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Opening a New Window Into Hemingway's Life, and U.S.-Cuba Ties

By Jennifer Howard, Chronicle of Higher Education

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More than 50 years after his death, Ernest Hemingway is helping to thaw Cuban-American relations.

The American writer loved Cuba and made it his home for more than 20 years, living there from 1939 to 1960. Thanks to an unusual collaboration between an American nonprofit organization and the Cuban government, Hemingway's Cuban home, Finca Vigía, is being restored, and many of the papers he left behind—including letters, passports, hotel bills, and household accounts—are being preserved, digitized, and made available outside of Cuba, many for the first time.

At a news conference held on Monday at the U.S. Capitol, representatives of the [Finca Vigía Foundation](#), supporters, and a Hemingway scholar celebrated the digitization of 2,000 items the writer left behind at Finca Vigía. The digitized images will be made available this year at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, in Boston, home to the largest collection of original Hemingway materials. The new collection joins 3,000 images from Finca Vigía released by the foundation and its partners in 2008.

Sandra Spanier, the general editor of Hemingway's letters and a professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, said there is no "bombshell" document to be found in the Finca Vigía collection. Mary Hemingway, the writer's widow, got permission to travel to Cuba in 1961 and remove manuscripts and other important papers.

Working under time and space constraints, she had to leave a lot behind, though, including some 9,000 books from Hemingway's library—about a third of them featuring his marginalia. She also left behind many of their personal effects, all preserved more or less as the Hemingway family had left them, and a wealth of documents full of "a sense of the texture of daily life at Finca Vigía," Ms. Spanier said. The Finca Vigía material reveals "the extent to which Hemingway did feel at home in Cuba."

Canned Trout and Pheasant

Among the documents are insurance papers and instructions for the domestic help on what to plant in the garden and how to care for the estate's many animal residents when the Hemingways were absent. Grocery lists and specialty orders give a sense of how the Hemingways lived and even what they ate. In April 1957, for instance, the Hemingways sent a large order to a gourmet emporium in New York. The order included 18 tins of "Capitaine Cook Marinated Mackerel,"

smoked rainbow-trout pâté, lobster and crab bisque, preserves and chutneys, and a whole pheasant and a whole guinea hen, both canned.

There are weather reports. Hemingway sometimes kept a notebook in which he recorded barometric pressure and wind speed and direction. During one hurricane season, he concluded a series of readings with the note, "Hurry up and wait for the Big Hurricane," with "Big" underlined.

There are packing lists and booksellers' receipts, too. For a trip in 1944 to Europe to file war dispatches for *Collier's* magazine, Hemingway bought a copy of John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* and a dictionary of military terms, according to Ms. Spanier.

As befits a world-traveling writer and sometime war correspondent who knew many of the prominent figures of the day, Hemingway left behind at Finca Vigía documents that record a life lived in and around big events and personalities. "He was an eyewitness to 20th-century history," Ms. Spanier said, and the Finca Vigía materials reflect that. Passports from the 1930s and 1940s record his travels, and the collection includes letters to and from such notables as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ingrid Bergman, and Hemingway's longtime editor Maxwell Perkins, whose granddaughter Jenny Phillips founded the Finca Vigía Foundation a decade ago, when she learned that the Hemingway house and its contents were falling into decay.

Persistence Pays Off

At the news conference, Ms. Phillips told stories of how her grandfather, "a very small Yankee intellectual with a romantic view of the outdoors," had loved spending time with the ruggedly adventurous Hemingway, and how they had bonded while fishing "in the blue waters of the Gulf Stream."

Ms. Phillips also talked about the difficulties of getting the requisite clearances from both governments to go to Finca Vigía and work with Cuban experts and caretakers to preserve the estate and its contents. "We have worked under incredible difficulties," she said. It took years of bipartisan effort stateside to bring it off, as well as the agreement and help of the Cuban Council of National Heritage.

Eventually, though, the foundation and its partners were able to arrange for specialists from the United States, including conservators from the Northeast Document Conservation Center, to travel to Cuba to help conserve and digitize documents and books, and provide training and materials needed for the work.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Mystic Seaport museum got involved in restoring the house and Hemingway's yacht.

Bob Vila, the original host of the PBS show *This Old House* and a Cuban-American, serves as co-chair of the foundation's board and has traveled to Cuba several times to help with the restoration. The EMC Corporation has helped provide financial support for the foundation's work.

It took political wrangling and persistence to make it possible for Cubans and Americans to collaborate on the work. U.S. Rep. Jim P. McGovern, a Massachusetts Democrat, has been closely involved with the project. He was the host of Monday's event, which was timed to coincide with the 60th anniversary of Hemingway's winning of the Pulitzer Prize for *The Old Man and the Sea*—a book he wrote at Finca Vigía.

Mr. McGovern is a founding member of the foundation and serves on its advisory board. He made a strong case at the event that it's time to repair Cuban-American relations and move beyond the lingering distrust and paranoia of the cold-war era.

"This is very much a Cuban-American project," he said. "This is about collaboration. It is about building trust." He said, "Our hope is that this is contagious, and there will be many more projects like this."

Politics or no politics, something had to be done to stabilize the archive, Ms. Phillips said. "These documents were in terrible condition," she said. "We couldn't wait for the political climate to change."