



# Mobile Museum remembers German POWs

By Alex Minkin  
STAFF WRITER

It was painted a deep army green with posters that outlined the Geneva Convention barricading the windows. There were barbed wire graphics surrounding a message that read "Internment: it could happen to you." This was no rubber-ducky yellow school bus. This was a "Bus-eum," that housed stories of redemption and reckoning from the darkest period of human history.

"Held on the Home Front" tells the unknown stories of some 372,000 German prisoners of war (POWs) in the United States from 1943-1946. The exhibit is held in a reconstructed school bus, outfitted with boards displaying photographs and documents from the WWII era. It was parked outside of Duke Hall on Sept. 8 and 9.

"I was fascinated by some of the information in the bus," said senior Matt Clausen. "The extent to which these prisoners were involved in American's lives amazed me."

Irving Kellerman, the museum's traveling docent, was happy to relay his knowledge of German prisoners in the United States.

"Late in the war, appropriated ocean liners were sending 15,000 American soldiers to Europe and bringing just as many German POWs back," Kellerman said. "Housing prisoners in Britain was a threat because they could potentially rise up and surround the island's capital. Sending the POWs to America was the best way to prevent them from escaping back to Europe."

Most of the prisoners, however, had no such plans of escape. There were officers who clung to Nazi ideology, but the vast majority of soldiers were young draftees.

"They were treated as friends," Kellerman said. "They enjoyed working. Their jobs included harvesting crops, falling trees, building roadways and constructing housing."

The United States not only met the regulations of the Geneva Convention, it surpassed them. Many POWs formed special relationships with their employers.

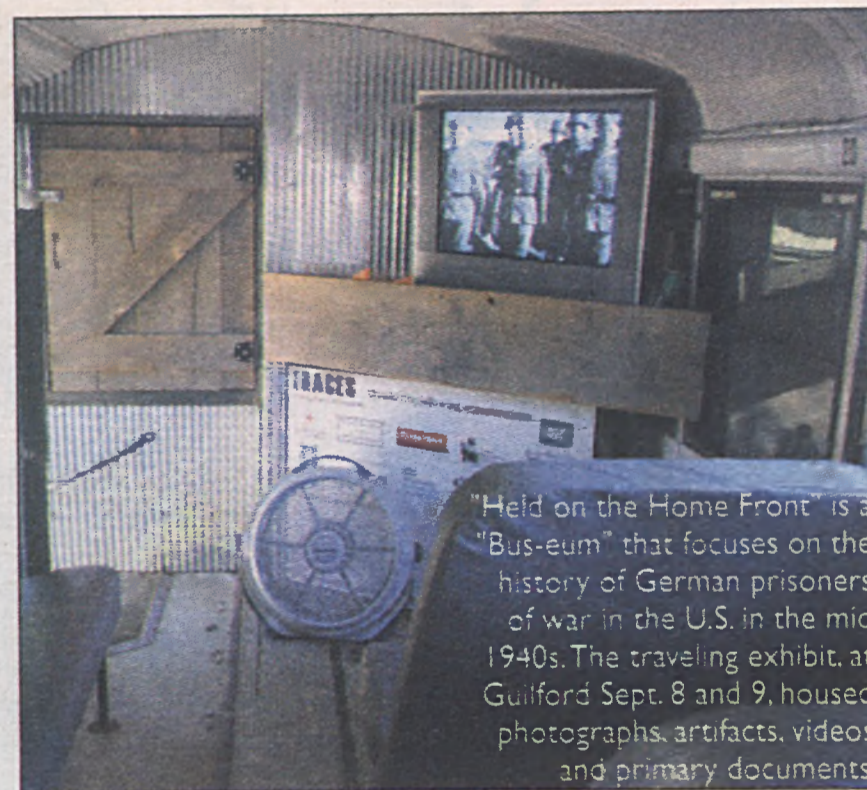
"The Quakers were known for building relationships with the POWs," Kellerman said. "They were often invited to Sunday dinners and meetings for worship. They also made sure the POWs had plenty of books, almost all of which were banned in Germany."

"This is what made the POW situation in the U.S. so significant," said Philip Slaby, assistant professor of history. "The U.S. began to rebuild two years before the war was over by exposing these men to a democratic way of life."

Other stories, however, underscored the non-democratic race relations within America.

"The Geneva Convention guaranteed the rights of the German POWs," Slaby noted. "There were no such guarantees for Japanese-Americans during the internment of 1942."

There was a story in the museum



"Held on the Home Front" is a "Bus-eum" that focuses on the history of German prisoners of war in the U.S. in the mid 1940s. The traveling exhibit, at Guilford Sept. 8 and 9, housed photographs, artifacts, videos and primary documents.



PHOTOS BY CLARE OOSTERHOUDT, GUILFORDIAN

about a black military police unit that guarded POWs on a train. When the train traveled through the South the prisoners were allowed to sit, but the black military unit was not.

Greensboro had its own relationship with German POWs.

On Sept. 9, Director of the Friends Center Max Carter led a group of students to the old Coble farm, which now sits on the property of Friends Homes West.

"POWs would pile in Walter Coble's truck each day for work," said Carter. "They reconstructed the foundation of a barn that still stands today."

Friends Homes West will soon expand its housing and unless the barn is put on a historical registry, it will be lost forever.

"I was surprised to find such a significant piece of history right across the street from Guilford," said sophomore Tim Leisman. "It's very unfortunate that the barn will probably be destroyed."

On the evening of Sept. 9, Kellerman and his "Bus-eum" drove on to their next destination. During their visit, I learned a little bit about humanity and that if I want to travel to the past, all I have to do is cross the street or jump on a bus.