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Francis E. Abernethy



Hazel Shelton Abernethy

THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES

by Francis E. and Hazel Shelton Abernethy

This paper was presented to the East Texas Historical Association meeting in Nacogdoches, Texas, on September 22, 1995. "The Best Years of Our Lives" is really a figure of speech, not to mention an irony. The purpose of the following dramatic duologue is to show some of the effects of World War II and the immediate post-war years on the generation that fought it.

AB: The homecoming movie after World War II was the academy award winner *The Best Years of Our Lives*. It was no heroic When-Johnny-Comes-Marching-Home-Again movie with parades and people waving flags. It was about real psychologically and physically wounded soldiers and sailors coming back to a society of civilians and trying to adjust to a world that was trying to forget it had been at war.

The homecoming song – "I kissed her once, I kissed her twice, I kissed her once again; It's been a long, long time" – was a little gentler, more romantic than the movie and maybe just as true. But one thing was true: coming home after the war on "The Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe" (from Johnny Mercer's song of the same name) was a helluva lot more difficult than going to the service during the war.

HAZEL: We got to the Best Years of Our Lives through Drouth, Dust Bowl, and Depression in the United States and wars and rumors of wars abroad.

In 1931 Japan marched into Chinese Manchuria. This was the first event of a decade of aggression worldwide. I was four and Ab was six. For the next

ten years we witnessed war developing on every front. Although we were young some of those pictures we saw in newsreels and later in *Life* magazine were indelibly printed in our minds. We studied war in our geography and history classes in elementary school – not as ancient conflicts, but as current history. By the time December 7, 1941, came around, even children our age were rather fatalistic: it had been just a matter of time.

I was fourteen and Ab was sixteen when Pearl Harbor occurred, and our lives began to change immediately. At school, war stamp and bond sales and scrap drives took precedence over other activities and gasoline and food rationing changing our lives at home. Ab's life was affected more drastically than mine. He had to move from Palestine to Nacogdoches the summer before his senior year in high school.

AB: Hey! – we are talking major catastrophe here – not that my father, who was a Goodyear tractor tire salesman, had no tires to sell *nor* that to keep his job he had to move his family – No! the catastrophe was that I, who had a bonded circle of friends and a high profile job jerking sodas at Doc Murphey's Drugs, had to leave the sophisticated good life in Palestine and move to the outback rurality of Nacogdoches, where I became the new kid on the block. The war had interrupted some of *the best years of my life!*

HAZEL: He was the new boy in town, and he was cute, and by the end of that school year we were "going together."

I have to admit that my main motivation was to have a serviceman to write to. But as time passed my feelings got a little more serious, and by his graduation time we were a pretty love-sick pair. All of this was compounded by the fact that he and his family were moving to Gulfport, Mississippi, the day after graduation and that three weeks later he would be going into the Navy. This best year of our life was a very emotional time.

AB: Looking back, maybe those weren't the best years of our lives, but they were certainly some of the most intense. They were the years that stamped our generation's memories with scenes and songs that are as vivid and heart squeezing today as they were then. Maybe even more so; the mind has a way of saving treasures and tossing trash.

I was seventeen in 1943, and two life-changing events happened to me that spring: I joined the Navy, and I fell in love. The hitch in the Navy lasted three years; the love affair lasted fifty-two – and it's still holding. And it had a dramatic start.

The ultimate going-away-to-war movie was *Since You Went Away*. Theatres were awash with tears when Jennifer Jones and Robert Walker parted at the train station, and then the music played. "Nights are long since you went away, I dream about you all through the day."

Our parting song was the old Eddie Howard balled "For all we know, we may never meet again; Before you go, make this moment sweet again." We cried rivers! parted in sorrow, wrote long longing letters, and came together briefly and frustratingly on short leaves over the next three war years.

HAZEL: Ab was the first boy I sent off to war and it was certainly the most painful departure. But, as the spring of 1944 developed and my own high school graduation approached, all of the boys in my class began to take on a

new significance. We were only seventeen or eighteen years old. Most of us had known each other all of our school lives, and we had played together, studied together, and grown up together. Now suddenly these boys that we had taught to dance and that we had played clod wars with just a few months before were putting on uniforms and going off to fight in a real war.

These boys left one by one through the summer and fall of 1944 and by Christmas most of them were gone. Before each one left we feted them and hung on to them as if each one were the only boy in the world – and for that point in time he was. When a friend returned home on leave we were completely absorbed with him. It was his time and all other priorities disappeared. College classes certainly had no priority. We didn't hesitate to say that a friend was in on leave so we couldn't come to class, and usually this excuse didn't meet with much objection. Everyone had people they would have dropped everything to see.

For the rest of the war the highlights of our lives were the comings and goings of our friends in the service. As time wore on these comings and goings dwindled away – everyboy was overseas.

AB: You know, I couldn't wait to go to the service. My reading before we ever got into the war had been *G-8 and His Battle Aces* and *Bill Barnes Air Trails* and, most of all, a Navy recruiting pamphlet I picked up at the post office. So when I passed a test and got into an officer's training program, I was in a hurry to go. But V-12 was too slow, and I was scared to death that the war would be over before I would get in it. I quit going to class and soon was in boot camp, then gunnery school, and finally went to sea in wooden-hulled mine-sweeper serving as a survey ship. I loved the sea and sailing and being in the Navy. I would not have chosen to be anywhere else at that particular time in history, and most of my shipmates on the *USS Harkness* felt the same way.

HAZEL: This was truly a war that everyone was involved in, whatever his age or job or position. People were volunteering for all sorts of war related activities. Businessmen gave up their executive positions and salaries and went to Washington to head up Government agencies as "Dollar-a-year" men. Movie and stage stars went all over the country selling war bonds and entertaining the troops. Bob Hope went to every battle front in Europe and the Pacific and became an icon of home for thousands of homesick American boys. Stage door canteens sprang up in Hollywood, on Broadway, and in every major entertainment center in the country. Nearly every town in the country that was near a military camp or convoy crossroads had some sort of USO. Even here in Nacogdoches, with a population less than 10,000, we had a USO.

Many major rail centers which had large numbers of troops passing through had volunteer groups of ladies who met every train with cookies and sandwiches and good wishes for these boys. The home front grew Victory gardens, and saved scrap metal, paper, tin cans, and even bacon grease. We car-pooled and made every trip necessary. We rolled bandages and knitted socks and mufflers. But most of all, we wrote letters and we prayed.

AB: But the war dragged on. A tired Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president for the fourth time in 1944, and by then a sadness hung over the land.

We sang sad songs to our sweethearts on the other side of the big water – “I’ll walk alone, for to tell you the truth I’ll be lonely,” and “Long ago and far away I dreamed a dream one day” – and the words that still bring a lump in the throat of that generation, “I’ll be seeing you in all the old familiar places.” Longing for home and loved ones and *Peacetime!* became a twenty-four hour process. The heroics of “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” had given way to the sad reality that a real war lasted longer than an Errol Flynn or Van Johnson movie.

HAZEL: On a happier note, 1944 was the year of D-Day, the Liberation of Paris, and the first smell of victory. As the Allies advanced rapidly toward Germany that fall we were all saying “They’ll be home by Christmas.” That hope was dashed by the German break-through known as the Battle of the Bulge. America suffered 77,000 casualties in that engagement. It was the grimmest Christmas of the war. We recovered, and that spring we knew Germany was near the end. Even the bone-crushing news of FDR’s death on April 12 could not completely dim our optimism. For many in my generation, Roosevelt was “The President,” the only one we had ever known. When Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945, there was an accompanying sadness that The President had not lived to see the victory.

VE Day was reason to celebrate, but the job was only half-done. Most of my friends were in the Pacific, and the wait was still on. All of the predictions at home were that the Japanese would have to be driven out, island by island. So for us at home, as well as those in the Pacific waiting to start the invasion of Japan, the news of the atomic bomb was welcome.

AB: The *Harkness* was sailing somewhere around Okinawa on V-J Day. We were in convoy with a half-a-dozen other ships heading to God-knows-where. They never told us anything. We sailed blacked out and at battle stations, wearing helmets and life jackets, both of which we hated. We also had been listening to the radio and knew about the big bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so we were sweating it out, hoping the war would end before we had to invade Japan.

Then, about ten o’clock that morning the destroyer leading the convoy blew its whistle and ran up the flags spelling “Victory!” We screamed and hollered and jumped around like a bunch of crazies, and some idiot yelled, “Unload through the barrels!” Well, we fired everything we had, the big gun – a three-inch fifty – twenty millimeters, fifty calibers. Crewmen broke out carbines, .30-06s, and .45 automatics from the gun shack and shot at anything that floated or flew. They did the same thing on the other ships, and it’s a wonder we didn’t kill and sink each other and every ship in the East China Sea.

HAZEL: I was working at Cason-Monk Hardware and operated the pulley-change system they had in the office at the back of the store. We all made plans about just what we would do when the news of the Japanese surrender came. I planned to grab hold of the central pulley and just ride it down the middle of the store to the front door. Fortunately for the Cason-Monk pulley system, we got the news in Nacogdoches after business hours with a blast of the civil defense siren and the sounding of all of the fire and sawmill whistles in town.

My father and I went down to the square, where many people like us just wanted to come together and celebrate but didn't quite know how.

AB: Our whole convoy headed toward Buckner Bay. We made port that evening, and the main thing I remember is the Japanese mourning dirge that played continually on all of their stations. Now that we were the victors we would allow ourselves – dimly – to recognize that a nation of human beings was bowed down in sorrow.

I don't remember much shipboard philosophizing about the morality of the A-bombs. Considering the bloodshed involved in taking Iwo Jima and Okinawa, admirals and deck apes alike agreed that if we had to march up the mainland of Japan and take it by force of arms, our dead would number in the tens of thousands. We were awed, even frightened by the power unleashed at those holocausts, but we *never* questioned the necessity or the morality. We would have been damn fools to have had it and not used it.

We tied up in Buckner Bay and kept minimal watches. Periodically we would hear firing from the island, when the Marines pried some die-hard Japanese soldier out of a cave and he tried to start up the war again. We rode out a typhoon, did some sounding and surveying, and then headed to Japan for the occupation.

We marched into a bombed-flat Nagoya with loaded rifles, not knowing what to expect. What we found was a defeated people who quietly welcomed us to what was left of their lives. People bowed and said "Konichi Wa" as if we were all human beings casually greeting each other on the street. Hirohito – at the "suggestion" of Douglas MacArthur – had so ordered it.

HAZEL: The immediate reaction was: "They'll all be home!" and "We can throw away our ration books!" The Office of Price Administration had set up price controls and instituted rationing early in the war. Rationing had begun with sugar in April of '42 and increased to include coffee, butter, meats, fat and oils, canned foods, shoes, and gasoline. These restrictions were lifted gradually in the spring of '45 but had to be reinstated on some items as shortages occurred. Rationing finally ended in 1947, when restrictions on sugar were lifted.

Price controls on everything but rent were lifted by the fall of 1946 but reinstated in 1950 because of the threat of inflation. All controls were removed by 1953, and the Office of Price Stabilization was abolished.

The War Department wisely set up a point system that would ensure a gradual de-mobilization. The system was set in place – so many points for age, for months in service, overseas duty, etc. As soon as this was published everyone started busily calculating when their return would occur. Ab wrote that he would probably be eligible in 1948.

A surprising number of veterans returned to school the fall of 1945 and even more the spring of 1946. So many, in fact, that a campus Veterans Association was established in February of 1946.

But the fall of 1946 was the real beginning of the post-war campus in everyone's memory. The enrollment at SFA jumped to over a thousand and early rumors said the ratio of men to women was 7-to-1 – officially it was said to be 3-to-1, and as we later realized many of these male students were married. Nonetheless it was a miracle to girls who had spent most of their

college years on a virtual all-girl campus.

AB: Its a wonder the *Harkness* remained seaworthy; we let her go to hell tied up in Nagoya. We packed the deck guns in cosmoline and stuck them in the hold. And we stood a semblance of watch, but we chipped no paint. All of the enthusiasm with which we joined the Navy and went to war was gone. Officers and men were marking time and counting discharge points, waiting to go home.

We finally sailed home in cold February seas, so badly provisioned that we were breaking C-Rations out of life rafts before we got to Guam. We finally got fresh stores on Johnson Island and sailed into Pearl Harbor stuffing ourselves with lettuce and tomato sandwiches on toast.

I left the ship at San Diego in March of '46 and rode the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe through the southwestern desert back toward Texas. Somewhere in the sands of the Arizona desert we rolled for miles though a forest of airplanes – stored tail up, nose down – the waste of war that stretched as far as you could see on both sides of the track. I still think of that sight and wonder if those planes are still there.

They gave me \$100 and a ruptured duck at the separation center in Norman, Oklahoma. I hitchhiked to Nacogdoches, stopping on the way to visit uncles and aunts, who welcomed me home with love. An uncle drove me from Tyler to Nacogdoches.

I had spent my entire enlistment with Hazel on my mind, daydreaming and nightdreaming what it would be like when the war was over and I would hold her again – with no more good-byes or even goodnights. I never doubted that we would get married, settle down, have children, and grow old together. No matter how bad things got, I could always curl up with her in a soft corner of my mind, and feel that everything would be all right when the war was over and we were together again.

And there she was coming across her yard to meet me in a tight, striped T-shirt; and the music played “I kissed her once, I kissed her twice, I kissed her again – It’s been a long, long time.”

HAZEL: De-mobilization was not necessarily the realization of the perfect dream for everyone, however. There were all sorts of problems involved in the return to “normal” life. Many men came home to the same problems that had existed before they left; the war had not cured those. Many found themselves asking what was normal after all – what was real?

These men who had left for war on a note of high drama, the center of everyone’s attention, returned home to a heroes’ welcome alright, but they soon found they were expected to blend back into everyday civilian life rather quickly, adjust, get with it – the war was over!

Ab’s uncle dropped him at Heaton’s Grocery store on North and East Austin streets, just up the hill from our house. He called to tell me he was on his way, and I immediately called my best friend to tell her he was home. When he came in our front gate and I ran out to meet him, it was just what the dreams had all been about. We could have been one of those “Back Home For Keeps” ads that Community Silverplate had run in the *Good Housekeeping* magazines all through the war. I had saved everyone of the series, picturing myself as the heroine, of course.

And it was wonderful – but – the urgency and the high drama and the shadow of his impending departure were not there anymore. He was going to be around, and I was pretty involved in college life by then. I was a sophomore. I was nineteen years old. I was also smarter than I had ever been before or ever have been since, and I had the lead in the College production of *Claudia*. I had classes and I kind of fitted Ab in where I could. It was a far cry from the times when he would come home on leave and nothing else mattered but being with him. He was very aware of the difference, and by the time he left things had kind of fallen flat.

AB: Can you believe that she had not put herself on “Hold” while I was gone! Her life had moved in its own direction. The result was that she had play practice that first night – and every other night that I was there – and I spent what should have been catch-up courtin’ time in a dark auditorium watching her do something that was as important to her as my company. And during the day she went to classes. I was not a part of her life’s activities.

I was not a part of any activities. I was a floater between a life in the service and civilian life, and I did not belong to either.

We pledged undying love, but sometimes when we kissed I caught her with her eyes open and kind of squinty, as if she were running through lines of her play.

I was subdued when I headed to Baton Rouge, where my parents now lived.

I met other service men at the edge of towns hitching rides back home, and we came together like long-lost brothers and sat on curbs, smoking and talking about how strange it was being back and how we couldn’t find a place where we were comfortable. Some even talked of going back in the service.

A lot of servicemen came back without a familiar home to go to, without a familiar room in a familiar town. Dads moved all over the country during the war, working in shipyards and defense plants. Orange, Texas, grew from a town with 7000 people to a town with 70,000 in a year, and those movers were coming from all over Texas. My best friend left a home in Woden (pop. 54) and returned to his parents’ new house in Houston. My dad’s company had moved him three times, so I – and thousands of barely grown vets – came “home” to a house and town that we had never seen before.

Well, I lasted about two weeks hanging around the house before I nearly went berserk and took my parents with me. Dad’s suggested cure was to find a job. Mother tried to fix me things I liked to eat.

I hit the road the first week in April, vowing to find a ship and go back to sea. I ended up bumming around half of the United States, from New Orleans to Tampa to New York, Chicago, Winnipeg and then back through the wheat harvest to Texas. I slept behind sign boards, in fire stations, flop houses, and Salvation Armys. I washed dishes for a week in DC, milked cows for two weeks in Indiana, and worked the wheat harvest till it ran out in Kansas. And I met a host of wandering hobo vets on the road. I guess we were all looking for something; a place, maybe, or something of our old selves.

I made it back to Hazel and Nacogdoches around the end of July. That was not one of our better visits.

HAZEL: The next time I heard from Ab after his homecoming visit was

a brief postcard "on the road." His plans were indefinite, and he would see me "sometime." In the meantime, more and more of the Nacogdoches boys were coming home. Soon most of my high school crowd was together again, and we pretty much resumed the easy ways of our senior year, before everybody left for war. We dated some but usually it was just "our crowd" enjoying being together again.

One Sunday in late July I had a date to go on a picnic at Love's Lockout – apparently I was the only girl in East Texas who had never been to Love's Lookout. I had gone to the eleven o'clock church service and was sitting with a group of my girl friends when one of them nudged me and said, "Look." There at the front entrance was Mr. C.K. Chamberlain, our high school principal and the official greeter for the church, and he was standing by the most be-draggled hobo I had ever seen and was pointing him in my direction. It was Ab, wearing the clothes he had been on the road in for four months and with all of his belongings in a little paper sack. He was walking over to me in full view of the whole congregation of the First Methodist Church. I was mortified! I was also glad to see that he was alive. The last communication had been a postcard from Kansas two or three weeks before with no indication when, if ever, he would be back in Texas.

Well, the visit went downhill from there. The boy I had a date with promptly broke it when he found out Ab was in town – I have yet to go on a picnic at Love's Lookout. He and Ab were good friends. In fact, Ab spent the rest of the visit at his house regaling everyone with his adventures on the road. The end result was that we broke up in a stormy session in our front yard that ended with my Daddy coming out and ordering him off the premises with instructions never to return. Whoever thought the end of the war meant peace and dreams come true was not completely clued in.

Many engagements or understandings were broken in the postwar period, but more tragically many wartime marriages ended also. Just as the marriage and birthrates had skyrocketed during the war, the divorce rate in postwar America more than doubled. Romances and marriages that had flamed during the heat of wartime found that they had little to stand on in less urgent times.

AB: I spent the rest of the summer still floating, this time on a shrimp boat out of Morgan City. But I did make one decision as I sat on a bucket trying to make a living snapping shrimp heads; I decided I would go back to school. And since Nacogdoches (in spite of or because of Hazel) was the nearest thing I had to a home base, I decided to use the GI Bill and go to SFA.

Fifty years ago 88,000 WW II vets enrolled in colleges under The Service Man's Readjustment Act. They were the first of 2.2 million vets who went to school under what was better known as the GI Bill of Rights. The beginning of the best years of many lives was the GI Bill, which gave vets a chance to start businesses, buy homes, and most importantly, go to school. The lucky ones went to college on the GI Bill and adjusted themselves to a world they had dreamed about when they were standing sleepy-lonely bridge watches from midnight until four a.m. The unlucky ones joined the 52-20 Club (twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks) and floated around, waiting for something to bring them back to a civilian's earth. Incidentally, less than ten percent of those on 52-20 drew the full fifty-two weeks. Nobody wanted to go on welfare.

Most made it; some didn't. I did.

Dad dropped me off at the boys' dorm that September afternoon, and I sat and stared at a wall as uncomfortable as ever. Then somebody yelled up at my window, and I looked out to see four of my high school buddies draped around in a black jeep, circulating a fifth of Four Roses. We drove out in the East Texas countryside of an early fall, stopped somewhere near the top of Hayter Hill where it drops off into the Loco Creek bottoms, and welcomed each other back to civilian life. For the first time since I was discharged, I was back on earth and I occupied a piece of it that was mine, and I was home, where I belonged. The war for me was finally over.

HAZEL: The 1947 *Stone Fort*, the college annual, reflects the transformation on the campus at SFA. Along with an enlarged enrollment – predominantly male – there were new buildings to accommodate this growth. These were temporary buildings purchased at war surplus prices from de-commissioned army facilities. Temporary buildings were set up for the Music, Agriculture, and the newly established Forestry Departments. They were used, wooden, army barracks which were later brick-faced to up-grade them. There were also two Vet Villages constructed on campus, one for married and one for single vets.

These temporary buildings remained on campuses for many years. When we went to teach at Lamar in 1956 the auditorium and student center there were still in a rambling wooden army surplus Rec Center. College campuses all over the country were bursting at the seams, and de-commissioned Army facilities were running over with buildings that were no longer needed. The result was a decided new look to many stately ivory tower campuses.

The G.I. Bill was responsible for most of this growth. The educational part of this bill provided tuition, books, and a monthly stipend based on time-and-a-half in service, not to exceed forty-eight months. The stipend was \$75 for a single GI, \$90 for a married student, and \$105 for a couple with a child. The student could attend any school that he could qualify for, university or vocational, SFA or Harvard, USA or overseas. Over two million veterans responded to this, and the educational level of this country rose significantly.

AB: College provided the first taste of normalcy most of us had seen in several years. And we went at it with a youthful enthusiasm that belied the age of some and the wartime experiences of all. We went to pep rallies and ball games, joined clubs and played campus politics, and we danced every dance.

My parents bought me a pocket watch and a suit. The suit was double-breasted with a long, single-button roll and the pants had cuffs that were slightly pegged. I looked as good in those civvies as I did in those Honolulu tailor-made dress blues that had eighteen-inch knees with thirty-inch bells that went flap-flap as I walked down the street and all the girls would sigh and say, "Oh, what a salt!" Well – I looked *almost* as good.

HAZEL: Clothes were a big part of that post-war campus. I worked all summer at Cason-Monk and saved every penny to buy clothes before the fall term started. For the first time since the beginning of the war there were beautiful clothes. I bought TWO pairs of shoes. Not the serviceable shoes I could buy, if I could find them, during the war, but darling, fragile dress shoes,

sling pumps with HIGH heels. One pair was brown kid with a semi-tailored bow on the toe, and the other pair was black suede with a scalloped open toe and grosgrain ribbon heels. I also bought a tan camel's hair coat with big Joan Crawford shoulder pads and a blue gabardine dressmaker suit with a scalloped placket down the front of the jacket and little rhinestone buttons and BIG Joan Crawford shoulder pads and a tailored brown gabardine suit with BIG Joan Crawford shoulder pads.

The first home game of the season, when it was still pretty hot, I wore my new brown suit, my new brown sling pumps, *and* my camel's hair coat. By half-time the weight of two sets of big shoulder pads had cut off the circulation in my neck to my brain, and this plus the heat of two layers of real wool combined to send me home in a faint. But these were the first good, new clothes I had had in five years, and I was going to wear them or else.

Imagine our dismay when hem lines dropped drastically with the New Look in the winter and spring of '47-'48. These great new clothes we had all bought were soon hopelessly out of fashion. But our experience in wartime scrounging and making do came to our rescue. My mother scalloped the hem of my blue suit to match the jacket and added eight inches of blue velvet so I felt very stylish. Everybody's skirts had some sort of addition that year, and you could tell at a glance what had been bought before or after the advent of the New Look.

On the whole, 1946-47 was a memorable year in every way. The fact that Ab and I were broken up added a sort of sad romantic air to everything and at the same time allowed us to date other people and have a great time. My father had told me at registration week that Ab was back. He was happier to see him than I was. Daddy was sure that his talk with Ab had made a better man of him and his coming back to SFA was proof of it. The year in general was what we had always thought college could be. All it had ever needed was men.

AB: Nacogdoches had no housing. I spent the first three weeks of school sleeping on various friendly couches. I still had everything I owned in a seabag. Then six of us rented a four-room house we called The Buzzard's Roost. We slept two to a bed in three bedrooms, and we lived and ate and entertained at a big table in the kitchen, and within a month the Roost was put off limits to female students by the Dean of Men, who happened to be Hazel's father. You can imagine his reaction when he found out that his daughter had brought me supper one night.

I spent the following year in the Vet's Village army barracks, lovingly referred to as The Old Folks Home.

Vets came back to a housing shortage they could not imagine. Merle Travis wailed "No Vacancy" about a soldier whose only dream when the bullets screamed was a little nest where he could rest when the war was won. The US was woefully short on nests. Officially it was said that we were about 4,500,000 houses *short* for our burgeoning peacetime population. One apartment was advertised for rent in Atlanta, and over 2,000 people showed up to rent it. The Senate voted unanimously to turn over 75,000 units of surplus military housing to vets and their families. Private contractors bought surplus Army buildings and converted them to apartment buildings and dwellings. Vets tried to cope by building A-Frames or concrete block houses.

HAZEL: Ab and I did finally, inevitably, get back together, and got married in 1948. There was still a housing shortage, and wartime rent control was still in effect. We lucked into an apartment that we rented for \$20 a month out of our \$90-a-month GI money. We got the apartment because we knew the couple who were vacating it, and we got our names in at the head of the list. It was in an older house that had been converted into apartments. It had two large rooms and a converted sun porch that was called a kitchen because they had put a sink in it. We had to share the bath, but the rooms had twelve-foot ceilings and a fireplace in both rooms, which we couldn't use for fear of fire, but it was our kind of house. We bought a brand new Westinghouse refrigerator with Ab's terminal leave bond, and we were set up for housekeeping and many more of "the best years of our lives."

AB: Believe it or not, vets never talked much about World War II before all these fiftieth anniversary proceedings began, but we have lived the rest of our lives with it. I got my bachelor's on the GI Bill. Hazel and I went to the University of Neuchatel Switzerland (so we could ski!) on the GI Bill. I got my master's and Hazel had a baby on the GI Bill, and I finally ran out my education time with a summer at UT working toward the Ph.D. We bought our first house with a GI Bill loan and bought our first land with a Texas Veterans' Land Bill loan. And let it be said of that generation that less than one percent defaulted on their government loans. Selling that Veterans' financed land bought our last house, the one we still live in. So – World War II was a long and bloody war, and it took some agonizing to get over it – but the United States of America more than paid me back for those three years that some called The Best Years of Our Lives.

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Hazel Shelton Abernethy was born and raised in Nacogdoches, received her bachelor's and master's degrees in history at SFA, and taught history at SFA for ten years until retirement. She has been active for the past eighteen years as an actress and stage manager for Nacogdoches' Lamplight Community Theatre.

Together they have five children and six grandchildren.