

UWO faculty, students collaborate on Neenah Historical Society bomb shelter exhibit

by Derek Paulus - Monday, April 29, 2013

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/26948/uwo-faculty-students-collaborate-on-neenah-historical-society-exhibit/>

For more than 40 years of the Cold War, many Americans found themselves gripped by the fear of nuclear attack after the Soviet Union became the world's second nuclear power on Aug. 29, 1949.

The government responded to this concern by forming evacuation plans in the event of a nuclear attack and stocking public fallout shelters. Still, some citizens took safety into their own hands, building private fallout shelters for the protection of their family and themselves.

One of these family fallout shelters was tucked beneath the yard of a Neenah residence, owned by University of Wisconsin Oshkosh graduate student Carol Hollar-Zwick. It will be the focus of a free, upcoming exhibit at the Neenah Historical Society, 343 Smith St., Neenah, opening May 5 from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. The exhibit will remain open to the public during the same time every Sunday in May and June.

The creation of the exhibit is a joint effort between UW Oshkosh faculty and students, the Neenah Historical Society and the Wisconsin Humanities Council, which provided a \$2,000 grant.

“This is a good metaphor for history, literally, in your backyard,” said history professor Stephen Kercher, who worked with the team that created the exhibit.

Kercher will also be presenting some background information on the exhibit at the Neenah Public Library May 1 at 7 p.m.

When Hollar-Zwick and her husband, Ken Zwick, first opened the 1960s-era shelter years after they originally moved into the residence, they discovered water had filled the space, leaving various supply cases floating on top. Fortunately, the items in these cases remained dry and will be on display at the exhibit.

Though the shelter is poured concrete and therefore immovably fixed into the ground, a replica was created of the 8-foot-by-10-foot shelter for the exhibit.

Kercher said the exhibit provides a local perspective on a much broader historical topic. The exhibit will, however, provide some historical context to accompany its focus on the family fallout shelter.

In addition to other audio and visual components, the exhibit will display a 1961 episode of *The Twilight Zone* that focuses on the subject of nuclear fallout shelters. Kercher said that the private letters of Rod Serling, the creator of the show, suggested that the topic of this episode was controversial and sparked a great deal of public response.

“I imagine it would be a reminder of how scared people were... It does provide a window into a very anxious time,” he said of the exhibit.

Kercher said few Americans built private shelters like the one represented, as it would have cost half of the median salary at the time. This meant that much of the public had to rely on public fallout shelters in the event of nuclear war, making private shelters like the one in Neenah controversial.

“If you build one for yourself you’re saying, ‘good luck, everyone else,’” Kercher said.

History major Austin Frederick also worked on the team developing the exhibit and said that controversy also arose over the debate on how to best protect the public if a nuclear weapon were to explode nearby.

Frederick researched Cold War civil defense policies in a class of Kercher’s and was invited to work on the exhibit. Frederick said the debate was over whether evacuation to another city or to fallout shelters would be the safest option for citizens in the event of a nuclear attack.

“It just shows the real challenges there were in the government,” he said.

Frederick’s research revealed that Wisconsin was divided into two areas—targets areas and reception areas. Target areas were cities most likely to suffer a nuclear attack, such as Milwaukee, Madison and Green Bay. Reception areas were cities that people would flee to if a nuclear attack was imminent.

Frederick worked with other students to create panels to share information on this topic with visitors to the exhibit.

“My exhibition panels capture the national, state and local history of civil defense preparation during the Cold War,” he said. “It demonstrates that civil defense was not just big city stuff, but that it permeated down to the small communities right here in Wisconsin.”

UW Oshkosh’s Dempsey Hall also contains remnants of the Cold War era. Located near the first floor stairwell beside one of Dempsey’s southeast entrances is a yellow and black sign labeled "Fallout Shelter" with an arrow pointing to a door just beneath it.

Kercher said that although generalizations about the fear felt by American citizens are difficult to make, he said that fear was clearly evident during the period.

“Certainly people living in large urban areas such as New York or Washington D.C. had more reason to fear a nuclear attack,” he said. “But the Neenah resident who built his shelter was certainly scared enough to take this precaution. The threat of nuclear attack was abstract but very real.”

Kercher said those living today can hear “from the remembrances of those Americans who grew up during the Cold War that the threat of nuclear war was an oppressive reality.” He quoted part of the 1962 *Port Huron Statement* that was written by Students for a Democratic Society, a student activist group during 1960s America.

The statement makes it clear that Cold War fear was all too real.

“The enclosing fact of the Cold War... brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends and millions of abstract ‘others’ we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time,” the statement said. “We might deliberately ignore, or avoid or fail to feel all other human problems, but not these two, for these were too immediate and crushing in their impact, too challenging in the demand that we as individuals take the responsibility for encounter and resolution.”

Learn more:

- ["Take Cover, Neenah! Backyard Family Fall-Out Shelters in Cold War America"](#)
- [Wisconsin Humanities Council](#)