

Stories come to life



Hugo Daily News Photos / Amber Hanneken

BETTY BRADSHAW shares some of her memories with TRACES bus driver and tour guide Irving Kellman in the mobile museum Thursday afternoon. The mobile museum, a school bus converted into an exhibit and theater, was parked at the Choctaw County Library for most of the day. Visitors learned about German prisoner of war and internment camps in America during WWII.

Mobile museum showcases unknown WWII history

By Amber Hanneken
Staff Writer

HUGO — A story seldom discussed and in few history books is that of the encampments for German prisoners of war and German-American civilians during WWII on American soil — and some were as close as Stringtown, Ardmore and McAlester.

The American Legion, Masonic Lodge, Choctaw County Arts Council and Choctaw County Public library helped bring light to their stories by sponsoring the TRACES mobile museum, which visited Hugo from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday at the library.

Housed in a school bus, the exhibit tells the story of the 15,000 German-Americans interned by the U.S. government and about 380,000 German POWs imprisoned on the continental U.S. during WWII, through illustrated displays, artifacts and a 21-seat theater.

"The exhibit is about how you treat people," said Irving Kellman, TRACES bus driver and tour guide from St. Paul, Minn. "You create friends or enemies. We created 370,000 friends through our treatment of prisoners of war."

Because of favorable treatment, 20-25,000 former POWs came back to live in America, Kellman said, many sponsored by their guards or civilian friends they made while working in American factories and farms.

There were 31 POW camps in Oklahoma and about 250 in the Midwest. Fort Sill, McAlester and Stringtown were also internment camps where German-Americans were held during the

war, much like the Japanese. McAlester held 4,500-5,000 men. The exhibit enlightens visitors to a little-known history that had both positive and negative repercussions, and raises questions about the moral and ethical implications of the government's actions during wartime.

"It's not in our history books and it's a shame," Kellman said. "I told the students who came through here, this is the one and only time in their life that they will hear the story of German POWs."

Kellman has been conducting the tour for 6.5 years and been to 18 states, 1,400 towns and met with 140,000 who have visited the exhibit. The bus began its tour in Oklahoma in mid-October and will remain in the state until mid-November, then head to New Mexico.

TRACES Center for History and Culture is a

non-profit educational organization created to gather, preserve and present stories of people from the Midwest and Germany or Austria, who encountered each other during WWII.

Students from Goodland and Fort Towson had the opportunity to tour the bus museum. There were Navy and Army recruiters in the library answering questions and several veterans came by to share their stories. Military books donated to the library were on sale and local WWII veterans' photos were on display.

"It's so close to Veterans Day, we saw this online and thought it was a great idea," said Lila Swink, Choctaw County librarian. "We try to get a variety of programs for adults and children."



HEAVY RAINS didn't stop 159 Choctaw County residents from visiting the TRACES mobile museum Thursday to learn about little-known WWII history in America.