

Bunker, Chang & Eng (from Tar Heel Junior Historian) ^[1]



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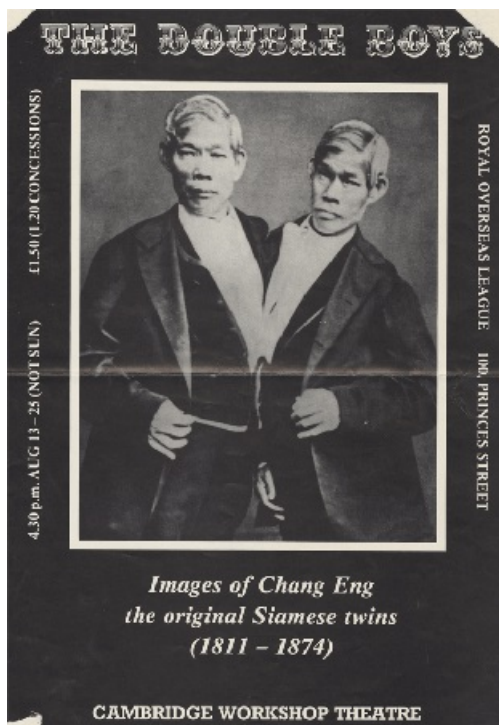
Chang and Eng Bunker

Surry County's Original Siamese Twins

By Dr. Annette Ayers *

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Chang and Eng Bunker. Courtesy of NC Archives. Click to view original online.

Chang and Eng Bunker were born in 1811 in Siam, a country in Asia now known as Thailand. These twins were conjoined (born with their bodies joined together)—attached by a four-inch-wide band of flesh they eventually stretched to five inches so they could stand beside each other. Their names, Chang and Eng, meant left and right. They were given the label “original Siamese twins” because they were the first conjoined twins to be described in that way and the first conjoined twins ever seen by a lot of people. Siamese twins remain rare today; they must be identical and of the same gender, and only 30 percent are male. It is rare for conjoined twins to live to adulthood. Chang and Eng were unique because they lived to be more than sixty years old, and they are the only Siamese twins known to have married and had children.

The twins’ father died when they were about eight years old. Young Chang and Eng helped provide for their mother, brothers, and sisters by selling duck eggs in their village. (Throughout their lives, they would be known as successful businessmen.) When they were thirteen, a Scottish merchant named Robert Hunter noticed the unique twins and asked the king of Siam for permission to take them to Europe. The king refused because he did not like Hunter. Hunter and a friend, Captain Abel Coffin, offered the twins’ mother three thousand dollars. They paid her only five hundred dollars and would never return Chang and Eng to Siam as they promised to do. But since the king liked Coffin, he finally gave the man his permission to take the twins out of the country.

The eighteen-year-old twins signed a contract with Coffin. This written contract has been passed down through the Bunker family and is preserved in Surry County today. In the United States and Europe, the twins went on display for curiosity seekers to view, in exchange for a fee. Chang and Eng toured with Coffin for three years but did not get a fair share of the profits. He paid them ten dollars a month plus expenses, then later fifty dollars a month. The tours usually earned one thousand dollars a month.

The twins were very intelligent and quickly learned to speak English, improved their education, and became more and more interested in the world. Chang and Eng never traveled as part of a circus but held many exhibitions in public

buildings—giving lectures, performing acrobatic stunts, and demonstrating their physical strength. In 1832 the twins stopped touring with Coffin so they could make more money. They began to manage their own affairs and schedule their own tours throughout the United States and Canada. Everywhere they traveled, local doctors examined Chang and Eng. These examinations satisfied the doctors' curiosity, proved the twins' bodies were attached, and provided publicity for their shows.

While touring in New York, the twins met and became friends with Dr. James Callaway from Wilkesboro. Callaway invited Chang and Eng to visit his home and go hunting and fishing. Tired and needing a vacation in 1839, the twins did just that. They liked the quiet and peaceful area, decided to purchase land nearby, and moved to [Wilkes County](#) ^[2], where they became naturalized American citizens on October 12, 1839. Naturalized citizens had to have a surname (last name), and Chang and Eng had never had one. They chose the name of an American friend from New York: Bunker.

As wealthy landowners, the Bunkers participated in local social events. They soon met Adelaide and Sarah Yates, daughters of a wealthy farmer. Chang fell in love with seventeen-year-old Adelaide, and they wanted to marry. Eighteen-year-old Sarah eventually agreed to marry Eng. The sisters' parents and neighbors immediately objected. Chang and Eng traveled to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to consult a surgeon about being separated. The surgeon refused, describing such surgery as too dangerous. The parents of Adelaide and Sarah finally agreed to the marriages, which took place April 13, 1843, at the Yates family home in Wilkes County. The two couples began their married lives in a house in the Trap Hill community.

The twins prospered and moved to Surry County, where they came to own more than one thousand acres of land and twenty-eight enslaved people. They lived together in one house for nine years, but their wives began to quarrel. Starting in 1852, Sarah and Adelaide lived in separate houses. Chang and Eng agreed to reside in one house for three days, in which that brother made all the decisions without question. They spent the next three days at the other twin's house, where he made all the decisions. The Bunkers faithfully held to this arrangement the rest of their lives.

The twins returned to touring between 1849 and 1870 to support their large families. Chang and Adelaide had ten children, and Eng and Sarah had eleven children. The twins met many important people, including [President Andrew Johnson](#) ^[3] and [Queen Victoria](#) ^[4] of England.

Throughout their lives, Chang and Eng consulted various surgeons in America, England, and Scotland, to determine if they might be separated. All the surgeons agreed the risk was too great. Returning home from the 1870 tour, Chang suffered a stroke that left his right side partially paralyzed. As the brothers grew older, their health began to decline, they quarreled more often, and they demanded that the local doctor perform surgery to separate them. He refused. Even today, doctors are not sure Chang and Eng would have lived if separated.

Chang died suddenly in January 1873, and Eng died several hours later. Their wives allowed surgeons in Philadelphia to autopsy the bodies. They discovered the twins had connected livers. Chang suffered a blood clot to the brain, but doctors could not determine the cause of death for Eng. It may have been shock. Fearing someone would steal the bodies, the family buried the twins in the basement of Chang's house, and later, in the front yard. When Adelaide died in 1917, the twins were reburied next to her at White Plains Baptist Church near Mount Airy. Sarah is buried at Eng's farm, although her name is included on the church tombstone.

Philadelphia's [Mutter Museum](#) ^[5]—which features medical rarities—has a display of Chang's and Eng's connected livers, castings of their joined torsos, and a special chair built for them. More than a thousand descendants of the Bunker twins live in [Surry County](#) ^[6], where the family hosts a yearly reunion, and numerous descendants live across the country.

Dr. Annette Ayers is a part-time instructor at Surry Community College and an educational consultant. A member of the Tar Heel Junior Historian Association Advisory Board, she is a retired history teacher and served as the director of education and programs at the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History (2004–2007).

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[NC LIVE resources](#) ^[9]

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