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Event explores history, art, lasting impact of WWII Home Front images by Franklin County photographer

Ottawa, Kansas— On May 5, the Franklin County Historical Society will host “Home Front in the Heartland, Revisited,” a special event exploring the history, art, and lasting impact of Franklin County photographer J.B. Muecke’s photographs of Midwesterners doing their part to support the war effort during WWII. The program begins at 7 p.m. and will be held in the auditorium at Neosho County Community College, 900 East Logan, in Ottawa, Kansas.

J.B. Muecke (sometimes spelled Mickey) lived most of his adult life in Ottawa, Kansas, where he worked as an independent photographer who often sold his images to the *Ottawa Herald*. For decades, he captured the story of Franklin County, from circuses to tornadoes, floods to the construction of I-35. However, many of his most iconic photographs were shot during the early 1940s. Muecke captured images of children gathering newspapers for paper drives, farmers collecting scrap metal from their fields, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts supporting War Bond rallies, and shopkeepers and customers dealing with wartime rationing. Christmas images of children show framed photographs of fathers in uniform in the background. He even documented German POWs as they worked on farms bereft of local labor.

Thanks to a Heritage Grant from the Kansas Humanities Council, the Franklin County Historical Society had the resources to develop an intense research and oral history project around Muecke’s home front photos. Scholars included Franklin County native Dr. Virgil Dean, longtime editor of the Kansas State Historical Society’s *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*; Henry Fortunato, visiting fellow at the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas and founder of Sunflower Republic LLC, a consulting and creative services firm that develops public history projects; and John Pultz, art historian and associate professor at The Kress Foundation Department of Art History at the University of Kansas.

While Fortunato and Dean examined the photographs in their historical context, Pultz examined the artistry in Muecke’s photographs and how Muecke carefully framed the images to convey certain ideas and ideals.

According to Pultz, although Muecke’s images show real Franklin Countians making real contributions to the war effort, there was a deliberateness in how Muecke framed, lighted, and angled images in order to stress Franklin County’s commitment to patriotism.

“There is an incredible clarity in Muecke’s mind in what he’s trying to do,” said Pultz. “Muecke comes up with an image that enunciates what he’s trying to convey instead of just capturing a photo of happenstance.”

As a result, many of Muecke’s photographs tell a complete story without even needing a caption, such as a photograph of people reading posted lists of local men in the armed services, or a photograph of a little girl dropping her donation to the Red Cross into a “U.S. Mail” box.

During the May 5 event, Virgil Dean and Henry Fortunato will join Deborah Barker of the Franklin County Historical Society to review the stories of these Home Front photos and their lasting impact. The event is open to the public and free to attend, and community members are invited to help identify people and places documented in the images as well as share their memories of J.B. Muecke.

After this event, the photographs and research will be developed into an exhibit that will travel across Kansas.

Founded in 1937, the Franklin County Historical Society strives to preserve, present, and promote the history of Franklin County, Kansas. For more information, visit www.olddepotmuseum.org.

The Kansas Humanities Council is a nonprofit organization that supports community-based cultural programs, serves as a financial resource through an active grant-making program, and encourages Kansans to engage in the civic and cultural life of their communities. For more information, visit www.kansashumanities.org.

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Media Contact:

Deborah Barker, Executive Director, Franklin County Historical Society
work: (785) 242-1232 cell: (785) 418-3810 barkerd@olddepotmuseum.org