

## THE STORY OF THE ORIGINAL SIAMESE TWINS

The conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker were born into poverty in rural Thailand in 1811. They were joined just above the waist by a thick strip of flesh. Until the age of 18, they lived remarkably unremarkable lives in an obscure village in the kingdom Siam. Were it not for an enterprising and unscrupulous Scotsman names Robert Hunter, they would have remained local curiosities. Hunter paid the boys' parents to allow him to display them abroad for five years. They never returned.



First stop was America where they were exhibited everywhere: coffee shops, public halls, philosophical societies and museums of curiosities.

People gawped as they played chess and turned cartwheels. Doctors poked and prodded and amateur philosophers stroked their chins. Did the boys share a soul? If one committed a crime, could you send both of them to prison?



Unfortunately for their “owners”, Chang and Eng were more than just a pair of helpless and ignorant sideshow freaks. They were modest and shy young men. On reaching their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday the twins wrote a firm letter to their “owners” explaining they now considered themselves free men.

To celebrate that freedom they went boating in the Niagara Falls and treated themselves to some extravagant presents: 500 cigars, a horse and new suits of clothes. Thus equipped, they took on America on their own terms.

Despite experiencing horrific (and usually racist) abuse and getting into fights (on at least one occasion with each other), they raked in considerable sums of money.

But Chang and Eng yearned for domesticity and marriage. Aged 28 they settled in North Carolina. Between them they had saved \$10,000 from their show, a sum that allowed them to purchase a house and some land. The twins gave up performing and turned their hands (all four of them) to farming.

The question of marriage was trickier. Their deformity and foreign appearance were both hindrances. Plus could one twin marry while the other remained single? The solution came in the form of two sisters, Sarah and Adelaide Yates, who may have been softened towards the idea of marrying the conjoined twins because of their considerable wealth. Between them the brothers fathered more than 20 children.

Their story does not end happily ever after. Much of Chang and Eng's fortune was wiped out by the Civil War and they were reduced to performing again. By all accounts the sight of two old, disappointed men trying to entertain an audience was deeply depressing. Chang suffered a stroke and began drinking heavily. He died after the pair fell from a carriage in 1874. Eng followed him only hours after.



Had they been born today, Chan and Eng Bunker would have lived perfectly normal lives. A modern surgeon would probably have separated them as babies, their only shared organ being a strip of liver. Nowadays, even twins joined at the skull stand a chance of being successfully separated. Chang and Eng, however, were born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the extraordinary course of their lives was determined by that small strip of flesh and liver.

*Adapted from: The Times*