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By BRENT ENGEL

## Louisiana exhibit will showcase World War II prison camp

**BRENT ENGEL/COURIER-POST** Frances Beck, left, and Martha Sue Smith stand on what was the foundation of a guard house at a World War II branch prison camp on the southwest side of Louisiana. A mobile museum of the POW experience in America during the war is coming to Pike Country in April.



They went to work, attended church and took in a movie once in a while. And had it not been for the accents and the nearby guards, it would have been easy to miss that the men sitting across the aisle were considered enemies. More than six decades after the end of World War II, remnants of Louisiana's prisoner of war camp remain. One of the community's surviving links to the most cataclysmic event of the 20th century will be showcased when a mobile museum comes to town. The Traces Center for History and Culture of St. Paul, Minn., is bringing what it calls a "bus-eum" to American Legion Post 370 at 420 Kelly Lane on April 27 and 28.

The visit is sponsored by the Louisiana Area Historical Museum with financial contributions from local businesses, residents and veterans' groups. "It's a piece of history," said museum president Martha Sue Smith. "It's something we lived through." "When we die, nobody is going to know what happened here unless someone

makes a record,” said Frances Beck, a former museum board member. “And who’s going to make a record unless we do?” Both women grew up nearby and, like many others of their generation, have strong memories of the war era. “It’s very personal us,” Smith said.

## **The camp**

One of the reasons the Army chose Louisiana for a branch POW camp was because the city already had a place for it. A National Youth Administration facility featuring bunkhouses and a mess hall had just closed when the military came calling in 1943. The site was on the southwest side of Louisiana near what is now the intersection of 15th and North Carolina streets. The first prisoners were Italians who arrived in August 1943 and left in April 1944. A month later, 63 German POWs were brought in. All came from larger prisons and most worked at Stark Brothers Nurseries, which was founded in 1816 and still is in business. On Sundays, guards often took Italian prisoners to Mass at the still-standing St. Joseph Catholic Church at 508 N. Third. Sometimes, they were escorted to a movie at the long-gone Clark Theater at Fourth and Georgia, where a train caboose now rests. David Fielder is author of “The Enemy Among Us” about World War II POWs in Missouri. He interviewed German prisoner Franz Engelmann, who said that “the accommodations were better” at Louisiana than other places where he had been held. Today, mobile homes rest upon some of the concrete slabs of former buildings and weeds grow around the foundation of a guardhouse. The Kansas City Southern railroad tracks curve around the site.

## **Low-risk prisoners**

Harry Elliott grew up four blocks from the camp, and he and his friends were fascinated by it. “We used to ride over there on our bicycles and talk to the guards,” Elliott remembers. “Some of the prisoners would come over and talk to us. We could understand them a little bit.” Only prisoners who were considered low-risk were sent there. Fielder reports the escape rate for European POWs of around four per 1,000 inmates was about the same as the rate for American federal prisons, and no act of sabotage was ever tied to a POW escapee. Despite the lack of danger, Smith and Beck

remember their parents warning them about the camp. “We were threatened with our lives if we came by here,” Beck recalled as she walked around the property. “You were not supposed to come near here. It was as much to protect them from us as it was to protect us from them.”

### **Coddling charges**

There were charges that the camp coddled prisoners. Elliott, who worked alongside Germans at Stark during the summer, remembers the prisoners “had hot meals” and “we were eating out of our lunch buckets.” While the prisoners may have been appeased at times, they never got preferential treatment. “They weren’t mean to us and we weren’t mean to them,” Elliott said. The War Department investigated, but dismissed the claims. One reason may have been the political power of nursery co-owner Lloyd C. Stark, who had been Missouri governor from 1937 to 1941. Fielder wrote that Stark needed the workers. Filling the manual labor needs of the nation was common for the 425,000 German, Italian and Japanese prisoners held in 660 camps on American soil during the war. They built roads and waterways, did agricultural projects, laid city sewers, put up housing and filled other wartime needs. “They were good workers,” Smith said.

### **Auf wiedersehen**

The Louisiana camp was closed on March 31, 1946. The remaining German POWs were sent to Fort Leonard Wood before being shipped home to Europe. Smith is trying to track down photos of the camp, but hasn’t had any luck. “They’re very scarce,” she said. The mobile exhibit, which is housed in a refurbished school bus, features narrative panels and films. Hours are 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. April 27 and 28. The bus usually visits a community for only a couple of hours. Smith said Louisiana was able to reserve it for two days because of its POW camp history and local support. “I’m just as excited as I can be,” she said. “I thought it was something the museum should do. It seemed like the perfect match.