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BELL TOLLS FOR HEMINGWAY HOUSE IN CUBA?

by Bob Dart

WASHINGTON – In a victory for prose over politics, preservationists announced Thursday that the Bush administration has eased the trade embargo against Cuba enough to allow at least the first steps toward saving Ernest Hemingway's crumbling home on a hilltop near Havana.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation put "Finca Vigia" – the Cuban home where Hemingway lived from 1939 to 1960 and where he wrote "The Old Man and the Sea" and "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – on its 2005 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

In the nearly two decades that the list has been issued, this marks the first time a spot outside the United States has been included, said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust.

The United States has had a trade embargo against Cuba, with its Communist government headed by Fidel Castro, for four decades.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R.-Fla., an outspoken Castro opponent, said she would oppose the National Trust's effort.

"I will first verify how the permission process took place, then why the U.S government believes that historic preservation in a terrorist country is of our national interest, why U.S. citizens should want to use monies to refurbish a tourist site in a tourist apartheid society," she said.

Moe said preservationists have received permission from the Treasury Department to send a team of experts to prepare a preservation plan. However, he said, "We do not yet have a license to take financial resources to Cuba" to do the actual restoration.

"We're working on that," he said, citing "very good cooperation from both governments" -- the United States and Cuba.

"Ernest Hemingway is one of the world's most celebrated authors and Finca Vigia (Lookout Farm) is the home he loved best," said Moe. "Even though it stands on foreign soil, this house is part of the shared cultural heritage that defines us as Americans."

The house, built in 1886, has been so damaged by hurricanes, aging and deterioration that experts have called it a "preservation emergency" in danger of falling down, Moe said at a press conference.

It could cost \$2 million to \$4 million to save the building, but the true cost will not be known until the American engineers and architects examine the it later this summer, he said.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation was established in 1949 and is chartered by Congress. However, Moe said it has not received federal funding since 1998.

Saving the Hemingway house would depend on "significant restoration funds" being raised from private sources, and the governments of Cuba and the United States allowing the funds to be used, Moe said.

Hemingway's 15-acre estate overlooking the Caribbean Sea, which he shared with his third wife, reporter and author Martha Gellhorn, was left to the Cuban people after the author's suicide in 1961. It was turned into a museum and housed more than 2,000 of Hemingway's letters, discarded manuscripts and drafts, 3,000 photographs, hunting rifles, wild game trophies, bullfight posters, his personal library of 9,000 books and original furniture.

"There are tell-tale signs all over the house of his daily life there," said Phillips, who described a room with a yellow tile floor where Hemingway wrote on a Royal typewriter while standing up.

But now the roof is leaking, the foundation is crumbling, plaster is falling off walls, and mold and rot are rampant, said Moe. "The Cubans have been excellent stewards of this property but time and weather have taken their toll,"

Ros-Lehtinen did not know about the issue before being contacted by a reporter Thursday.

"The Hemingway House is for tourists. The people of Cuba are kept starving and medically needy by a despotic regime. If Castro wants to have a pretty tourist site, let him pay for it. He has consistently been listed by Forbes magazine as one of the world's richest men," she said.

Last year, the Bush administration denied a travel license for Cuba to the Hemingway Preservation Foundation in Concord, Mass.

The group's leader, Jenny Phillips, is the granddaughter of Maxwell Perkins, who was Hemingway's editor for 20 years. She has organized a campaign by writers and historians to get federal permission to restore the Cuban house.

"We believe the Hemingway home, Finca Vigia, like Mark Twain's home in Harford, Conn., and William Faulkner's in Oxford, Miss., is a vitally important literary and cultural landmark that must be saved for future generations," said the letter to the Treasury Department. Among the signers are Ken Burns, William Kennedy, John Irving, Barbara Kingsolver, Norman Mailer, Doris Kearns Godwin, Salman Rushdie and Edmund White.

"We do not consider this a political issue," they wrote. "As writers, our position is simple and clear: It is imperative that Finca Vigia and all its important papers, books, photographs and memorabilia of Ernest Hemingway not be lost forever."

The license issued by the Treasury Department authorizes the U.S. preservation team to share its research with the Cuban government. However, it says "transactions involving the actual restoration of the site require separate authorization."

"They know we're coming back to ask," said Moe, who was optimistic that the request would be granted.

The list of endangered historic places also includes the Belleview Hotel in Bellair, Fla.; Camp Security, a Revolutionary War POW camp in York County, Pa.; the Daniel Webster Farm in Franklin, N.H.; Eleutherian College in Madison, Ind.; the Ennis-Brown House in Los Angeles; endangered old buildings in downtown Detroit; Catholic churches in greater Boston; King Island, Alaska; the National Landscape Conservation System in several Western states; and the Hallowed Ground corridor in Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.