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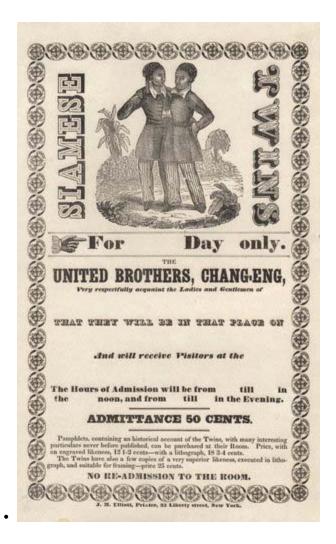
Tales of N.C.'s gutsy twins still go on

Born 200 years ago, 'Siamese Twins' are focus of scholars, playwrights, many descendants.

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By Mar	k Washburn	
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Though their relationship would later unravel, Eng, left, and Chang Bunker were a sensation for their era. N.C. STATE ARCHIVES



A playbill for the twins. Everywhere they toured, doctors examined them but weren't sure they could be separated. JOFFRE BUNKER COLLECTION, N.C. STATE ARCHIVES



France denied entry to young Chang and Eng, fearing they would cause birth defects in pregnant women. OBSERVER FILE PHOTO

More Information

Conjoined twins

Chang and Eng, through their fame, gave their name to a condition called "Siamese Twins," now known medically as "conjoined twins."

Conjoined twins occur once in every 200,000 births. They originate from a single fertilized egg and are always identical and the same sex.

Charlotte's most famous conjoined twins were probably Daisy and Violet Hilton (1908-1969), who were sideshow attractions and appeared in Tod Browning's 1932 film "Freaks." They were stranded in Charlotte in 1962 when their promoter abandoned them.

Twins live on

Among public events celebrating Chang and Eng Bunker:

Exhibition of 19th-century artwork found in the archives of the Wellcome Library of London at the Siamese Twins Museum, 218 Rockford St., Mount Airy. Free.

Bunker Family Reunion, Mount Airy, July 22-24. Includes public performances of the play "The Wedding of the Siamese Twins" by Burton Cohen and a lecture on the impact of the twins on society.

MOUNT AIRY They were born 200 years ago this month and became North Carolina's most famous homesteaders. They were superstar performers better known in their day than Abraham Lincoln. They toured the globe and were received by royalty.

Their names were Chang and Eng Bunker, but you know them as the Siamese Twins.

Most of their adult lives were spent as prosperous farmers in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, raising 21 children between them. Theirs is a strange story, and it isn't over yet. Chang and Eng seem to be making a comeback these days.

In July, descendants of the twins - there are about 1,500 - will gather in Surry County for a reunion. Cynthia Wu, an assistant professor at the University of Buffalo, will present new research into a book she's writing on the twins' impact on American literature and culture.

In March, a play called "I Dream of Chang and Eng" by playwright Philip Kan Gotanda debuted at the University of California-Berkeley.

And last week, 19th-century prints and posters uncovered in the archives of the Wellcome Library in London went on display in Mount Airy, where the Surry Arts Council runs a museum devoted to Chang and Eng.

It was at that museum one day last year - after closing time - that a California researcher discovered a trail to something else about the twins: America's Buddhist roots.

On May 11, 1811, twins joined by a band of cartilage above the hip were born to a woman named Nok in a fishing village in Siam near present-day Bangkok. Nok worked with them to stretch the band so they could stand side-to-side rather than face-to-face. As adolescents, they were summoned to meet the King of Siam. He found them to be keenly coordinated, vivacious, clever and charming. They became favorites of his court.

Twins' many firsts

"They were as well known in their time as Michael Jackson is today," says Todd Perreira, who lectures in religious studies at San Jose State University in California. "They were incredibly famous. They were known in Russia, Europe, in Bolivia."

Perreira clicks off a list of firsts involving the twins based on his research. First Asians to become United States citizens. First Asians to vote in U.S. elections. First Asians in the U.S. to marry outside their ethnicity.

And as a result of a serendipitous encounter last year, Perreira now believes they were America's first Buddhists.

In 1824, a Scottish merchant named Robert Hunter encountered the twins while they were swimming. Astonished, Hunter thought he discovered a new kind of aquatic life. He befriended the twins with an eye toward exhibiting them. He had to get permission from the king. It took three years. In 1829, they

set sail. When they docked in Boston six weeks later, the 17-year-old twins were conversant in English - at least the variety spoken by sailors.

Artifact discovered

At UNC Chapel Hill, the Wilson Library maintains a collection on the twins. There, Perreira found a picture in an old Life magazine article about their descendants. It showed a small object that looked like a Chinese fan. He recognized it as a Palmleaf manuscript, a religious text. He went to Mount Airy.

He was surprised to find a museum dedicated to the twins. It was closed and he was leaving town, but he stopped to peek in. A woman working late saw him. She opened the door, and he said he was researching Chang and Eng.

"And she's like, 'Well, come on in. That's family you're talking about.""

Perreira says he showed her a picture of the object. "And she says, 'I know who has this."

In America, the twins were an instant sensation. Those coming to glimpse a freak of nature bound by an isthmus of cartilage found themselves enchanted by the dignified Chang and Eng, who could play instruments, do gymnastics and tell clever stories. They traveled extensively, playing in Raleigh and Charleston. Soon they were off to Europe.

Families prospered

Tanya Jones was the woman who opened the door to Perreira. She is executive director of the Surry Arts Council, a great-great-granddaughter of Eng and one of the many keepers of the family legacy.

She points to Chang's will on the wall of the museum. It ensured that two of his 10 children get \$500 extra from his estate because they were born deaf. They were educated at a school for the deaf in Raleigh.

"Everyone educated. Everyone. Boys, girls and special needs," she says.

Chang and Eng earned a fortune from their tours. In 1839, they bought a farm near Wilkesboro, where they had been on tour. They fell in love with two Quaker sisters, Adelaide and Sarah Anne Yates. Within a year, each wife bore their first child.

Rewriting the textbook

Jones led Perreira to a modern-day Eng Bunker, a great-grandson who had the fan in his home in Pilot Mountain.

"We think it is something called a parita, something monks would recite to offer protection," Perreira says. "It was often done when you were about to travel."

Until now, experts thought Buddhism was unknown in America until Sanskrit texts were translated and published in 1844. This discovery of the parita pushes the date back more than a decade.

On the edge of Mount Airy, the twins bought land and built two houses. Their farms lay side by side, separated by Stewarts Creek. They would spend three days in one house with one wife, then three days with the other.

Relics in old homestead

Eng's house burned down in 1956, and his land was subdivided over the years. Four lanes of Interstate 74 now occupy a good chunk.

Chang's house survives, though modernized. It rests on the original hardwood sill, visible in the cellar, 16 by 16 inches thick, tough as concrete. Living there since 1947 has been Kester Sink, another guardian of the legacy.

"This is Chang's house, but he was never here without Eng," says Sink, 87.

Sink married Chang's granddaughter, Adelaide, who died of cancer in 1968 and is buried beside the twins on the next ridge at White Plains Baptist Church, which the twins help build on Eng's land.

There's a hollowed-out log in the barn that used to hold salted pork for the winter. Chang and Eng were known as expert ax men; Sink thinks they crafted it themselves.

"These guys could overcome such awesome obstacles," he says. "Look at how much they accomplished."

In their later years, the twins' lives grew less harmonious. Chang suffered a stroke in 1870 and depended upon Eng for mobility. Chang developed a taste for whiskey, while Eng was abstemious (and unaffected by his brother's drinking). Eng developed an interest in poker and often played all night. Their sister-wives feuded with one another and grew estranged.

Jan. 16, 1874, was the last night the twins spent in the house. Chang had developed pneumonia but insisted on adhering to their three-day traveling schedule and they went to Eng's house. Before dawn, Eng awoke to find him dead. "Then I am going also," Eng told a son. Within three hours, Eng was dead, too.

City's penchant for fame

Mount Airy, population 10,000, has a disproportionate trove of famous names. Entertainer Andy Griffith, country star Donna Fargo and major-league baseball players Chubby Dean, Ron Blackburn and Ben Callahan all sprang from the quaint town 90 miles north of Charlotte. And then there's Chang and Eng.

Sink wants Chang's land preserved.

"Before Adelaide died at 44, the only requirement she gave me was to look after her children and not let this property get out of the Bunker hands," he says.

Their two daughters told him last month they intend to keep it.

If you follow politics, you've heard of one of his daughters. She's Alex Sink and lost the 2010 gubernatorial race in Florida by a narrow margin.

So that's one more celebrity for Mount Airy, where something must be in the water.

Their deaths in 1874 made headlines around the world. Speculators wrote to the widows offering to buy the bodies, which were shipped to Philadelphia for an autopsy. Chang died of a blood clot in the brain. No cause of death could be found for Eng. They concluded he died of fright. In the slender band that bound them, surgeons found that the men shared only one organ - portions of a liver. It is on display at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia. To this day, people come to see it, the final exhibition of the Siamese Twins.





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jholmes 25

You can't tell me that these guys never did the simultaneous double-tap with both wives riding like the Kemper cavalry!

Yesterday 11:22 PM Report Abuse

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friendlydude

Must have been hard to get a date. Or dates.

Yesterday 07:02 PM Report Abuse

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MaynardGKrebs

This is like the "First in Flight" claim; How does N. Carolina lay claim to these guys? Born overseas, entered the U.S. via Boston Ma. GAWD N.C. has Andy Griffith & Barney Fife.....thats it! These other false claims get old after awhile N. Carolina. I will give ya "Popcorn" Sutton and the most people that have seen "Bigfoot" though.

Yesterday 04:19 PM 1 Like Report Abuse

Like Reply



freejoy1

Think it through! North Carolina never claimed the Siamese twins as "native sons". The state claimes them based on the Fact that the twins Chose North Carolina to make their homes and raise their many children. Many of their descendants still reside in NC.

I hope that makes things clearer for you Maynard.

<u>Yesterday 07:58 PM</u> in reply to MaynardGKrebs <u>1 Like</u> Report Abuse <u>Like</u> Reply



ledukes

They were also in the movie "Freaks." Here's a good article on them from Creative Loafing:

http://charlotte.creativeloafi...

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Guest

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ledukes

...said Hitler.

Yesterday 01:39 PM in reply to Guest 6 Likes Report Abuse

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Outlawed

Nice to know that you are so much smarter than everyone else so you can judge who lives and dies.

You may have made it back in cave man day's, then again you may not have been perfect and they may have clubbed you to death.

Yesterday 12:56 PM in reply to Guest 3 Likes Report Abuse

<u>Like</u> Reply



Briekittenx

You're all over CO's website today and completely out of line on every comment. While you're entitled to your opinion, respect others and keep the ignorance to a minimum.

Yesterday 12:43 PM in reply to Guest 4 Likes Report Abuse

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GeauxSaints

There is a book written about them, and as I recall, they were marked for execution as children by the same king who then decided to spare them.

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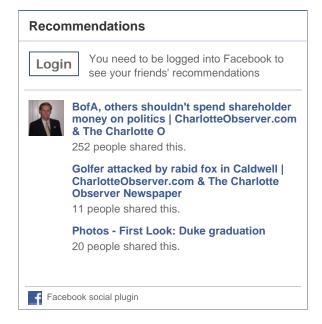
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