

Trip kicks off celebration of William Carey

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William Carey University professors Myron Noonkester, Jonathan Brooke and Bennie Crockett pose for a photograph in the Carey Center on the Hattiesburg campus. The three are going to India today to attend a conference at the college William Carey founded there, in conjunction with the 250th anniversary of the missionary's birth. / matt bush | Hattiesburg American

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What would William Carey tweet? About everything under the sun, according to William Carey University history professor Jonathan Brooke.

"He's running in all kinds of circles... He's a very 18th century character. I mean he's an intellectual and he's a hobbyist and he's a scientist and he's a gardener and he's a theologian.

He's on every Facebook page. He likes EVERYTHING, you know what I mean?" jokes Brooke, a self-proclaimed "Carey geek."

One can imagine that Carey's twitter feed this week would tweet a shout-out to Brooke and two other WCU professors who are following in his footsteps, so to speak. The three are flying today to India's Serampore College, the college that Carey founded, to attend a conference on the famous "father of modern missions."

They also will sleep in the house in which Carey lived and died nearly 200 years ago.

William Carey University, founded in 1906 as South Mississippi College, took William Carey as its namesake in 1954. Here are a few of the events that will take place through spring 2012:

June: Bennie Crockett lecture on Carey

Aug. 22: Birthday party for Carey

October: Art exhibit of 250 works in the Lucile Parker Gallery

Oct. 17: Carey lectures

April: Carey-lympics at homecoming

The trip kicks off a year of Carey activities related to the 250th anniversary of his birth at the Baptist university that bears his name. Events later in the year will range from a birthday party to an art exhibit to a curry cook-off on the Tradition campus.

It's also an exciting moment for Brooke's two companions Bennie Crockett and Myron Noonkester, who have never been to India and have devoted the last 11 years to compiling artifacts on Carey.

CAREY COLLECTION

Their collection started with a Carey postage stamp and a conversation.

"We were sitting in this very room in the summer of 2000," said Crockett, a philosophy and religion professor, sitting in this Lawrence Hall office, "And Myron said, 'Nobody's ever done anything with this man, and we need to do something.'"

And so they did, slowly compiling a large and valuable collection of Carey artifacts now housed on the Hattiesburg campus's 2,500-square-foot Donnell Hall. There are letters; Bibles printed at the Serampore Mission Press; even Carey's childhood spelling dictionary.

Crockett and Noonkester also started a website devoted to Carey's life and works.

All told, including the construction of the museum and the purchase of the cases that contain the materials, William Carey has plowed more than \$1 million into the Carey Center.

"At a little school like this, sometimes you have to convince people, no it's not just a bunch of stuff that Aunt Sally collected about William Carey," said Noonkester, a history professor and dean of the Noonkester School of Arts and Letters. "We have a lot of rare materials over there."

One reason for the collection is just to inform students who the heck Carey is.

"I have students who ask sometimes, 'Was he some old guy who gave money to the school?'" said Noonkester.

Not quite. Museum intern Rebekah Clark, a senior, said she came to the school knowing nothing about Carey - except that he was a missionary who went to India.

Now when she gives tours to visitors she concentrates on other things.

"The thing I like to talk about is his social reforms," she said. "I think a lot of the time people just focus on his mission work and his Bible translations and don't realize all that he did."

IT'S COMPLICATED

That's in harmony with the full understanding of Carey that Noonkester and Crockett wish to impart to students and visitors.

Back to that postage stamp, the first item in the Carey collection.

It's a 1993 Indian stamp celebrating the 200th anniversary of Carey's arrival in India - and it features the stock image of the wise, old Carey staring intently into the distance with quill in hand and Serampore College in the background.

In other words, it's a bit of historical myth-making that doesn't quite match the man Noonkester, Crockett and Brooke have come to understand through thousands of artifacts they've collected and studied.

On the one hand, Carey who lived in India for 41 years, lives up to the billing of a Christian hero. He worked to end the practice of suttee or widow-burning in India. He was also, in Noonkester's words, "rabidly and determinedly anti-slavery" - a radical stance in his time.

Poke around a bit, though, and you find traits that complicate the man. How did a man, formerly a poor cobbler, deal with the intense adulation that greeted him during his lifetime? Opinions vary.

"We have very lively conversations about this all the time," said Brooke.

"One of us is always like 'Read this letter. I told you he was pretentious.' Well, he's not pretentious, he's just human."

There's also the issue of whether Carey neglected family in his hard-headed devotion to his work. His sons ran wild, while his first wife Dorothy suffered what appears to be clinical depression, worsened perhaps by difficult living conditions. She went insane in 1795 and died in 1807, while Carey stayed in India until his death in 1834.

"It's a life where he's sold out to the mission," explained Crockett. "There's no running water, no antibiotics, no electricity, there's nothing."

He added: "She has a child that dies. They have to bury him, because the locals won't come near a corpse... Anyone who is on the edge psychologically - that could be a tipping point."

But, even with the dark edges, Carey represents for Crockett the embodiment of an expansive Christian identity - one that has meaning for Carey faculty and students today.

His campaigns against suttee and slavery show his strong social ethics.

His championing of science and his desire to engage native Indians on their own terms - without forced conversions - demonstrate his Enlightenment tendencies, even as his theology remained solidly in the Reformation era.

So, for Crockett and his colleagues, the study of Carey's life also becomes an examination of what it means to be a Christian university.

"Everything about William Carey's life can be related to a Christian institution," said Crockett. "We have faculty and students who are engaged in mission work obviously, but I would hope that there is cognizance on the part of health care people here that it is Carey's religious identity that is basis for why we do medicine."

For Brooke, the variety of elements in Carey's life mirrors the diversity within the school itself.

"You can make this place a one-dimensional Baptist school, but it's a school; it's a community; it's everything," he said. "I think that reflects very well on the Carey that we are learning about."

CLICK IT

To visit Crockett and Noonkester's Carey website, go to

<http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/>

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