

UP FRONT | CUBA

Cubans, Americans unite to save Hemingway home

U.S. preservationists have offered Cuba help in shoring up Ernest Hemingway's beloved home outside of Havana.

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The yellow-tiled room where Ernest Hemingway stood to write *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is empty now, his house stripped of its books and bull-fighting posters and bottle of Gordon's gin that stayed right where he left them for more than four decades after his death.

The famous artifacts have been tucked safely away, preservationists say, as part of a rare joint effort by Cubans and Americans to save the rotting Havana villa that Hemingway called home through 20-plus years, two wives and the 1954 Nobel Prize for literature.

"This is a unique literary shrine – one-of-a-kind," said Jenny Phillips, chairman of the board of the Hemingway Preservation Foundation and granddaughter of Hemingway's editor and friend, Max Perkins. "If it isn't preserved, it may be lost forever."

The author's beloved Finca Vigía, or Lookout Farm, suffers from structural problems and damage from tropical weather, most recently Hurricane Dennis. Built in 1886, the building's walls are crumbling, the pool is empty and the roof leaks, especially in Hemingway's writing room. Experts have called it a preservation emergency.

The Cuban government has begun restoration work but Americans like Phillips want to help, offering expertise and – eventually, they hope – financial resources.

"We see it as a shared responsibility," she said.

Last month, the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the home, used as a museum since Hemingway's death in 1961, on its annual list of endangered historic sites. It was the first time a non-American property has made the list.

"Even though the *finca* sits on foreign soil, it's a part of our heritage as well as the heritage of the Cuban people," explained Paul Edmondson, vice president and general counsel for the trust. "It was the house Hemingway lived in longest, and he loved it the best. He felt a great connection to Cuba."

The house, located in a suburb about 12 miles outside of Havana, played a significant role in Hemingway's literary life and swashbuckling persona. More than his homes in Key West and later in Ketchum, Idaho, the *finca* fed his creativity and stirred his imagination with its abundance



HEMINGWAY PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

WORK NEEDED: *Finca Vigía*, where Ernest Hemingway wrote *'The Old Man and the Sea,'* has structural problems.



JORGE REY/AP

ONCE SPLENDID: Security guard Emilia Leon walks past Finca Vigia, which is being preserved.

of mango and avocado trees and proximity to the ocean, scholars say. He wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* there, basing it on a Cuban fisherman, and it won him the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1953. A year later, he won the Nobel Prize and donated the medal to the Cuban people.

He wrote other books, too – *Islands in the Stream* and *Across the River and Into the Trees* – and reveled in the sun-drenched daily life of the *finca*. In one room, he kept a lizard preserved in a jar of formaldehyde, honored for its heroic, if losing, battle with one of Hemingway's many cats. He entertained celebrity friends at the house -- Ava Gardner reportedly once swam naked in its pool.

The Cuban Ministry of Culture and the Council on National Patrimony have already begun leading the first round of conservation work on the property and its colorful contents, the stuff of Hemingway scholars' dreams: animal skins and game trophies, rifles, his Royal typewriter and artwork, plus 2,000 letters, 3,000 photos and 9,000 books with handwritten notes in the margins. The bathroom wall bears meticulous, penciled notations of his weight and blood pressure. Outside, his beloved boat, the *Pilar*, is on display.

Under a 2002 agreement coordinated by the Social Science Research Council of New York, U.S. preservationists are assisting the Cubans in conserving documents and photos from the house. They're being digitally copied and the originals preserved to halt deterioration, with the work financed by grants from the Rockefeller and Ford foundations.

A set of copies will be sent to the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston, where a large collection of Hemingway research materials – much of it brought from Cuba by Mary Hemingway after her husband's suicide – already resides. The originals eventually will be returned to the house in Cuba.

The second phase of preservation – the house itself – has been complicated by the U.S. trade embargo of Cuba. An application by the Hemingway foundation to travel to Cuba for the project last year was turned down.

But in June, after the National Trust joined the application, the Bush administration agreed to allow a team of architects and engineers to go to Cuba to consult on the project. The five-person U.S. team made one trip earlier this summer and plans at least two others before the license expires this fall.

The group does not have permission to bring financial support into the country but plans to apply for a new license in the fall that would include that provision.

"It's not political – it's a cultural project that overrides politics," Phillips said. "It's just absolutely unique."

Cuban school children make field trips to the museum to study "Papa" and his influence on world literature, she said.

But U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros Lehtinen, R-Fla., thinks Americans have no business working in Fidel Castro's Cuba, no matter how good the cause.

"I'm against the whole operation – engineers and architects, anybody who's going down there to fix a tourist site. And that's what it is, a tourist site," she said. "It's only going to help increase Castro's tourism industry, and that's how Castro stays in power."

She said she plans to meet with National Trust leaders within weeks to discuss the preservation efforts.

For Phillips, the drive to save Hemingway's house started with the tug of family ties. On a trip to Cuba in 2001, she and her husband made a spur-of-the-moment decision to see the home, since her grandfather had been Hemingway's editor. Because of their connection, they were given a guided tour.

Astonished at the richness of the artifact collection and captivated by the intimacy of the house, she and her husband started the Concord, Mass.-based foundation and began working toward preservation of the property.

"This has been kind of a personal mission for me. It's been very gratifying," Phillips said.

Perhaps even more so for Hemingway scholars in the United States, who soon will have access to vast amounts of new material from Cuba.

"He wrote many of the masterpieces there. It was really the center of his writing life from 1939 on," said Sandra Spanier, professor of English at Pennsylvania State University and general editor of the Hemingway Letters Project, an ambitious plan to publish 12 volumes of his letters.

"He himself talked about why he loved living in Cuba, because he worked better in the early morning air, with the breeze coming through the hilltops," she said.

Cubans remember him as much for his whole-hearted embrace of the people as for his literary achievements.

Rene Villarreal, who served as "major domo" of Finca Vigía and became the first curator of the museum after Hemingway's death, said the author adopted the Cuban people as his own.

After a chance first encounter – he met Hemingway when he asked the famous writer for help to buy baseball equipment – he went on to run the household. During his time there, Villarreal met movie stars Gary Cooper and Spencer Tracy, helped care for Hemingway's 50-plus cats and went to cockfights with him and his famous pals.

When locals couldn't afford a funeral, Hemingway paid, he said, and when Villarreal got married, Hemingway urged the bride-to-be to "take care of my Cuban son."

After Hemingway's death, Villarreal continued to watch over the house as museum curator.

"He was very much loved – by the world but especially by the townspeople," he said.

Villarreal and his son, Raul, have written the story of his years with the man he called "Papa" and are hoping to sell it to a publisher.

"The best time of my life was with him at the *finca*," Villarreal recalled from his home outside New York City. "He was a friend to the Cuban people and he will never be forgotten."



COLLECTION OF RENE AND RAUL VILLARREAL

AT HOME: Ernest Hemingway in the mid-1950s in the workroom of his Havana home.