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TIME TAKING ITS TOLL ON HEMINGWAY HOME

Saving It, Though, Will Take More Diplomacy Than Carpentry

by Kevin Walker

TAMPA — Finca Vigia, or "Lookout Farm," is where Ernest Hemingway wrote the book that won him the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

It's also where Hemingway settled down for two decades after living in Chicago, Paris and Key West.

Hemingway — in a 1949 Holiday magazine article — called it a place "where morning is cool and fresh on the hottest day in summer" and "eighteen different kinds of mangoes grow on the long slope up to the house."

Unfortunately, it's falling apart. Among the problems: a leaking roof, a shifting foundation and an exterior damaged by last year's hurricanes.

On Thursday, a U.S. private preservation group placed Finca Vigia on its annual list of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places."

Here's the catch: The estate sits on a hillside outside Havana, Cuba.

Officials with the National Trust, a Washington-based nonprofit organization, hope international borders do not impede efforts to restore it. It is the first location outside the United States to make the trust's annual list.

"This is a very important historical landmark, both for the Cuban people and the American people. It's important that we cooperate on this," said Paul Edmondson, vice president and general counsel for the National Trust.

Other landmarks on the list include historic Catholic churches in the Boston area, Daniel Webster's farm in Franklin, N.H., and the Belleview Biltmore Resort & Spa in Belleair.

Harry E. Vanden, a professor in the Latin American and Caribbean Studies program at the University of South Florida, said the Cuban government likely will agree with any restoration plan.

"I'd bet my bottom dollar on it. The Cuban people are very proud of Ernest Hemingway," Vanden said.

E.J. Salcines, a judge and Cuban historian, agreed.

"Whether you like Hemingway or don't like Hemingway, he was a giant of American literature. You cannot discuss 20th century American literature without mentioning Ernest Hemingway," Salcines said.

Salcines, who used to travel to Havana before the communist revolution, once saw Hemingway in Cojimar, just outside Havana. Just a boy, he made note of the bearded American on the beach.

"It was years later when I realized: 'Hey, that was Ernest Hemingway!' "

Trip Planned

Edmondson said a group from the National Trust plans to travel to Cuba next week to meet with Cuban officials, clearing the way for a trip later this summer to Finca Vigia by architects and engineers from the United States.

The Bush administration has tightened restrictions on travel to Cuba. The U.S. government rejected a request last year from the Hemingway Preservation Foundation in Concord, Mass., to evaluate the estate's condition partially over concerns a restored Finca Vigia "would boost tourism to Cuba. That was a concern of the U.S. government," Edmondson said.

The National Trust made it clear that "this is not an effort to better tourism for Cuba. This is an effort to ensure our heritage is preserved," he said.

The current travel license runs only through November, however, and allows for evaluation, not work, on the house. Edmondson said the trust will need "future licensing" to do any work.

"We haven't been told we can't do it, but we haven't been told we can either," he said.

Vanden travels to Cuba often and saw Hemingway's estate several years ago.

Everything, he said, is as Hemingway left it. Books are still on shelves, pictures (including one of Hemingway and Fidel Castro) on the walls.

"That was the neat part. One had the feeling he had left and just not returned yet," Vanden said.

Linda Mendez, events coordinator for the Hemingway House and Museum in Key West, said a restored home certainly would bring people to Havana. The Hemingway House in Key West gets 400 to 600 visitors a day.

"People are just fascinated by Hemingway. He had a personal charisma and a wonderful writing style all his own," she said Thursday.

Longtime Resident

For literature lovers, Hemingway's Cuban home is a major landmark. Hemingway moved to Cuba in 1939, after living nine years in Key West. He ended up living in Cuba longer than any place else.

Hemingway had become a literary star — and gone through two wives — by the time he moved to Cuba. He had been spending more and more time there, anyway, after a fishing trip there in 1932 with Joe Russell, owner of Hemingway's favorite bar in Key West, Sloppy Joe's Bar. The pair left on a two-day trip. They returned four months later.

Hemingway returned to Havana often, taking rooms at Hotel Ambos Mundos. He eventually divorced his second wife and married a third, Martha Gellhorn. They settled in Havana. During these pre-Castro years, the area had become a playground for America's wealthy set. Hemingway, when not enjoying himself, did write novels, including "For Whom The Bell Tolls" and "The Old Man and the Sea," which won the Pulitzer in 1953.

Gellhorn convinced Hemingway to purchase the 15-acre estate, refusing to share a hotel suite in downtown Havana. Gellhorn had it renovated, and Hemingway ended up living there for 21 years.

One doesn't have to look hard for reasons why he liked it. He writes about it in "The Great Blue River," published in Holiday magazine in 1949. Among the reasons: the beautiful weather, the cockfights, the "strange and lovely birds," the shooting club nearby.

But mostly he loved "the great blue river" — the Gulf Stream.

In "Islands In The Stream," published after his death, Hemingway wrote: "In the mouth of the harbor the sea was very wild and confused and clear green water was breaking over the rock at the base of the Morro, the tops of the seas blowing white in the sun. It looks wonderful, he said to himself. It not only looks wonderful, it is wonderful."

WHAT HAPPENED

The National Trust on Thursday named Finca Vigia, the Cuban estate where Ernest Hemingway lived from 1939 to 1960, one of its "11 Most Endangered Historic Places."

The Pulitzer

Hemingway, considered one of greatest American writers of the 20th century, wrote "The Old Man And The Sea" while living there. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1953. His other novels include "The Sun Also Rises," "A Farewell to Arms" and "For Whom The Bell Tolls."

The Damage

Finca Vigia ("Lookout Farm") was built in 1886 by Catalan architect Miguel Pascuala y Bager. It has structural problems, including a leaking roof, a shifting foundation and exterior damage from last year's hurricanes.

The Trust

The National Trust, established in 1949, is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to raising money to preserve historical American landmarks. Public service announcements about the trust's endangered list will run this summer on the History Channel.

For information, go to www.nationaltrust.org.