

China Central Television

This story began over one year ago when Steve Courtney of Terryville, who was researching a book that he was writing on the Rev. J. H. Twichell, contacted the Colebrook Historical Society. Twichell had been a close friend of Colebrook native Edward Carrington (died 1865) and it was Steve's guess that there might be additional information in our Carrington files. As it turned out, these files contained far more than he had hoped for, as there turned out to be a wealth of data on all the friends of the family and guests at their home in Colebrook Center. Steve read all of them, and even went so far as to put them in order. The result is three acid-free boxes containing documents and photos dealing with the Carrington family. I felt that our association on this matter had come to an end, but that did not turn out to be the case. About a month ago, I received a call from Steve who had been contacted by a professor from Wesleyan University who was to be the interpreter for a television film crew from Beijing China that was coming to this country to make a documentary film on the Chinese students that had come here in 1872 in order to gain academic backgrounds in the technology of the West.

We had long known of close ties between the Carrington family and several of the Chinese students. It is a strong probability that Twichell was the catalyst in this relationship, as he was closely associated with the Chinese Educational Mission, headquartered in Hartford, and was the best friend of the now-deceased Edward Carrington, who fell on a battlefield during the Civil War. Twichell remained a close friend of the Carringtons for his entire life. It would have been the most natural thing for him to take some of the students to Colebrook during his frequent visits. As all the locations known to have been associated with the Chinese students were to be documented, Colebrook would be included. Initially, the main interest focused on the fact that the village is probably the only location that looks essentially the same as it did in the nineteenth century. Most sites, such as the Mission headquarters in Hartford, are completely gone, or their locations so altered as to be unrecognizable to any of the students; Colebrook, then was to be filmed as representative of the 1870's.

The documentary is to be based on the style developed by Ken Burns; all aspects of their subject examined in minute detail, with a blend of motion pictures and still photography. Between 1872 and 1874 some 120 Chinese students were sent to America by the Chinese Educational Mission, specifically the Connecticut River Valley. They were quite young, twelve years or so, to be sent into a strange and foreign world for a period of 15 years charged with acquiring skills in technical arts and applied science that would bring their homeland into the industrial world of the West. The plan was for them to attend various prep schools throughout the valley, which would prepare them academically for Yale, Harvard, R.P.I., Penn. State and other seats of higher learning in this country.

There had always been some opposition on the government's part about sending students outside China, but some 9 years into the program, a political swing toward a more conservative attitude caused the ouster of the sponsors of the Educational Mission and the students were recalled to China. Some were still in high school, and only a few of them had completed their engineering training. It was when these students were in Springfield, Mass., preparing to return to China, that the two who had converted to Christianity, Yung Kwai and Yew Fun Tan, slipped away from the rest, went into hiding, and remained behind. They both entered Yale and graduated with the class of 1883. Yew Fun Tan came down with pneumonia three short months after graduation and died at Colebrook, where he was buried in the Carrington family plot.

Such are the bare facts of the case. The Carrington diaries, however, shed new light on the matter.

Two weeks ago, when a representative of China Central Television first visited us, he outlined what he anticipated their actions would be, which was to film locations around the village and in addition, he asked me to read through the two diaries in order to find all reference to any of the Chinese students and mark the locations so that the film crew could document them. I did so, and on October 20, at 8:30 am, a small entourage of vehicles drew up in front of the Historical Society. There was a large white van containing the six members of the film crew, an auto containing Mr. Courtney with his wife, and another with the translator, Laura Tyson, accompanied by her family.

All were interested in the museum, and after a short tour, we withdrew to the library where the Carrington papers were assembled. The diaries were taken out, decorated with colorful markers showing locations referring to Chinese students. These were read out loud for the translator, the camera recording everything. Suddenly there was a flurry of rapidly spoken Chinese after which they explained the cause: It seems that the official version as to the semi-failure of the Mission was based upon the government's charge that Tan (as he was referred to) was the sole cause of the problems by trying to persuade others to become Christians, to neglect their Chinese language studies and to embrace western clothing styles and hair styles. In those days, Chinese men had to wear their hair in a sort of ponytail, called a cue. To cut it was a grave deed, bearing severe consequences. What the diaries undisputedly showed however, was the total repudiation of the official version. Here are the exact entries: "August 4, 1880 Tan came to say goodbye – to China." On August 6 an entry reads: "Tan to Avon early." (one of his teachers lived in Avon.) Tan is not mentioned again until August 24, 20 days after the government had recalled him home. The entry on that date reads: "Tan came after we were in bed & had his cue cut."

Tan never did go back to China, and the sequence of events clearly show that it was the government that had broken trust with the students, not the other way around. There had to have been a great deal of soul-searching going on in Tan's head during those twenty days that ended with his rejection of his government's policies and orders. His untimely death and subsequent burial in a Christian cemetery allowed the government to use him as a scapegoat for 118 years. With this new evidence, China Central Television will present its case for rectifying this historical inaccuracy.

Ultimately, many pages of our documents were individually filmed, their contents read aloud in both English and Chinese.

All this activity sparked our appetites, and we traveled to Norfolk and dined on New England Beef Stew at The Pub. The amount of black pepper and hot sauce that was poured over the dishes redefined the culinary term "hot"!

With our stomachs full, we became more relaxed than we had been during the morning and took the back roads on our return trip to Colebrook where the cameraman had us stop several times to film fall foliage, Benedict Pond, the Gen. E. A. Phelps house in North Colebrook and finally the grave site of Yew Fun Tan.

For me, it was a most wonderful experience, one that I will never forget, and I have the strong feeling that the China Central crew feels the same. Next summer, when the film is completed, we have been promised a copy, which we will of course, share with the public.

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg