Today on Across the Fence we will visit a fourth generation business that features one of Vermont’s most famous products. And we’ll step back in history to learn the story of that infamous Vermont soldier in the Civil War. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I’m Judy Simpson. This month marks the first fighting that Vermonters encountered during the Civil War. The first battle involving Vermonters took place at Lee’s Mill in Virginia and even though it was a minor skirmish in the context of the war it’s where Vermont soldiers built their reputation as brave and fearless fighters. William Scott was one of the 65 Vermonters killed that day April 16, 1862. Scott’s reputation preceded him to the battlefield but not as a fighting man. Scott was known as the sleeping sentinel the most famous private in the union army. Vermont Civil War historian Howard Coffin tells us more about Scott’s story of honor and duty and conspiracy.

Here, east of Groton along Route 302, stands a monument to a man who was probably the most famous private in all of the Civil War. William Scott. A member of the third Vermont regiment he was 18 when he went off to war. Early on the regiment was stationed outside of Washington in Georgetown. He was on sentry duty and they found him asleep. He was court martialed for that and he pleaded not guilty but still after deliberations the court martial sentenced him to death by firing squad. They brought him out a few days later with the regiment assembled tied him to a post and he expected to hear his own death warrant read. He was ashen faced and we heard the words that he’d been pardoned. He became known as the sleeping sentinel and went back to duty. Abraham Lincoln was aware of his case. Appeals had been made to Lincoln to spare his life. Looking back at all and looking at some sources like Wheatlock Bazzee who was on a court martial it now seems there was a plot at foot to scare the daylights out of union privates early in the war by almost killing one of them. Apparently it worked; just south of Saint Johnsbury along the Passumpsic river. Down here where Interstate 91 and 93 now meet that level area was once the St. Johnsbury fairground. To the fairground to the summer of 1861 came 1000 Vermont men to drill and form the third Vermont regiment. One of those men was William Scott. This marker is right in the middle of the fairgrounds which was renamed Camp Baxter, soldiers got here. Here they drilled and here William Scott became a soldier. A friend of his said he was a big awkward country boy whose heart was as big as he
was. He had trouble learning to march. He kept kicking the foot of the man in front of him. Days later 10,000 people gathered here to see the women of Saint Johnsbury present a home a flag to the regiment. Governor Erastus Fairbanks spoke and a few days after that the regiment marched down the road to St. Johnsbury on the way to war. Down this road they came which was lined with people the third Vermont Williams got doing the best he could to keep in step. At the depot a huge crowd most cheering some weeping as the regiment boarded the train for Washington, DC and the war zone.

The sparing of the sleeping sentinel’s life was big news. It was in all the newspapers. Scott was briefly famous. The winter passed in camp Scott wrote home to Groton borough how he wished he could be home and how he'd like some maple sugar. Then war began. George Burton McClellan took his army up the Potomac down the Virginia peninsula and began to move against Richmond but lo and behold came upon the Warrick River which didn’t show on their maps. Looked much like this orange pond about this wide it had been banned by the confederates and on the far side the confederates had constructed earthworks. For medical Arts Works and rifle pits. On the 16th of April General McClellan came along and ordered the Vermonters to wade across the pond and attack those earth works. The third Vermont were the first to go and as they waded into the water William got riddled with bullets. But they kept on across the pond captured the earthworks held them until driven away by a confederate counter-attack. By the end of the day 148 Vermonters had been shot 65 of them would die. The war had really begun for Vermont. Vermont learned what war was all about. So the Vermonters had seen their first real heavy combat. Soon would come savage at station and bigger casualties and down the road of course was Gettysburg and Wilderness and Cedar Creek and finally Petersburg Appomattox and the final cost would be some 6000 Vermont lives. Right smack in the middle of Groton is the town’s Civil War monument with an astonishing number of names of local lads who served in the Civil War. The Scott boys' names are on here at the time of the Civil War there was a store here. Local people gathered here to get the latest war news. I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Scott took the buck board 4 miles down to get that news night after night. It was here that he learned of William’s death. Maybe Carl Sandburg said it best William Scott among the fresh growths and blooms of the Virginia springtime in Lee's Mills took the burning messages of six bullets into his body all he could give Lincoln for his country and for his God was now given. Civil War combat had begun for the Vermonters. William Scott was not the only member of this family to die in the Civil War. Scott had three brothers who were also killed in combat.

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Our next segment has its roots in the 1800’s and that is when Johnson Woolen Mills began operations. Recently communication students from Norwich University visited the Johnson operation to speak with the fourth generation of the family who own and operate the Woolen Mills.

Stacy Manosh / Owner, Johnson Woolen Mills: I am the fourth generation to run Johnson Woolen Mills. My great grandfather came into the company in 1902. It actually started in the 1830s, but it incorporated in 1842, so we use 1842 as our start date, even though it was earlier. Being fourth generation, I am the first woman to own the company. We make rugged woolen and outerwear for the entire family, for men, women, and children. For children we start at size 4 and go right up to size 18. For women we make capes, jackets, pants, the same rugged woolen outerwear we make for the men.
Raymond Roy / Marketing Manager: We have a reputation in the area. We're one of five woolen mills that are left in the United States and only two, including us, are completely made in the United States to this day.

When you walk into the store you are greeted by a whoosh of Johnson Woolen Mill products. Everywhere you look it's just Johnson Woolen Mill, our wool vest, our wool jackets, our pants, daypacks, everything that we make out of wool.

I don't think people realize the store is as large as it is, and that we also have such a wide variety of Johnson and woolen products that we offer. Anywhere from coats to capes to ponchos, to vests to certain shirts to pants to mittens, some scarfs as well and then a variety of shirts and coats to begin with and even within those categories there is a variety different things. So they’re really amazed with just how many things we do have in terms of a variety of things. I also think that they love to be able to touch and feel the stuff and when you can see this thing up close and personal then get to actually study the workmanship and they are amazed at the workmanship in it and the quality of the cloth, the wool that we use.

I think people like Johnson Woolen Mills because it gives them that warm fuzzy feeling of when they were growing up and their grandfather, great grandfather, and all their family members wore the woolen jackets. The deer hunters have their lucky jacket that was passed down, generation to generation. It's kind of like mashed potatoes; it's a warm, comfort type of feeling. I think that nowadays with the world being so, somewhat unstable and you don't really know what's going on. To put on your jacket just gives you a warm fuzzy all over that "hey, you know, things are okay."

As you can see in our store, we have many, many different plaids and colors and sizes and checks. We use mostly 85 percent wool 15 percent nylon. We feel the nylon gives it the strength and durability. We also have 100 percent wool. We use 90 percent wool 10 percent nylon. You can find a variety of different styles, shapes, colors in our store. We can make anything.

When we think of Vermont we always think red and black checkers, there’s different sizes of those. We have the, small one which is called the buffalo check, we have a medium size, and we have also got the large size. Then I think after the red and black which is kind of our staple plaid, then we're going to get into the blue and black, green and black, there are some others. We just introduced, believe it or not, what is called a burnt rose, which is a kind of pink and black for the ladies and it turned out to be really popular, we kind of took that on the road, I was over in Minnesota for example and we went to some of our dealers in northern Minnesota and we just laid the swatch down with the styles that I wanted to make into it and I said ladies what you think? And a lot of the buyers were women, so it was the right populous to take it to and I got a real positive response and we even grabbed people from the aisle in the store and said what do you think? I think we ended up getting enough orders that we introduced that for example, it’s kind of an unconventional plaid but the women want to be represented as well.

Production process these days is different from of course the old days, where you had to start right with the sheep. Today, we buy our wool on bolts we do what is commonly called the cut and sew. We have a production table, a cutting table; it's probably as long as a bowling alley made of wood. And we lay out the fabric and do what is called a marker. Our two cutters lay the patterns out. Everything is done by hand.
They'll give the patterns to the production manager and then there will be sewers who have a specific job, so it's an assembly line type of thing although all the machines look alike everyone has their specialty. And who then presses. We'll have an inspector who will do the last inspection and then what it will do is then it go down to the floor, which is our store room, and we'll have the store manager or the stock room person will then go ahead and put it on a shelf and make sure that it’s up and checked off.

Our employees are the absolute best. We have people here that have been here for a very long time. The employees here are family. My door is always open. We have three dogs that come to work with us. I always say to people, I hand out checks on Tuesday, "if you’re stressed out, come hug a puppy." We’re family, we help each other. Norman and Evon were two of our employees were getting hay in one day and they’re older people, so the cutting table went and helped them get their hay in. We just help each other, it's oh, we're family.

I think we encapsulate the whole concept of Vermont; its pride and workmanship, it’s the local community pulling together to make a good product. It's the fact that Vermonters would just... some people would say creatures of habit but when we find something good we don't necessarily want to change it, if it’s a good product it will always be there.

Marketing certainly has changed, it's changed dramatically. We have a lot more orders with our website. We have a website for our store and for our retail. Johnson Woolen Mills is almost two businesses, you have the factory that is manufacturing where we make products for dealers like Kittery Trading Post, LL Bean, people like that, the Japanese, all over. And then we have our retail store, so that's another part of the business.

The internet store has been great because it allows us to reach a bigger population of people who can’t necessarily get in their car and come over to the store and actually walk around.

Our customers are not just Vermonters, who absolutely love our products by the way, loggers, farmers, people that cross country ski, anybody that enjoys being outside in the winter in Vermont they say fantastic things about our products. I have people that come in to the store to tell me that they are wearing a jacket that their great-grandfather gave to their grandfather and their grandfather give it to them and they’ve got it in their will for their son. So our products last a long time, I hear that a lot.

Our thanks to Norwich communication students for sharing that story from Johnson and our thanks to you for joining us. I'm Judy Simpson, we'll see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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