Today on across the fence on the 150th anniversary of the Civil War a new book focuses on a Vermonter who was a civil war photographer. The book is entitled the very fine appearance the Civil War photographs of George Houghton. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I'm Judy Simpson. When our country's civil war began in 1861 a Brattleboro man accompanied Vermont soldiers into the field to document their experiences. The man from Brattleboro was photographer George Houghton. 150 years later that Houghton photos along with letters and personal diaries of soldiers are the basis of a new book a very fine appearance. The book's author is our guest this afternoon. It is a pleasure to welcome Don Wickman of Rutland. Don is a historian writer and has been with us before to talk about the Vermont in the Civil War and Don thanks for being with us.

Don.: Thank you you're welcome.

Judy.: Let's begin by a touching on the timing of your book.

Don.: What could be better the onset of the siscal centennial or the 150th anniversary of the Civil War and this is a time for people to be really aware of their Civil War history our bloodiest conflict that ever occurred in this country. People always have it excitement when it seems like major anniversary is come about. We all the sudden want to learn more about our history and this is a prime time for a book like this and also Vermont’s history.

Judy.: Excellent. Who was George Houghton?

Don.: Houghton was born in Putney and actually his first profession was a carpenter and in the early 1850's he learned some of the basics of photography and eventually opened up a full studio in Brattleboro Vermont in December of 1859 after doing a trip out to Wisconsin where he ran a small studio but he always went back to carpenter as a backup. You couldn't guarantee photography as a fulltime profession and he was very successful running in competition with another photographer also in Brattleboro. Brattleboro back then had 3800 people and when the war broke out he was there. He was ready to go and seem to have an adventurous a streak in him.

Judy.: You would have to have I would imagine. How did you become interested in Houghton and his photography?

Don.: I've always had the interest in the Civil War and accessing his images through two albums that are in existence that he made up in 1864. One is at the Vermont historical society and the other one is at UVM special collections. He started looking at the faces and the scenes that he's put forth like the one here of the third of Vermont graves taken after the battle of lee's mill in 1862. The poignancy of some of these photos looking at the young faces and the images got really exciting about telling a little different part of Vermont history vs. the battles and some of the horrors of war.

Judy.: How long did it take you to get this book published?

Don.: I actually started doing some other research back in 2006. It was over the last 2 1/2 to 3 years in putting it all together and the Vermont historical society took a leadership role in that.

Judy.: Why was the photography so important in the Civil War?
Don.: I think the essence of it is that it was able to bring life to the war. It was also very easy to bring the war back to the home front. You start thinking of the American Revolution the war of 1812 and other conflicts and other life we use more basic media that couldn't be reproduced. You have watercolors pastels charcoal pen and ink but you could not really duplicate those easily. Photography all the sudden through glass plates you could do multiple images and people could buy them up. You can also buy these baseball card image is called carts of the seeds of soldiers. People could give those out like baseball cards. Without the bubble gum.

Judy.: No kidding that's amazing. Maybe you could talk to us about some of the places that Houghton when during the war and the things that he did?

Don.: He started off making three trips to Virginia. The first one in 1861 in too early 1862. This picture here right now of the sixth Vermont regiment was taken at camp griffin Virginia it was when the first brigade the first Vermont brigade was in camp near Washington, DC and I think it shows some of the great composition that he had back then and the clarity of these pictures with the glass plates is literally amazing what you can pick up. That was his first trip down there that's in the area Mclean Virginia then in march through July of 1862 he accompanied the Vermont brigade again all through the Virginia Peninsula up to Richmond and back. This in a cheer show some of the officers in the fourth Vermont regiment one of which is one of our future governors Captain Pingery on the far right. He was from Hartford but he just captures these images of these officers looking very stoic at the time. That was the second trip and the third one he was with a second Vermont brigade just south of Washington, DC and this is an encampment of the cruel for Vermont regiment. The second Vermont brigade served for nine months and is most known for helping blunt Pickett's charge on July 30, 1863 at Gettysburg.

Judy.: Where did you find all these photographs?

Don.: The two albums at UVM and VHS probably provided over 90 images but then there are photos in individual collections and also public institutions. We were able to access some of them through the Brattleboro historical society the Fairbanks museum and the Bradford historical society and this image here even though it's one of the images in the album is one of two Houghton's that's in the library of Congress. What's so provocative about this one is it actually gives exposure to a slave family or slave quarters to people in Vermont which was a very white state in 1862 when this was taken. So it brought back a little bit of life. People had never been exposed to it.

Judy.: Do you have a favorite image?

Don.: Yes there's one image that was taken in late 1861 is a large shot of the six Vermont officers. I had hoped it might be a cover photo because it was so provocative but the problem is that there are flaws in it. The interesting part in this image besides having three officer wives and there is I've been able to identify all but three of the officers successfully and the sad part about it and it's the commentary about the Civil War is 60% of these men were either killed or wounded or discharged for disability before the war ended.

Judy.: Why was it so unusual to have pictures of their wives?

Don.: I think they're visiting at the time and the way I was able to identify them was I identify the officers first and then went back into 1860 census records and found out they were all married. So I just put two and two together that the wives would be standing next or husband back then.

Judy.: Take us a little bit further through the book. What else is in it?

Don.: Howard Holzer who is a very well-known Lincoln scholar wrote a wonderful forward and then I did a full biography of Houghton from up to his death in 1870 in the Wisconsin dells in Wisconsin. Then we had the over hundred photos that were collected and used in some cases were Houghton provided a caption we use that. I provided contemporary quotes to go along with those. In some cases the caption on the quote I found directly links to the photo with the book. We have some journal entries mentioning that we had our photo taken by the artist today and it's the exact photo. Then I was able to successfully because Houghton identified some of the individuals on the screen in the image and I was able to find them another pictures and I was successful in identifying more and more of the officers at the time.

Judy.: With so much work that you've done on the people in these photographs two you feel like you really have a sense of who they were about their family's about their lives?

Don.: Not so much about their lives but I think more of an inside to George Houghton and what he was trying to capture. Composing these pictures and bringing the war back home but I think the real interesting part is you look at
the ages of these men. Most of them are all under 30 at the time and others are mere boys. You had to be 18 but parents could sign off and there were 16 year olds in the ranks.

Judy.: That's amazing. What is it that you hope people will learn from this book or at least take away from the book?

Don.: One part is that photographs are lasting legacy. They will never go away and this is something that is going to last for generations on generations it's one of the interests of the Civil War I think is the photography. It also shows another side of Vermont and the Civil War that is not always presented. We learn about the heroism of Vermont troops in the field but you think this just brings up another sidelight that there were times in camp relaxing times and that these men were out there fighting for the preservation of the union.

Judy.: Amazing. Do you think that it's important to have something in book form like this and these photographs? Are people so used to googling up whenever they're looking for to have a collection in their hand and to go back and forth with the physical book?

Don.: Definitely I think it's just it's tearing at some of these images and also the fact that you're not going to be able two Google George Houghton and find 100 plus photos at one time because they're scattered so many places but it's a wonderful collection of what I know is available. I hope that more will surface with this two further tell the story of George Houghton. I think it's just good to look at these images and pass them along to get the idea of what these men were going through.

Judy.: I think it's interesting to think about George Houghton. We say he's followed the troops he's taken pictures he's come back he's made several trips that wasn't easy to do.

Don.: No these cameras wade up to 30 and 40 pounds. Then you had to worry about all the chemicals and the processing. He had his own little wagon and we saw in one of the earlier images to go along that was a portable darkroom. And the 10th that he took down through Virginia had a flap and it to have natural light so he could take interior pictures of it. So he was very creative in his ways and we look upon the Civil War as something very new. There was always ever changing technologies throughout the war but the important part was this was almost the birth of photojournalism at this stage because it was the first time that somebody traveled in the field. There are so people doing pen and inks and make them woodcuts to put the newspapers and we didn't get technology two insert into newspapers until the 20th century but still people could purchase these images and put them on their wall at home. They could look at the displays inside photography studios and there are comments by Vermont Phoenix the Brattleboro newspaper mentioning that there were photos of Houghton on display in his windows for people look at.

Judy.: How unusual was it for a photographer to do something like this at this time? It seems like he was pretty determined that this was what he was going to do and as part of his business but was that unusual?

Don.: I think for a Vermonter to go out into the field was a little rarer. You had some of your major studios like Mathew Brady's out of New York City he had other photographers on the staff that would go out into the field and they could afford it. And he had another studio down in Washington so for one individual from Vermont to go out and see I think was a little more rare than your larger population areas. That is what makes them more special people will always say if they're familiar with Civil War for Tabor fee everybody will say Mathew Brady Alexander Gardner Timothy O'Sullivan they won't say George Houghton right away because he doesn't have as much of a press core following but hopefully this will make people more aware of the significance that he has in the world of civil war Photography.

Judy.: It sounds like we're pretty lucky as a small state to have this kind of documentation of our troops.

Don.: Definitely yes. Not all states have that advantage. To my knowledge none of his plates exist so we're very thankful that he made of those two albums that he did in 1864 and they're still in existence.

Judy.: That is interesting I haven't thought of that of course. So copies cannot be made as far as from the originals.

Don.: Right all we can do now and what we did was high resolution scans of the originals.

Judy.: You mentioned the one photograph you thought about putting on the cover of the book but it was damaged that is the way that you can correct the damage or is that?

Don.: Through photo shop but that would also have taken away from something of the original. That's why the decision was made not to put it on there was that you would be more a less improving it and taking away from the originality.
Judy.: So this photograph that's on the cover of your book was that well preserved?

Don.: Yes.

Judy.: That's amazing.

Don.: You scan that you can zero in right into those faces. It's clearer than some of the digital photos that we get to take a day.

Judy.: That's amazing. We should highlight the website for the Vermont historical society. You can go online to Vermont history.org. Don Wickman's book is entitled a very fine appearance and again you can find the book at the Vermont historical society. That website is Vermont history.org and there all kinds if you've never been to the site there's all kinds of great artifacts. Lots to look at that add to what you're talking about.

Don.: And the society will be preparing an exhibit for the 150th before the year is out and also you'll be able to get this at local bookstores throughout Vermont.

Judy.: Fantastic. Don thank you very much.

Don.: You welcome Judy.

Judy.: That that's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson will see you again next time on across the fence.

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