

Out & About

Art adventure: At Florence Griswold

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Contact us:

Sue Braden editor
sbraden@ctcentral.com
tel: 203-458-5747
Fax: 203-453-4152

PRESERVING THE PAST FOR THE AGES

Designer restores old photos
to be etched on new
Civil War monument

By Diana Carr
Special to Out&About

Kerry Sheldon, of Durham is using the latest in modern technology to honor fallen Connecticut soldiers from the Civil War.

A former pediatric nurse, Sheldon is now a composite design artist who does "photo restoration digital image editing" by computer. (You can learn more about her business, Casual Clicks, by going to (www.casual-clicks.com.)

Her journey to the Civil War era began when she met Bob Larkin, who had seen her work and asked her to do a couple of photo restorations. Larkin, whose great-great-grandfather fought with the Ninth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry (known historically as The Irish Regiment) in Vicksburg, Miss. during the Civil War, is overseeing a project that is giving Connecticut its due for its role in the War Between the States. It all began when his family went to Vicksburg National Military Park, the largest Civil War cemetery in the country, and saw no mention of the aforementioned infantry or of Connecticut. Further investigation revealed that monuments were only allowed for states that fought in the Vicksburg campaign from March 29 to July 4, 1863. Connecticut had fought in 1862.

Legislation was changed in 1990, allowing Connecticut its monument, and in 2005 Governor Rell received an invitation from the National Park Service to erect a monument at Vicksburg National Military Park. Larkin and a committee of 40, who had contacted Rell, were now given "the green light" for the project.

Sheldon says the photo restorations that Larkin asked her to do turned into designing the artwork that's being etched on the monument, a project that began two years ago. In February artist Stacy Mathieu began etching Sheldon's designs onto the monument. She and her husband's family own Mathieu Memorials and Granite Works, which is located in Southington, and are providing the monument.)

For the bottom panel, Sheldon used a composite of several pictures in order to tell a story.

"I took elements of different images and creatively placed them so that it all works." The story is of the Connecticut soldiers who were ordered to dig a canal on the Mississippi River, as part of a strategic military plan. Many died



Kerry Sheldon, a composite design artist from Durham, is restoring several images for a Civil War monument in Vicksburg.

from heat exhaustion and disease. Sheldon's photo montage shows the men working, and a medic and two soldiers assisting a fallen man.

The middle panel consists of photo restorations of some of the men in the Ninth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, arranged so that the viewer will see his or her face reflected in the midst. Sheldon says she had to get creative because the photos were often taken after the men had aged, or had changed ranks. She found it challenging to find the appropriate uniforms and insignias, and gives credit to historian Tom Callinan for doing the research that made everything on the monument historically accurate.

The top panel bears a depiction of a flag with the Ninth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry and the official State Seal of Connecticut. The original flag, which is in the Hall of Flags (in Hartford), has experienced the ravages of time, says Sheldon - a fact that has presented her with one of her biggest challenges.

Working with an old photo of the original flag, she digitally painted, by computer, the missing components. She has done all the artwork except for the Connecticut State Seal, which was provided by the state. All the

panels have images on both the front and back.

"It's been very much of a collaboration," says Sheldon. "Bob and I bounced ideas for the artwork off each other, and then he took the pictures to the committee. Sometimes Stacy would ask me to modify the images. It's a very dynamic process. Though the etching has started, many of the images are still in the final tweaking process."

It's a huge undertaking, to be sure. Made of granite shipped from overseas, the monument weighs in, along with its two benches, at a hefty 15,531 pounds.

The centerpiece is currently at a warehouse in West Hartford, and will be shipped to Vicksburg National Military Park after completion and exhibition in Connecticut. (It is scheduled for exhibition in August either at Hartford State Armory or at a warehouse in West Hartford.) The remaining pieces and the benches are at Royal Melrose Granite (in Minnesota), being cut to size, and will be shipped to Vicksburg National Military Park. The dedication ceremony will be held at the park on October 14, 2008.

Larkin and Sheldon will be there.

Larkin tells us, "Without Kerry's work, the monument wouldn't be what it is > today. She has done so much with the portraits, which needed a lot of work. She spent hours and hours on the fine details that make it all come to life."

The respect goes both ways. Says Sheldon, "Bob put all this together. It's his project. He's the driving force behind this. Without him, the monument wouldn't be happening."

And both are proud to be part of, shall we say, this monumental task. Says Larkin, "For my ancestors and the soldiers of Connecticut to be overlooked for so long, and to finally get the recognition they deserve - it's very satisfying."

Sheldon points out, "The monument is to remember the men who left their families to serve their country and to fight for what they believed in. It's so we don't forget what they did for their country."

"This is one of those things you never imagine could happen to you. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

To be able someday to point to something and tell my grandchildren that I was a part of the process, will be incredible."