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## Will the bell toll for Hemingway's Havana home?

by Howard LaFranchi

A house sags in Havana - and not just any house, but Ernest Hemingway's favored residence, where he wrote such classics as "For Whom the Bell Tolls" and "The Old Man and the Sea."

And so, declaring the sorry state of Finca Vigia a threat to a piece of American cultural history, the **National Trust for Historic Preservation** has named the old farmhouse on a hillside overlooking the Cuban capital one of America's most endangered historic places. At the same time, it has announced a binational program to begin preservation of the Nobel-Prize-winning author's cherished "Outlook Farm."

What makes the hands-across-the-Straits-of-Florida project so noteworthy is not just the fact that it is the first time the National Trust has placed a site outside the United States on its list of America's most endangered historic places.

It is also that the designation and restoration project involve working with the regime of Fidel Castro - the Western Hemisphere's sole remaining nondemocratic government, the annual target of human rights organizations for imprisonment of dissidents, and an "outpost of tyranny" in the eyes of the Bush administration.

Given that context, the Finca Vigia project can be seen two ways: as a people-to-people cooperative project placing a common cultural interest above political antagonism; or as one more crack in the embargo on exchange with the hemisphere's last dictatorial regime.

For Richard Moe, the National Trust's president, it is clearly the former. "We are not trying to argue policy [with this designation], we are simply trying to get to Cuba to preserve this endangered place," he says, "and to do it by working within the context of the two nations."

So far the project entails only the travel of a survey team from the US to work with officials of the Cuban Culture Ministry to assess what is needed to preserve the colonial-era house where Hemingway lived from 1939 to 1960. Although the State and Treasury departments have granted the Trust a license for a survey team to travel to Cuba legally, Mr. Moe is careful to add, "We do not yet have a license to take in any financial resources to restore the house."

And whether or not that ever happens remains a question whose answer is mired as much in the politics of the Cuban-American community as anything else.

Already the Trust's initial look-see at Finca Vigia, planned for this summer, is raising heated objections from opponents of any dealings with Mr. Castro's Cuba, including key members of Congress.

Declaring herself "100 percent against US funds being used to refurbish properties in a terrorist country such as Cuba," Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, a Cuban-American, says, "I will do all I can to stop this nonsensical venture."

According to Alex Cruz, Representative Ros-Lehtinen's press secretary, the congresswoman on Friday wrote letters to the State Department, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), and the National Trust, seeking a reversal in the granting of the travel licenses.

How far she and other critics of the project will get with an administration that appears to have been convinced of the designation's cultural value remains to be seen.

President Bush has gone along with some food sales to Cuba, mostly as a gesture to American farmers looking to expand foreign markets. But the administration has resisted congressional efforts to ease the ban on travel by Americans to the communist island - even refusing the request of an Iraq war veteran to visit family there - and has reversed steps taken by the Clinton administration to facilitate family contacts.

The Trust's Mr. Moe says his organization stepped in after another organization already involved with Hemingway archives and memorabilia, Boston's Hemingway Preservation Foundation, was denied a license last year to take a survey team to look at the house.

"We convinced the people at State that this was a legitimate exception to the [travel-ban] policy," he says.

Moe says the designation of Hemingway's house simply recognizes "an important piece of cultural heritage for us as well as for the Cuban people," and says its preservation shouldn't offend anyone. "I think most people see this for what it is," he says; "it doesn't have a political dimension to it."

Of course preservation efforts anywhere rarely escape political connotations, whether because of association with a dark or controversial past, or because preservation of old sites is sometimes seen as a tactic for stalling development and modernization.

For example, the 2005 "endangered historic places" list issued by the Trust last week includes much of downtown Detroit and the "hallowed ground" corridor of Civil War battlefields in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, which the Trust says is threatened by suburban sprawl.

The additional strike the "Outlook Farm" project has going against it is that it involves the political hot potato of Cuba. Quips Ros-Lehtinen, "If the National trust has run out of legitimate US buildings to protect and refurbish, I can provide them with a very long list of historic buildings in my congressional district that can use some refurbishing and maintenance."

Just how far any binational preservation of Finca Vigia proceeds may depend on how the project is perceived: as simply the restoration of an old house with intrinsic cultural value, or as a site for Cuban tourism. "If Castro wants a pretty tourist attraction, let him pay for it," says Ros-Lehtinen.

Wayne Smith, director of the Cuba Project at the Center for International Policy in Washington and a former chief of the US Interests Section in Havana, notes that the Hemingway Foundation's request for a travel license last year was denied after critics labeled the project as a boon to Cuban tourism.

"My guess is that this year the thing was presented in a different light, and it went through," Mr. Smith says. Noting that Treasury's OFAC office "has a lot of new people," he says this year's license approval probably squeaked through on its "reasonable" cultural merits.

But Smith - a longtime advocate of more open relations with Cuba - says he doubts the travel license is any harbinger of a broader shift on ties to Cuba.

"This is very preliminary, but the real sign will be whether or not they can put in any money to restore the house," he says. "I doubt one travel license means there's a new direction on Cuba they're planning to take."