

Mobile museum of German history to come to Minot

By Jill Schramm, Staff Writer for the Minot (ND) Daily News, September 9, 2006
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Some disappeared under the cover of night. Others were taken during raids on their places of employment. About a third were kidnapped by U.S. agents in other countries.

All were locked up without ever being charged with or convicted of a crime.

An estimated 15,000 German-American civilians were detained in internment camps between 1941 and 1948.

A mobile museum detailing this piece of little-known American history will visit Minot Sept. 13. "Vanished: German-American Civilian Internment, 1941-48" travels in a retrofitted school bus called BUS-eum 2, which will be in the parking lot of the Minot Public Library from 4 to 7 p.m.

Using 10 narrative panels, an NBC "Dateline" documentary and a 1945 U.S. government color film, the mobile museum is taking the internment story to about 100 communities in Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri and Iowa this year. The exhibit is the project of TRACES Center for History and Culture, a Midwest/World War II history museum in St. Paul, Minn.

The Midwest was the site of 18 internment camps, including the nation's largest male facility at Fort Lincoln near Bismarck.

At the Minot event, Ursula Vogt Potter of Washington state will speak on her father's experience as an internee at Fort Lincoln and share what internment meant to her family. She will speak at 7 p.m. in the North Community Room of the library.

Her father, Karl Vogt, was living near Spokane, Wash., when the FBI came for him. He became suspect because he and his wife had been transferring a relative's money from an American bank to Germany where she had returned after living for a time in America.

Potter said her family was more fortunate than most because her father was gone only about two years and they didn't lose their farm.

"We had enough resources where we didn't lose everything we had. Most people lost everything," she said.

Her father became a citizen in 1954, but the internment experience changed their family forever. Potter wrote a book, "The Mislplaced American," and became involved with the German-American Internee Coalition and TRACES to educate people about that period in American history. She is working on another book about interned children, some of whom were deported to Germany even though they were U.S. citizens born in America.

Karen Ebel, a coalition member who lives in New Hampshire, said German internment remained largely a secret for many years. Her father, Max Ebel, talked about working for the Northern Pacific Railroad in North Dakota, but he didn't mention that he was interned at Fort Lincoln at the time.

"There's a lot of families who just didn't want to talk about it for years and years. Even though they really didn't do anything wrong, there's a certain amount of guilt they associated with being put in an internment camp," Ebel said.

Enemy-alien internment was a multimillion-dollar, seven-year government project during World War II. The 15,000 German-American civilians detained included more than 4,000 Latin-American Germans forcibly relocated from South America to camps in Texas, at Ellis Island and elsewhere.

In 1988, the government acknowledged that it had interned Japanese during World War II and in 2000 it admitted that it also had imprisoned Italians legally living in America. The government never officially has stated that it interned German Americans, both legal aliens and citizens.

Legislation in Congress would establish two commissions. One would review the U.S. governments' World War II policies regarding European Americans and Latin Americans and related civil liberties violations. The other would review the government's refusal to allow Jewish refugees fleeing persecution entry to this country during the war.

Ebel said the legislation first was introduced in 2001 and currently is being blocked in a Senate committee. House versions also exist of the bills. The legislation is important to complete the history books and give closure to people who were interned, Ebel said.

"We are not looking for reparations," Potter said. "We just want it to be known that it happened."

The underlying issue is the lack of due process during wartime, Potter said. Legal aliens were detained based on rumor or false information. A backlash against people because of ethnicity could happen again in the war against terror if people are ignorant of history, she said.

The TRACES exhibit poses questions about whether internment was effective, whether ethnic background or ideology are justifiable grounds for internment and whether society owes due process only to citizens or to legal, noncitizen residents.

Ebel, whose father returned to North Dakota in 2003 for the dedication of an art exhibit relating to the German internment, suggested the state erect a historic marker at Ft. Lincoln to remember its past. The United Tribes Technical College now operates at the Fort Lincoln site.

For more information about the history of German internment, visit (www.TRACES.org) or (www.gaic.info).