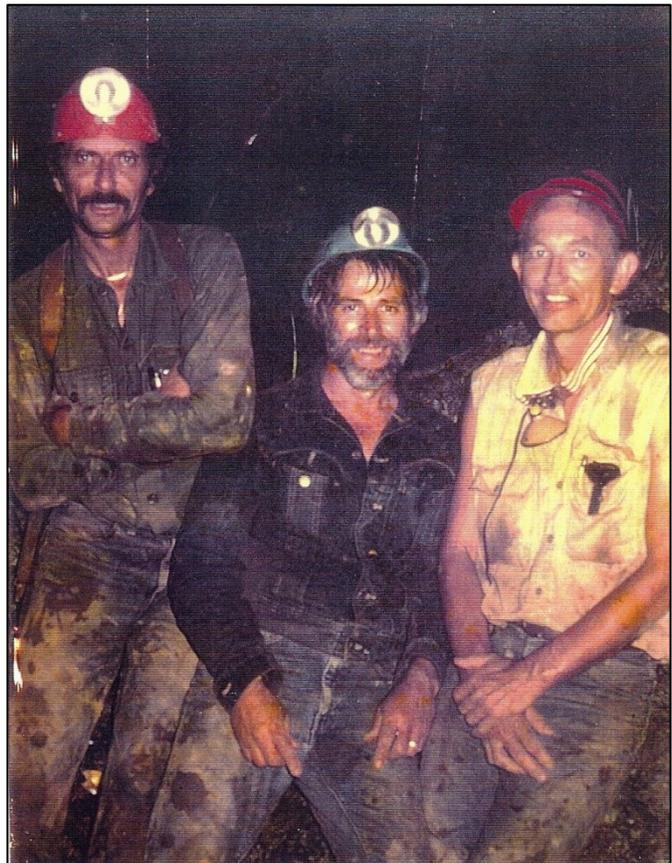
The Neches River is not wild in its youth. It flows gently along pastures, under barb-wire fences, and through culverts lying under asphalt roads. It flows placidly through East Texas pastures and farmland, watering stock and nourishing the fringe trees along its margin.

The river follows its valley and bottomland through thickets and dense woods, but its path is always narrow. Even when it floods, the water does not stray far from its banks. The young Neches nourishes the usual rural farmland population of deer, 'coons, 'possums and polecats, but nothing wild and scary, unless you count wild cat squirrels and scary water moccasins. When night falls, the river banks stir and scurry with wildlife sniffs and snorts and hogs rooting and frogs and toads in chorus. But the sound of the river is gentle.

With over one hundred photographs and maps, *Let the River Run Wild!* transports readers along the wooded banks of the Neches in a photographic journey that highlights the flora and fauna inhabiting the woods along this coursing river from its narrow upper reaches that run from Lake Palestine dam to its mouth on Sabine Lake. Learn about the highly controversial fight to save the the upper Neches led by the Texas Conservation Alliance and why the Neches River is listed as number six on the most endangered rivers list, compiled by the American Rivers organization.



Abernethy at Cueva del Río Subterráneo, SLP, 1974. Robert W. Mitchell.



Caving buddies Mitch, Dub, and Ab, in Belize, 1977. Robert W. Mitchell.



June 1977 trip to Belize, at Logan McNatt's house in Belmopan. Left to right: Bob and Linda Mae Mitchell, Jean and Dusty Rhodes, Logan, Tom Miller, Ab Abernethy.



The East Texas String Ensemble (pronounced "in-sim-bull").

the  
**EAST TEXAS**  
**STRING ENSEMBLE**

from  
NACOGDOCHES



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Ab and Twitch.