



| [Home](#) |

BUS-eum 1, a traveling TRACES exhibit

[Scenes from the BUS-eum](#) | [video of a typical stop](#) | [Post-BUS exhibit scenes](#)

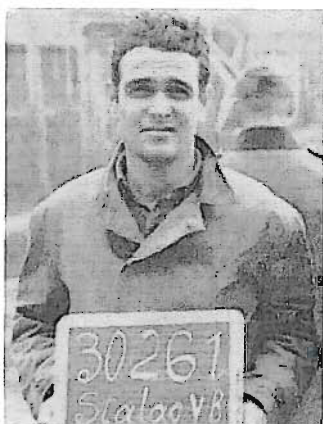
[Grand Forks Herald](#) | [Lawrence Journal](#) | [Slide Show](#)

[Northern Great Plains Tour Fall 2010](#) | [Teaching Materials](#) | [Narrative Texts](#) | [References](#)

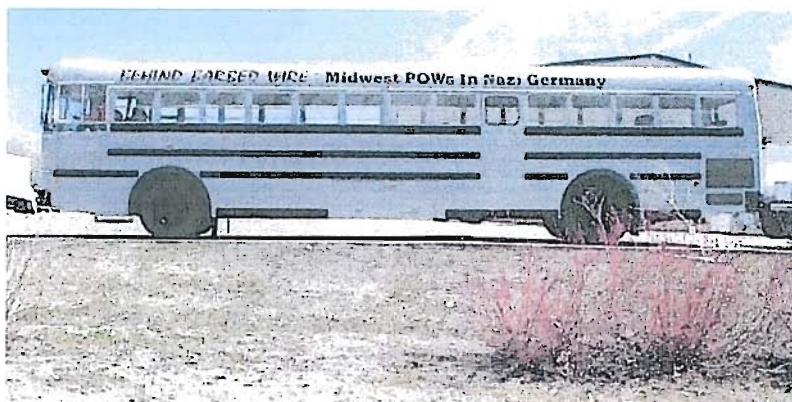
[Tour Publicity Packet](#) | [Tour Poster](#) | [Evaluation Form-Visitor](#) | [Evaluation Form-Sponsor](#)

| [To Order Exhibit Guide](#) | [To Order POW Diaries](#) |

Behind Barbed Wire: Midwest POWs in Nazi Germany



Iowan Thearl Mesecher was a POW in Nazi Germany for 14 months.



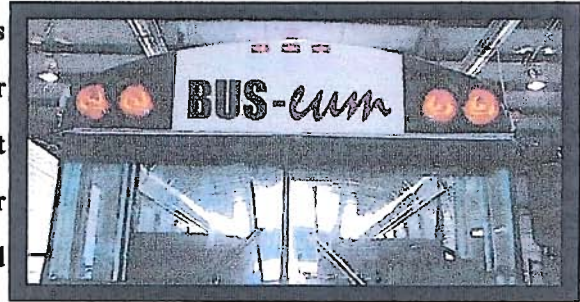
The BUS-eum 1 awaits the installation of graphics and the exhibit, March 2004

The Upper Midwest has unique connections to the World War II European-theater prisoner of war (POW) experience. They occurred during the Third Reich, which is what Germany's Nazis defined as the era of their empire. The first U.S. troops sent to Europe came from the Iowa-based 34th "Red Bull" Division. This division consisted of men from Iowa, the Dakotas and Minnesota. They served for more than 600 days, which was the longest uninterrupted duty of any U.S. unit in the history of the U.S. Army. About 2,000 soldiers from the 34th Division were captured in North Africa in February of 1943. They were captured in February 1943 by German *Afrikakorps* troops, led by Field Marshall Erwin Rommel. (Thousands of other Midwest men spent time as POWs, too, but in smaller numbers.) Later, pilots shot down during air raids over Germany formed a second wave of Midwest POWs imprisoned in Nazi Germany. Until the Battle of Bulge took place in December of 1944, just west of Germany in Belgium and Luxembourg, a disproportionate share of U.S. POWs in the Third Reich came, per capita, from the Upper Midwest. Minorities were among those POWs and their struggles were worsened by racism within

the Army and at home.

Despite the uniqueness of this legacy, virtually no one is aware of the special role Midwest soldiers played in the larger U.S. WWII experience. This is a disadvantage as we witness yet another cycle of global war and conflict: we forget what our ancestors experienced; we fail to learn from those experiences and apply whatever lessons they might offer us today. The non-profit

educational organization **TRACES** is bringing these stories to life through the creation of its **BUS-eum**—a 40-foot school bus converted into a mobile museum.



The exhibit consists of narrative display panels illustrated with photographs and documents, audio and DVD documentaries, artifacts and more. This exhibit will bring the stories of Midwest POWs in Nazi Germany to both large and small communities around the region. Remembering the experiences of the POWs in their communities of origin is a unique adventure in U.S. history. The **BUS-eum** is the only known mobile museum in the nation focused on the experiences

and related historical contexts of U.S. POWs. **TRACES** will bring it to both Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma between Labor Day and Veterans Day, fall 2007, with the exhibit *Behind Barbed Wire: Midwest POWs in Nazi Germany*. The **BUS-eum** will visit the seven other Midwestern states in the next two years.

This educational experience has been built upon years of research and gathered support. The International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva and the Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin have supplied hundreds of photos for the exhibit that otherwise are unknown in the United States. Indiana-born former POW and best-selling author Kurt Vonnegut has given **TRACES** free and unrestricted use of *Slaughterhouse Five* his account of having been present during the firebombing of Dresden. Funding partners in this project



include the Iowa Arts Council, Thomas Bus Sales, Firestone Agricultural Tire, WOI Radio, the Gold Star Military Museum, most Midwest states' Humanities councils, civic organizations, private individuals and many more.

Beyond Barbed Wire explores the human context of the POW experiences. Implicitly, it addresses five primary questions:

- 1.) Why did some Midwest POWs survive certain conditions or experiences, while others did not?
- 2.) What roles did art, free-time, and religion play in helping those men who did survive imprisonment by the Nazi regime?
- 3.) Why did some Germans or Austrians assist U.S. POWs, while others did not?
- 4.) How did the liberated POWs later come to terms with their own experiences, and
- 5.) How do nations and the individuals who constitute a nation come to reconciliation?

The **BUS-eum** will bring *Behind Barbed Wire* to hundreds of communities and enrich their historical awareness of their connections to the greater World War II drama. The exhibit will appeal to both children and senior citizens, as well as to urban and rural residents. Valuable discussion and reflection will be sparked amongst diverse audiences about local history and culture, and about current issues related to military service and war. **TRACES'** motto is "We bring HISTORY to LIFE!" That mission will be furthered when the **BUS-eum** tours the very region whose men are celebrated in this unique exhibit.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Traveling Exhibit about Midwest Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany Coming Soon

Hardly anyone alive today is aware that the first U.S. troops sent to fight in WWII came from the 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.

An exhibit which explores the experiences of Midwest prisoners of war (POWs) captured in Hitler's Third Reich, and the human context in which their experiences took place is currently set to tour Delaware this fall. The exhibit is called "Behind Barbed wire" and has been seen in over 20 different states and by thousands of individuals. The St. Paul-based, non-profit educational organization TRACES created this exhibit. The exhibit, housed in a converted school bus, will reach as many communities as possible on it's way across the state.

Barring unforeseen difficulties the *BUS-eum will be in Georgetown from 5 PM to 8 PM on Monday, October 4, 2010; it will be at the Marvel Carriage Museum at 510 South Bedford Street. The local contact person is Rosalie Walls at (302) 855-9660 or e-mail, marvelmuseum@juno.com*

"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?

Pg 2 POWs Exhibit

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 wave 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?"