HISTORY

Chang and Eng

The Original Siamese Twins

BY MIRANDA SPENCER

In the village of Meklong, near Bangkok, on May 11, 1811, a Chinese-Malay woman named Nok and a Chinese fisherman named Ti-eye were delivered of two healthy baby boys. In Siam (now Thailand) the birth of twins was a status symbol. So when the midwife lay them, one's legs twined around the head of the other, on a bamboo mat on the floor of the family's houseboat, it seemed fate had smiled. But when she went to bathe them, she found they couldn't be separated: They faced each other, joined at the breastbone by a tough band of flesh with a common navel. *Monsters.* A bad omen.

Eng and Chang, circa 1865, in a photo with their wives, children, and children's nanny (far right, holding child), who was also a slave. (Right) While the brothers moved with grace, their temperaments were not always in synch.

It was just a swath of skin, a flexible armlike ligament. Yet for these brothers, this gestational glitch would define their existence. They were two people, but they would share one life. That life was full: As the original, celebrated "Siamese Twins," they would meet royalty, travel widely, become wealthy—even enjoy the fruits of domesticity. But their inescapable closeness also brought anguish, and the longer they lived the more passionately they sought a "cure" for the very condition that made them special.

The twins were lucky to survive infancy. Siam was a feudal kingdom, still fraught with superstition, and when word of the unusual brothers traveled to King Rama II, he condemned them to death. Fortunately, the sentence was never carried out. But that didn't stop curious neighbors from poking their

noses in the door, or determined doctors from offering to burn, cut, or squeeze the boys apart.

Deciding to treat the twins no differently from her four other children, Nok set about raising Chang and Eng, as she called them. Most likely, the names derived from Thai words for the green and ripe stages of a local fruit (not, as legend has it, for "left" and "right"). From an early age both boys loved music, theater, and animals. They were active and strong: After a bit of a struggle learning to walk, they could soon run, jump, swim—even row the houseboat—with perfect coordination. Their favorite game was to run to the top of a hill, wrap their arms around each other, then roll down, laughing all the way. This activity helped stretch their connecting ligament from four to five-and-a-half inches, so that they were able to adjust from a face-to-face position to nearly side by side, and found it most efficient to go everywhere with their arms about each others' shoulders.

While they moved their bodies with intuitive grace, their personalities were not always in synch. Chang, on the twins' left, was slightly shorter, mentally quicker, and more dominant, with a volatile temper. Eng, more robust, was easygoing and usually gave in to his brother's wishes. And after their first fistfight, the boys realized cooperation was the only way to survive.

(Clockwise from top left) Chang's eldest son, Christopher, who fought in the Civil War; (left) Eng's daughter Kate and Chang's daughter Nannie; Eng's wife, Sallie, with daughter Rosella Virginia; Eng and Chang in 1870 with two of their sons.

When the twins were eight years old, a cholera epidemic took their father and all but two of their now seven siblings. Nok spent the family's life savings on an elaborate funeral; after that they all had to work. Chang and Eng took up fishing, eventually starting their own fishing business, then became merchants, buying trinkets wholesale and selling them at a profit in the city market. Innate entrepreneurship—combined with the curiosity and pity their link aroused in shoppers—enabled the twins to support the whole

The "Siamese Twins" Legacy

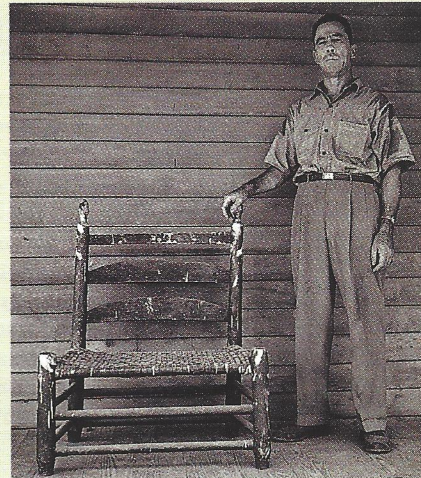
Chang and Eng Bunker live on, in both fiction and fact. They're immortalized in a Mark Twain story, as well as in poems, plays, articles, and an authoritative biography, *The Two*, by Irving and Amy Wallace. Recently, a monument in their honor was erected in Bangkok. But their most lasting legacy is their many descendants, the most famous of whom was Chang's grandson Major General Caleb Vance Haynes, an aide to President Wilson during World War I.

Living relatives still number 1,000 to 1,500 says Eng's great-granddaughter Jessie Bunker Bryant of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, a retired nurse who acts as the family historian. In fact, each July, scores of Chang's and Eng's relatives from all over the country convene for a reunion.

Among those still living in the Mount Airy area (where the local Visitor's Center maintains a prominent Chang and Eng display) are Eng's twin great-grandsons and namesakes Wayne Eng Bunker, who works for a textile company and owns a loan business, and Wade Chang Bunker, a retired Air Force officer. Now 57 years old, they were once featured in a 1953 *Life* magazine photo spread. They are not, by the way, conjoined—and, according to the current-day Eng, he and his brother are not even identical.

Elsewhere, five of the Bunker grandchildren are still alive. On Eng's side, there's Dennis, 92, of North Carolina, and Thomas, 80, of Indianapolis (who still works as a watchmaker); on Chang's side are three granddaughters. (The last of Eng's granddaughters, Nancy Adelaide Atkins, died in January.)

Few unpublished anecdotes and memories about Chang and Eng have been passed down among the relatives. Bryant speculates this is because some of the earlier generations didn't like to talk about the twins—to protect their own privacy, or because they felt embarrassed. Today, says Bryant, many Bunkers are proud of their forebears. "I love it," Eng's great-granddaughter Betty Blackmon told *Biography Magazine*. "If it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't be here!" However, notes the Mount Airy resident, some people who learn of her genetic link to the famous twins don't believe it. Once, at a restaurant, "I told this gentleman that I was related to Eng, and he said, 'Right, and I'm George Washington.'" **M.S.**



Chang and Eng required special furniture, such as this double-size chair with extra support in the seat.

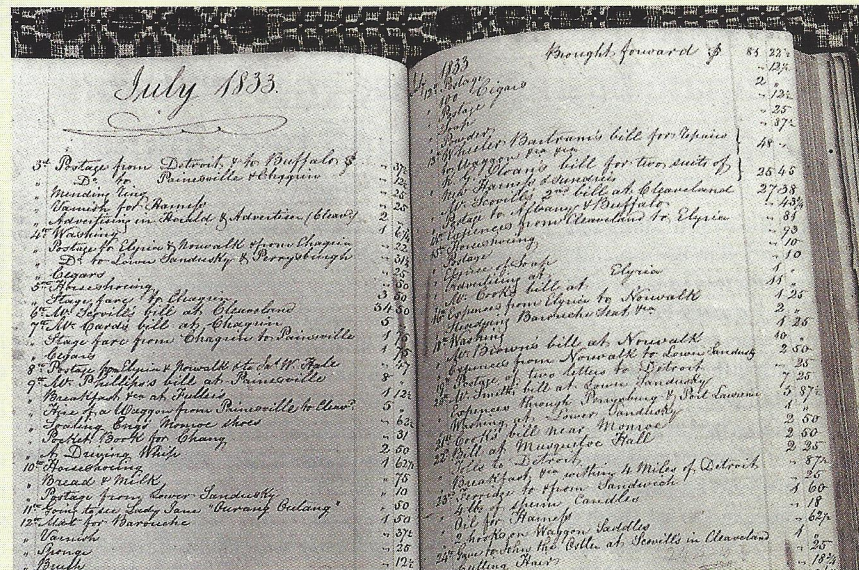
family by the time they were about 13 years old.

They also got their first taste of travel and adventure. A new monarch, Rama III, had ascended the throne, and decided he must meet the fascinating "Chinese Twins," as they were known. He summoned Chang and Eng for an audience at his glorious castle in Bangkok, where he peppered them with questions and gifts and allowed them to view his 700 concubines and wives.

Upon their return, Chang and Eng promptly sold the gifts and used the money to buy inventory for their new business selling ducks and duck eggs. It flourished, and they could have spent the rest of their lives in this contented fashion, but for the entreaties of an outsider who'd befriended them a few years earlier.

Robert Hunter was also a successful merchant, a Scot who'd recently expanded his international export company to Bangkok. One day while exploring the countryside by boat, he spied Chang and Eng swimming. Curious, he followed them to shore and started a conversation. Soon he was visiting them often, filling their heads with exciting tales of America and Europe. In the brothers, the mercenary Hunter saw a lucrative export, something he could show as a curiosity abroad. Having tasted glamour, the boys were game to go, but their mother—and, more importantly, the king, who "owned" his subjects—would not grant permission for them to leave Siam.

Hunter's solution was forming a partnership with Abel Coffin, a sea captain and business crony of the king's. The two would-be impresarios struck a deal with Nok, promising to pay her $3,000 for the loss of her breadwinners. More, the men agreed to act as the 18-year-olds' managers and guardians until they reached 21, after which the twins would be free to return home. (As the twins complained later, their mother never received more than $500.) Soon Chang and Eng were on their way across the Atlantic, nimbly climbing the ship's masts



July 1833.

Brought forward

An account book kept by the brothers from 1833 to 1839 during U.S. tours.

The *Other* Famous Conjoined Twins

Last fall, Broadway audiences saw an unusual spectacle: a musical about conjoined twins. *Side Show* was inspired by real-life actresses Violet and Daisy Hilton—pretty, petite, sisters who spent their 61 years joined at the hip. Born to an unwed mother in Brighton, England, in February 1908, they were sold to a local midwife. Their guardian forced them into performing, first in side shows and later in vaudeville. In their act, the girls sang, danced, and played instruments including the violin and saxophone. Managers continued to control every aspect of their lives—until, at 23, with the help of a lawyer, they broke free and successfully won their independence in court.

(Top) Violet and Daisy Hilton at home, 1955. (Bottom) The Broadway portrayal of the Hiltons.

As adults, Violet and Daisy were independent, well-off career women who enjoyed the friendship (and courtship) of glittering showbiz folk. They started a cabaret act, then went on to star in two "B" movies: the controversial 1932 cult film *Freaks,* in which they played a sideshow act, and 1951's *Chained for Life,* in which both twins faced jail when one was arrested on charges of murder. At separate times, both Violet and Daisy married, but neither coupling lasted long. (Violet's was a publicity stunt. Daisy's marriage ended after just ten days; her husband couldn't bear the constant presence of his sister-in-law.) The Hiltons retired to North Carolina in the 1960s, where they worked as grocery checkout clerks, and died in 1969. Throughout their lives, they were best of friends. As they stated in their brief autobiography, "It [was] as though some Power, greater and stronger than ourselves, [had] given us this inner harmony to compensate for our being forced to live constantly as an entity." **M.S.**

When Chang and Eng were only 13, their innate business sense enabled them to support their mother and two siblings.

for fun on the months-long sail.

They landed in Boston and began a relentless itinerary in their new career as touring performers. For the next two-and-a-half years—four hours a day, every day, with little rest between gigs—"The Double Boys" were displayed to packed houses in theaters and concert halls. Entertainment-seekers paid to observe Chang and Eng stand, walk, and run on stage, and to ask them questions. Over time the boys developed a real act, performing gymnastics and feats of strength, even playing badminton.

Besides being amazed by the twins' physical configuration, audiences were awed by their psychological unity. Chang and Eng seemed to act as one: Rarely speaking to each other (though friendly to others), they appeared to operate almost telepathically. As youths and throughout life, they had similar tastes in just about everything from food and clothes to books and politics. In letters, they referred to themselves as "I," signing themselves "Chang-Eng." This led to constant speculation and debate: Were they two or were they one? Was their band a conduit through which their bodies communicated with each other? And could they, *should* they, be separated?

Although Chang's and Eng's bodies were constantly probed and experimented upon by doctors, they remained remarkably amiable, reacting with humor and tolerating stupid or tasteless questions and comments from audiences. Gradually, though, the boys grew annoyed with the hectic pace of touring, and being underpaid and treated like second-class citizens by their managers. About to come into their majority, Chang and Eng felt it was time to chart their own lives. They had evolved from provincial peasant boys into witty, worldly men. Increasingly Americanized, they had embraced the concept of individual rights. They had begun to call themselves "we."

In 1832 they declared their independence and set to touring on their own terms for the next seven years. Their many gigs included Belgium and France (whose government had earlier refused to let them be exhibited, fearing their handicap would somehow corrupt children and cause deformities in the unborn).

Now famous as "The Siamese Twins," Chang and Eng were financially comfortable and culturally sophisticated. They enjoyed well-tailored suits and many a fine cigar. Besides a fair mastery of spoken and written English, they had developed a love of poetry and literature, seen almost every inch of America and Britain, and met countless people. One friend, Dr. James Calloway, invited them to vacation in his hometown of Wilkesboro, North Carolina, where they could enjoy their favorite pastimes of fishing and hunting. The trip would transform their lives once more.

Chang and Eng liked the land and people of rural North Carolina so much that they decided to retire from touring, trading a life of self-display to settle down in this secluded, relatively backward state with more tobacco plants than people.

Still needing some form of income, the twins returned to their business roots and set up a grocery store. But what they really wanted to do was farm the 150 acres they'd bought in the nearby community of Trap Hill, so they set to building a two-story house there

Conjoined Twins: A Medical Explanation

Conjoined twins are exceedingly rare, occurring only once every 250,000–500,000 births, according to John Templeton, M.D., a former pediatric surgeon who has operated on conjoined twins. Like other identical twins, they are the product of a single fertilized egg that splits into two separate embryos. If the split occurs after the 13th day of pregnancy, the embryos do not fully divide and the twins will be conjoined. (A few scientists theorize that the embryos split first, then fuse later.) The cause of this phenomenon is unknown, but genetic or environmental factors may play a role. Historically, up to 40 percent of such twins have been stillborn, and few lived past infancy. Today, however, conjoined twins that are identified before birth (using ultrasound) and delivered via cesarean section have a much better chance of survival.

While conjoined twins are separate individuals, they may share internal organs—a liver, stomach, or heart—and can be connected in various ways: at the pelvis, hip, or cranium, for example. The most common junction is at the chest and/or abdomen. Among the rarest cases are twins like Abigail and Brittany Hensel, now eight years old and the subject of a 1996 *Life* magazine cover story. Each girl has her own head, neck, and most major internal organs above the waist, but they share a bloodstream and one two-legged body below the waist.

"Chang and Eng contributed a great deal to modern medical management of conjoined twins," notes Dr. Templeton. The Siamese Twins are still studied today: Their autopsy report, linked livers, and a plaster cast of their torsos reside in the Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. Moreover, Dr. Templeton told *Biography Magazine*, recent discoveries have provided an answer to Eng's mysterious demise. Apparently, the healthy twin died of "hemorrhagic shock": As small amounts of Eng's blood circulated into his lifeless brother's body, he slowly bled to death when the blood was not pumped back.

Today, doctors usually attempt to separate conjoined twins, particularly if the degree of connection is limited, and many such operations have been successful. However, warns Templeton, "Every set is an individual case." Had Chang and Eng lived about 20 more years—when antiseptic surgery became standard—they could have been parted relatively easily.

Given the choice, conjoined twins themselves sometimes say they do not want to be separated from the only kind of bodies they have ever known; they even cherish their unique fraternal bond. As 36-year-old Dori (a.k.a. Reba) Schappell, an aspiring country singer joined at the head to her sister Lori, told the *New York Times* last year, "Our point of view is no, straight-out no. Why would you want to do that?...There are good days and bad days—so what?" **M.S.**

with their own hands. That same year, 1839, they applied for and received U.S. citizenship. This required adopting a surname. They chose Bunker, after the three Bunker brothers, New York friends and business associates.

The Siamese Twins received their expected share of visits from the local and national press, but mostly they lived as typical gentleman farmers—over time raising tobacco, grains, vegetables, fruit trees, honey bees, dairy cows, sheep, and pigs. They were excellent carpenters and skilled horse trainers, avid newspaper readers, and steadfast Whigs. They played a mean game of chess (though they disliked playing each other), and enjoyed chewing tobacco. Like many Southerners, they owned slaves—as many as 28 at one point. (Whether the nonwhite Bunker brothers saw the irony of practicing this form of racial oppression, no one knows.) Overall, they were pillars of the community, and two of the most well off.

The picture was complete—except for wives.

Chang and Eng had their eyes on Adelaide and Sarah (Sallie) Yates, teenage daughters of Wilkesboro neighbors with whom they often visited. Over several years, a discreet but genuine courtship began between Chang and Adelaide, and they confessed their mutual love. Then—given the total lack of privacy one's marriage would entail—they decided it would be logical and fair (not to mention more socially acceptable) for Eng to win Sallie as well. Sallie finally agreed, and the couples went public.

The prospect of two such eligible maidens marrying conjoined twins—foreigners, no less!—outraged the community. The Yateses learned of their daughters' romances only after neighbors threw rocks through their windows. They forbade the marriages, and banned the brothers from their home. Chang, Eng, and the sisters continued to rendezvous in secret; only after the foursome decided to elope did the parents consent.

So it was that 32-year-old Chang and Eng were joined in matrimony. After their double ceremony at the Yates home on April 13, 1843, the newlyweds spent their wedding night in the double-wide, four-person bed they'd had built. As with every other bodily function, the twins managed to coordinate the sexual act so that each twin was able to make love with his own wife—exclusively. So successful were they at this aspect of marriage that less than a year later, Sallie and Addie each bore a daughter, born only a week apart—and both gave birth again the following year. All told, over the next 20-odd years, the Chang Bunkers produced ten offspring (three boys, seven girls) and the Eng Bunkers, eleven (six boys, five girls). All of them singletons, all of them healthy—although two of Chang's children were deaf.

As the families grew, so grew their properties. The Bunkers bought a larger house near the town of Mount Airy, in which the commodious clan lived for nine years. But the strain of sharing one home led to more and more bickering between the sisters, and by 1852, Addie and her brood had moved into another house nearby. Chang and Eng, each with his own concerns, also were not getting along. Chang had taken up drinking (it did not affect Eng's sobriety), which only worsened his well-known temper. (Although, according to relatives, he was not an alcoholic, as often reported.) Eng, meanwhile, was partial to all-night poker games. Once or twice their arguments came to blows.

Since the twins could not go their separate ways, in 1857 they partitioned their lives through a system they maintained the rest of their days: alternating homes. For three days the twins would

(Continued on page 115)

esting mystery. •

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(**Chang and Eng** *from page 78*)

live at Chang's house with his wife and children, the next three at Eng's with his. They also alternated dominance and self-denial. The "host" brother was boss, and the "guest" brother submitted to his wishes about everything from chores to bedtime, remaining silent and pretending he wasn't there.

With their huge families and farms to run, money had gotten tight. So the twins came out of retirement and toured the United States again in 1849 and 1853, this time displaying a couple of their children in their act. In 1860, they began an intermittent relationship with P.T. Barnum, appearing at his American Museum (but never in his circus).

Then they took off for California, the one place in America they hadn't yet appeared. Rumblings of civil war brought them back east. Not long after their return home, North Carolina voted to secede. The brothers supported the Confederate cause; Chang's grown son Christopher even enlisted in the cavalry and was taken prisoner by Union soldiers.

Financially ruined after the war, Chang and Eng began performing once again. In collaboration with Barnum, they traveled to England in 1868, where they met Queen Victoria, and later took a grand tour of Europe, where they met the Russian czar. Along the way, the twins, who for most of their adult lives sought surgical separation, consulted the Continent's finest physicians, hoping to meet one who'd give them hope for surviving apart. None could.

The tour was cut short by the Franco-Prussian War, and Chang and Eng sailed back to America. En route, Chang suffered a stroke, collapsing in the middle of an on-deck chess game. His right side was partially paralyzed, forcing both him and the healthy Eng to remain bedridden till they arrived home. He never fully recovered, and Eng had to half-drag him around by a special harness—although Eng was patient and kind about his brother's disability.

Chang's health continued to deteriorate. One bitter-cold winter's evening, he suffered a particularly bad attack of bronchitis, but because it was time to switch residences again, he insisted on making the usual trip. The next night, he lay sleepless and miserable as Eng slept. In the wee hours, he cried out. When Eng's son William went to check on his uncle, his father told him *he* felt ill as well. Beside him, Chang was discovered lifeless. Seeing his dead brother, Eng cried, "Then I am going!"

The family doctor was summoned to perform separation surgery as promised, but soon Eng, too, had passed. It was January 17, 1874; the Bunker brothers were almost 63. Chang had died of a cerebral blood clot; Eng's death was attributed to panic.

Even in death, the twins remained a public curiosity, front-page news. The bodies were interred in a casket within a metal coffin (to prevent theft by the curious or greedy) and placed in a basement. Meanwhile, the widows fended off bids to buy their husbands' corpses. The family finally allowed the twins to be autopsied. Probing through the linking band, doctors discovered it was lined with peritoneal tissue (abdominal membrane). They also noticed that Chang and Eng's livers were connected, making separation medically impossible. Chang and Eng's final resting place is the yard of the White Plains Baptist Church in Mount Airy, North Carolina, a structure they helped build. The site is still visited by several generations of Bunkers, some of whom live in the area to this day. •

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(**Wilbourn** *from page 82*)

playful Benny and Frank Sinatra croons on the tape ("The cats are used to his voice because their caregiver listened to Sinatra a lot"), Henry calmly gazes at us from beneath a tea cart. That's progress: He's not cowering behind the sofa. Atypically, Henry's therapy has taken several months. But as a visiting family member affirms, "Henry used to run and hide in the closet, but now he'll come and sit on my lap." The happy ending: Henry and Benny were happily adopted together last summer.

When Carole Cecile Engel was growing up in Flushing, New York, she never dreamed that she'd create a career around cats. She remembers that she and her two sisters and brother watched a series of cats, dogs, and birds come and go from their home. "Our parents were never big on animals; they found different reasons for us to give them up."

So her feline fancy lay dormant until the early 1960s, when she was attending New York University, majoring in psychology and education and planning to be a teacher. "Then I saw *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and that was an inspiration!" she says , recalling Audrey Hepburn's on-