

Traveling exhibits tell unknown story of POWs during WWII

By Jim Cross, Contributing Writer

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Both area residents and students alike will have the special opportunity on Wednesday, April 8, 2009 to re-live or learn about history when two traveling exhibits called "BUS-eums" from the TRACES Museum in the Twin Cities will be stopping at the Riceville Community Schools. They will be open from 8:30-11:30 a.m.

The first BUS-eum discusses German POWs held in Midwest camps during WWII.

By the end of World War II some 425,000 German, Italian and Japanese prisoners of war (POWs) found themselves imprisoned in over 660 base and branch POW camps in almost all of the then-48 United States and the territory of Alaska. Millions more Axis and Allied POWs were held in other camps in Europe, the Soviet Union, Canada, Australia and Africa.

There were about 372,000 German POWs held in U.S. Army-operated camps in the United States. Those held in the Midwest often did field and farmwork. They also made friends with many Midwest residents who could speak German.

While Axis and Soviet POWs were both the perpetrators as well as victims of dictatorial governments and state-sponsored violence, POW experiences on all sides embody ageless and timely themes of war and peace, justice under arms and issues regarding human rights, international reconciliation and future conflict avoidance.

The roughly 372,000 German POWs held in U.S Army-operated camps across the United States were sent out to harvest or process crops, build roads and waterways, fell trees, roof barns, erect silos, work in light non-military industry, lay city sewers and construct tract housing, wash U.S. Army laundry and do other practical wartime tasks.



With the high rate of 19th-century German immigration to the Midwest, many of those who worked with POWs spoke to them in their native tongue; some even had relatives or former neighbors among them.

In the process, they formed significant, often decades-long friendships with "the enemy" and underwent considerable changes as individuals and as a group - thus fundamentally influencing postwar German values and institutions, as well as American-German relations. A number of POWs even chose to immigrate to the United States after the war.

The "bus"eum that will make a stop at the Riceville

Library contains a host of artifacts concerning German

The second BUS-eum deals with Midwest POWs in Nazi Germany.

and Midwestern soldiers and World War II.

Hardly anyone alive today is aware that the first U.S. troops sent to fight in WWII came from the Upper Midwest, or that the region's 34th "Red Bull" Division served the longest uninterrupted duty in U.S. military history-about 600 days. Even fewer know

that, as some 1,800 mostly Midwest soldiers were captured in one night in North Africa in February 1943, until the

Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 the most U.S. POWs in Nazi-German camps came, per capita, from the same region.

"Behind Barbed Wire," explores the experiences of Midwest prisoners of war (POWs) who were imprisoned in Hitler's Third Reich, and the human context in which their experiences took place.

"Behind Barbed Wire" poses five primary questions:

- Why did some Midwest POWs survive certain conditions or experiences, while others did not,
- What roles did art, free time and religion play in helping those men who did survive imprisonment by the Nazi regime,
- Why did some Germans or Austrians assist Midwest POWs, while others did not,
- How did the liberated POWs later come to terms with their own experiences, and
- How do countries once in armed conflict reconcile with each other: how do nations and the individuals who constitute a nation get beyond war?

As the opening panel of the exhibit reminds viewers, "The prisoner of war experience is one few men or women know directly. Being taken prisoner is, in itself, neither dishonorable nor heroic. Capture is largely an accident; often, it comes as a complete surprise and is frequently accompanied by injury. Usually, the confinement is painful; too often, it is fatal. In war, not everyone is lucky: some lose. Those taken captive are part of the unlucky ones."

As the exhibit's first text explains, "There were three main waves of Midwest POWs: those captured in North Africa in 1943, those pilots shot out of the sky during the air war over Europe, and those soldiers captured at the Battle of the Bulge, near the war's end. Each wave of Midwest POWs in Nazi Germany had its own experiences.

All of the men who survived them, however, left a provocative legacy for those alive today—one involving the very nature of war itself: how does armed conflict between groups of people play out, face-to-face, when the guns are lowered; how 'should' humans treat each other and, ultimately, live together?"

"I am very excited about the chance of having both Bus-eums in Riceville at the same time," commented Jim Cross, Riceville Public Library Director. "Those who visited last year really enjoyed the opportunity.

Chris Govern, High School Government teacher added, "It is exciting for our middle school and high school students to have the chance to experience U.S. history up-close."

The exhibits are free and open to the public. The cost for this special event is being paid for through donations from the Riceville American Legion, Riceville American Legion Auxiliary, Veterans Affairs of Howard County, Riceville Schools - P.A.T.T. - Parents and Teachers Together and the Riceville Public Library.

Barring unforeseen difficulties, both BUS-eums will be in Riceville from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on Wednesday, April 8, 2009.

They will be parked in front of the Riceville Community Schools at 912 Woodland Ave.

For more information, contact Jim Cross at 641-985-2273 or director@riceville.lib.ia.us

TRACES Center for History and Culture is a Midwest/WWII history museum in downtown Saint Paul/MN's historic Landmark Center (formerly 1896 Federal Courts Building). Each of its more than two dozen exhibits about Midwesterners' encounters with Germans or Austrians between 1933 and 1948 forms part of a larger mosaic, a fuller image of a war that is often misunderstood or seen in clichés. At TRACES, WWII is a case study to learn from for today and future generations.