

## Texas A&M Professors Research German POWs In Texas

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COLLEGE STATION - Texas A&M University professors are researching a little-known facet of Texas history - German prisoners of war.

Historians Arnold Krammer and Jack Lala are writing a book describing the lives of POWs in Texas, and Michael Waters is leading an excavation of one of the largest POW camps in the country, located just outside of Hearne. Waters, an anthropologist and geography professor, and a group of Texas A&M students are compiling the findings into a book about Camp Hearne.

During World War II, about 425,000 German prisoners were held in the United States. Camp Hearne held a maximum of 4,500 prisoners.

"These were not concentration camps, but POW camps protected by the Geneva Convention," Krammer explained. "The prisoners were treated decently."

In 1943, the first German POWs were sent to the United States. Most were 18 to 23 and had never experienced democracy. Hitler had taken over Germany in 1933, when most were only about nine years old.

"They learned about democracy while they were here in the United States," Waters said. "They learned that you could have a difference of opinion and not be carted off to jail."

Many were treated so well that they returned to Germany with an affinity for the United States, Krammer said.

"When you are captured in a war, you don't know how you will be treated," he said. "But they were treated not only decently, but in a friendly way. They were given all the things that a soldier who's been living in a foxhole for months suddenly comes to appreciate.

"It had a great effect on them. Many returned to Germany and became very good friends of America."

Both Krammer and Waters have interviewed former POWs, former guards, and others as part of their research.

German prisoners sometimes had wine or beer with their evening meals, could buy flowers and write letters, Krammer said. The women of Bryan, on rare occasions, held dances for the prisoners at Camp Hearne.

Despite the good treatment, all was not perfect at the POW camps. Some soldiers attempted to escape. The camps were enclosed with two sets of barbed wire fences and guard towers. Inside each camp were several compounds where the prisoners were segregated by rank. Some prisoners tried to escape by pole-vaulting over fences, burrowing beneath fences, or jumping from rooftops. Most were caught and returned within hours or days.

"Some tried to float down the Brazos River on a homemade raft," Krammer said. "Others escaped and tried to march to New Braunfels. They saw the city on a map and thought they would be welcome in a town with a German name."

When Camp Hearne opened in 1943, the camp experienced riots between anti-Nazi factions and other German prisoners, Waters said.

"There was a murder in Compound 1 in 1943," he said. "Hugo Krauss was beaten badly one night and died a week later in a hospital

in Temple. He was attacked because some of the other prisoners thought he betrayed to the Americans the location of a secret, short wave radio."

During the war, the United States had so many men fighting overseas that some of the German prisoners were put to work harvesting fruit and chopping cotton, Krammer said.

"I met farmers who still talk about how wonderful it was to have the Germans working on the farm, and how courteous they were," Krammer said. "They helped bring in the crops when we had nobody else."

According to the Geneva Convention, non-commissioned officers were not required to work. As a result, Waters said, many found other ways to spend their time, such as painting, taking classes on English and geography, or building fountains and other structures. Some of the prisoners built a theater in Hearne where concerts and plays were held.

Excavations at Camp Hearne uncovered remnants of some of these structures. More than 1,500 artifacts have been found, Waters said, including mess kits, canteens, belt buckles, boot fragments, buttons and toothpaste tubes.

For more information on Camp Hearne, including maps and photographs, visit Waters' website at <http://nautarch.tamu.edu/anth/waters>. For more information on German POWs in the United States, see Krammer's two books: *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, and *Hitler's Last Soldier in America*.

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