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NEWS RELEASE

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AGREEMENT PRESERVES HISTORIC DETENTION CAMP AREA

MISSOULA –

With the outbreak of World War II, sleepy Fort Missoula became home to about 1,000 Italian nationals, a similar number of Japanese and Peruvian-Japanese aliens and a few Germans. They were housed in the fort's Alien Detention Camp from 1941 to 1944.

The camp inmates were all men, and none were American citizens. Most of the Italians were from impounded Axis ships or the New York World's Fair. The Japanese had been living on U.S. soil, and many were among the most prominent leaders of their communities. Perhaps they would have liked to become citizens but were prevented by U.S. Alien Exclusion Laws.

The forced detention of these people in Western Montana created a strange and fascinating chapter in Missoula history. And now that history will be protected by a new agreement among The University of Montana, Missoula County and the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula.

The parties in the agreement own property once used for the Alien Detention Camp, and they have signed a memorandum of understanding to preserve, interpret and maintain the former camp barracks area.

In addition, they will cooperate to obtain National Landmark Status for Fort Missoula. Then in 2011 they will jointly sponsor a conference about the alien internment period to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the United States' entry into World War II.

“We feel a responsibility to preserve this historic area and what occurred there for the benefit of future generations,” UM President George Dennison said. “Scholars still work to unravel the full story of the camp. Certainly some of the detainments must have seemed unavoidable, while others remain very much in doubt, suggesting lessons for leaders, now and in the future.”

UM and the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula will work together to create learning opportunities for students and the public, including classroom education, fieldwork, distance learning and internships. Future exhibits, programs and lectures are expected.

The University and the museum already have a long history of working together. Robert Brown, the museum's executive director, is an affiliate faculty member in UM's Department of History, and the museum offers internships for UM history students.

“What happened at the Fort Missoula Alien Detention Camp is a unique and important part of Missoula's history, Montana's history and America's history,” Brown said. “The opportunity to partner with The University of Montana in preserving and interpreting this important site for future generations to learn from is exciting for all of us.”

The Historical Museum at Fort Missoula now occupies what was the Alien Detention Camp headquarters. UM owns a few buildings left from the camp era that are currently used for storage or University research.

UM and museum officials will appoint a joint planning committee to generate ideas about how to move the proposals forward. The group should have a detailed plan by June 1.

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