



Episode 2, 2005: Texas POW Camp Hearne, Texas

Gwen: Our final story explores a forgotten piece of World War II history that unfolds on a mysterious plot of land deep in the heart of Texas.

It's summer, 1942, and Hitler's armies are experiencing some of their first defeats, in North Africa. War officials in Great Britain are in crisis. They have no more space to house the steadily mounting numbers of captured German soldiers. Finally, in August, America opened its borders to an emergency batch of prisoners, marking the beginning of a little-known chapter in American history, when thousands of German soldiers marched into small town, U.S.A. More than 60 years later, that chapter is about to be reopened by a woman named Lisa Trampota, who believes the U.S. government planted a German prisoner of war camp right on her family land in Texas.

Lisa Trampota: By the time I really got interested and wanted to learn more, everyone had died that knew anything about it. I'd love to learn more about my family's history and how I'm connected with that property.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright. I've come to Hearne, Texas, to find some answers to Lisa's questions. Hi, Lisa?

Lisa: Hi.

Gwen: I'm Gwen.

Lisa: Hi, Gwen, it's very nice to meet you.

Gwen: So, I got your phone call. Now tell me exactly what you'd like for me to find out for you.

Lisa: Well, I heard, through family legend, that we owned some property outside of Hearne, and that in the 1940s the U.S. government decided to purchase it to establish a prisoner of war camp for German prisoners. So I'm really curious -- well, is that true? Did my family land get turned into a prisoner of war camp?

Gwen: Yeah, well, have you heard anything about life at the camp?

Lisa: I did hear a rumor that there was some animosity, that there were
Actually Nazis there, the hard-core Nazis, and I heard that there was actually violence that took place there.

Gwen: Although Lisa has heard some disturbing rumors about this piece of land, she's never been able to find it. Any locations, landmarks that you've heard about that I can take as leads?

Lisa: Well, I've heard that there is -- actually the site is located near the Robertson County Fairgrounds.

Gwen: Okay, well, that will give me something to go on. The existence of Japanese internment camps in America during World War II has been well documented, but few of us know there were camps for German prisoners, right here in Texas. And I grew up nearby in Houston. And I certainly never heard about Nazi activity and violence at these camps. I want to take a look at the site Lisa's talking about. Here's Robertson County Fairgrounds. It's hard to tell what I'm looking at here. There are no markings of buildings, and it's very overgrown. The place does have a spooky, almost haunted, feel to it. Wait. This looks like the foundation of a building. Long and narrow. I can't tell what it was. And look at this. It looks like some sort of ornamental structure. Are these spigots? Could this have been a fountain? A fire hydrant? Dated 1942 -- the date tells me there were some structures here during World War II, but I still can't tell whether this was a POW Camp. It's a fascinating prospect that 60 years ago, this tiny town hosted German prisoners of war. But I'm still suspi-



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cious of the whole story. I'm on my way to meet Arnold Krammer at the chamber of commerce. He teaches at Texas A&M University and knows the local history. As soon as I walk in the door, my skepticism about Lisa's story vanishes.

Gwen: Well, Arnold, now I know why you wanted me to meet you at the Hearne chamber of commerce. This is an extraordinary model.

Arnold Krammer: This is the camp layout for Camp Hearne.

Gwen: So Lisa was right. There was a POW camp in Hearne.

Arnold: These are the American guards and the administrators. You entered the barbed wire here through this cattle-guard arrangement, and now what you have are three compounds called compounds no. 1, no. 2, and no. 3.

Gwen: More or less, how many guards would you have and how many prisoners would be in a camp like this?

Arnold: We started out with a thousand guards, and the number of prisoners continued to grow as they poured in. The ultimate number of prisoners here in camp Hearne were 4,800, in a town which is less than five miles away of 3,100 people.

Gwen: It wasn't just Hearne, Texas, where Hitler's soldiers wound up. Arnold explained that the number of German prisoners interned in the United States soared to nearly half a million by war's end, housed in some 650 locations around the country. Defeated soldiers from General Rommel's legendary Afrika Korps came to Hearne in part because of the Geneva Convention's Treaty, which requires that prisoners be housed in a similar climate to where they were captured.

Arnold: And since the first prisoners were captured in North Africa, the war department determined that the closest equivalent to Tunisia was the American South. We had cotton fields not far from here, and these prisoners could be used to chop cotton and bring in the crops.

Gwen: Lisa's story is now making a whole lot of sense. Now I want to see if any part of the camp was built on her family's land. She told me her family's name was Catropia. I called the Southwest Regional Office of the National Archives and asked them to send me any land records they have on camp Hearne. Here we have, "United States of America, land in Robertson County, Texas." Ah, "Exhibit A. 720 acres, more or less." Here's the date. "17th of July, 1942." So that's when the land was expropriated. "For a 3000-man alien enemy internment camp at Hearne, Texas." And it was originally to be 3,000 men, but it gets to be much larger, as Krammer told me. Still no sign of a document that names the owners of the land expropriated to make Camp Hearne. Here's a map. Here is the internment camp, this long parcel, northwest of Hearne. Great! Here's a property map that shows which families owned the parcels that were taken by the government for the camp. And there's Catropia! Here's Lisa's family's name. Great! "Exhibit B." Catropia owned 300 acres, so he owned more than anyone else whose land had been appropriated for the camp site. So Lisa's family did own property that was bought to build camp Hearne. Now, on to Lisa's second question. Was there Nazi activity, and possibly even violence, at the camp? I want to see what the local library has. Hearne is a small town, and I'm sure a prisoner of war camp would have been big news back then. Oh, here's something. Good, let's see. "Christmas at Hearne prisoner of war camp. The following article, written for publication in Fort Worth." So it seems as if they're celebrating Christmas, several hundred German soldiers, at the Hearne prisoner of war camp. It looks very peaceful. They have a special meal. They can send off cards and pictures. Hm, I can't

find anything about Nazis or violence at Camp Hearne. That last article actually makes life there sound more like a summer camp. Oh, great! Here's a story. "Excavation at Camp Hearne Reveals Artifacts From World War II POW Camp." Looks like an archaeologist named Michael Waters organized a dig on the site in 1996. And it seems as if he's been working on this for a number of years and has found, not only objects, but a number of archaeological foundations of the various buildings. Maybe he can tell me if the rumors about Nazi violence at the camp are true. For two years, Michael Waters and his team sifted through the earth at the site of the former Camp Hearne. Inch by careful inch, they uncovered the forgotten story of the German prisoners who came to this part of Texas more than half a century earlier. I located Michael Waters and told him that I'd come across conflicting information about Camp Hearne. I've heard about Nazi violence there, but the newspaper accounts suggest that life at the camp had been peaceful, even pleasant.

Michael Waters: Oh, yeah, as soon as the German prisoners arrived in June of 1943, they -- while they liked the barracks and the surroundings, they started to enhance the area. They planted flowers. They created small miniature castles. They made elaborate fountains.

Gwen: I saw something that looked like a fountain, but that didn't make any sense. There was a concave stone surface and a pedestal in the center and I think three spigots around it.

Michael: Is this the one?

Gwen: Oh, that was it, that was it! Because it had this -- this curve here and then the pedestal had what, this kneeling woman.

Michael: And the water came shooting out onto the pedestal that was held by the woman and then down into the -- into the pond.

Gwen: Michael told me that the prisoners even built a theater, where they put on one performance of a play about the Jesse James gang. Well, this is all fascinating, but I've heard that there was also Nazi activity at Camp Hearne. Did you find any evidence of that in your excavations?

Michael: Oh, yeah, there -- there was quite a bit of evidence for -- for Nazi activity.

Gwen: I was shocked by what Michael told me. Behind the peaceful facade, the camp was a hotbed of ruthless Nazism. In Germany, Hitler had used the media to dominate the German population. Buried deep in the Texas earth, Michael found evidence that Nazis at Camp Hearne had done the same thing, even publishing their own pro-Hitler newspaper.

Michael: What this is, is this is a stamp, an ink stamp, and it says "Die Mahnung" on it, and when you translate this, it means "the warning." It's -- it's more of a warning like remember who you are. You're a German soldier and --

Gwen: And loyal to Hitler?

Michael: And loyal to Hitler, right. And this -- what this turned out to be is this was the top banner of the underground Nazi newspaper at Camp Hearne.

Gwen: The Nazi control within POW camps around the United States was disturbing. In declassified wartime documents, Michael discovered how the Nazis at Hearne built a secret underground room, complete with a radio transmitter, and held kangaroo courts to determine which prisoners needed to be disciplined. Hitler's

supporters even infiltrated the post office at camp Hearne, so they could be in contact with other Nazi prisoners in the United States. But there were also German soldiers at Hearne who opposed Hitler's ideology, and the struggle for power between these two factions became explosive.

Michael: Eventually, the Nazis did obtain the upper hand and -- and basically ruled over the camp as kind of a shadow element within the camp. And if you had any kind of anti-Nazi thought, you kept it to yourself.

Gwen: But how were they able to carry that out right under the eyes of the authorities and the guards? Did anybody care?

Michael: Well, I -- I think the Americans turned a blind eye to what they were seeing in the camp, because the most important thing to the American authorities was to maintain military discipline within the camp.

Gwen: I asked Michael if the Nazi activity at camp Hearne ever led to violence. The story he told me next provided my final answer for Lisa. Back at Lisa's home, I tell her that there was indeed a German prisoner of war camp at Hearne, and I explained what Michael Waters told me about the power of the Nazis there. Lisa, what you heard about Nazi activity at Camp Hearne was just the surface. In some ways, the Nazis ran the camp. I tell her that an organized Nazi conspiracy to control the prisoners at Hearne did eventually lead to violence.

Michael: At Hearne, it culminated with the murder of Hugo Krauss. He was a corporal in compound 1. What happened is -- is he turned in the location of the secret shortwave radio, and the Nazi element found out who did this. So on the evening of December 17, 1943, after Hugo Krauss had gone to sleep, a party of about six to eight attackers was organized. And around 11:30 in the evening, that's when they entered the barracks and began to beat him severely. And he died about six days later of his injuries that he received during the beating.

Lisa: That's awful. It is really sad to hear that.

Gwen: I've got one more thing I want to tell you, but it'll require my taking you to a place that you've never been before. Few steps up, there you go. Stand, get your bearings. Okay, Lisa, open your eyes. This was your family's land that was part of Camp Hearne.

Lisa: This is remarkable. [chuckling] Oh, I can't believe you found it, I just can't. You can't imagine how many times I've gone past this land and not even realized that it once belonged to my family. Unbelievable. Thank you so much.

Gwen: Nazis terrorized other POW camps in the U.S. According to one study, they committed 167 murders or forced suicides of German prisoners. But the violent deaths of men such as Hugo Krauss drove the U.S. authorities to action. The Nazis and anti-Nazis were eventually segregated into separate camps and compounds.

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