

Sun also rises on Hemingway home

Americans, Cubans try to keep legacy

by Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, Globe Staff

SAN FRANCISCO DE PAULA, Cuba -- In the 44 years since Ernest Hemingway died, the beloved Cuban villa where he penned classics that won him the Nobel Prize has suffered the vagaries of age, structural flaws, tropical rot, hurricanes, and the bitter storm between Hemingway's home country and his adopted one.

The US trade embargo, imposed in 1962, after Hemingway took his own life in July 1961, left cash-strapped Cuban authorities on their own to preserve the farmhouse in a village overlooking Havana, where he spent a third of his life, and where he composed his greatest masterpieces.

But in an unprecedented project, a team of Cambridge architects and US conservationists with the Concord-based Hemingway Preservation Foundation is scheduled to arrive today to advise the Cubans on how best to restore the shared cultural treasure.

The project was almost scuttled by the US government under pressure from hard-line Cuban-American politicians and activists, who assert that Americans should not cooperate with Fidel Castro's repressive government, no matter how worthy the cause.

Proponents of the mission, led by US Representative James P. McGovern, a Massachusetts Democrat and an advocate of normalizing relations with Cuba, countered that a monument to a literary giant is a legacy that should not fall victim to an ideological standoff.

In a move that helped to break the logjam, Senator John McCain, an Arizona Republican and a Hemingway fan, and other prominent Republicans threw their weight behind the project.

Adding its voice to the chorus, the Washington-based National Trust for Historic Preservation this summer named "Finca Vigia," or Lookout Farm, one of 11 endangered American landmarks. It was the first time that a site outside the United States had made the list.

Standing on the lush, tranquil property where Hemingway found solitude to write, and where he entertained such celebrities as Gregory Peck and Spencer Tracy, the former curator of Finca Vigia, Gladys Rodriguez, agreed that the property should not be used as a political football.

"Hemingway is a cultural bridge between the two cultures, the two people," said Rodriguez, who is now president of the Hemingway International Institute of Journalism in Havana. "We're not working toward any political end, just to preserve the historical memory of a US writer who lived many years here."

Cuban authorities consider the man who donated his 1954 Nobel medal to his adopted homeland one of their own.

And they have struggled over the years to keep Hemingway's spirit alive.

They have left the home as he left it -- windows open to the humid breeze, half-drained rum and Cinzano bottles handy on the bar, the table set for guests, 900 classical, jazz, and Latin records ready to be enjoyed, and his Royal typewriter propped up on a 1955 edition of "Who's Who" in the bedroom, where he stood writing barefoot.

The frozen-in-time feel of the home coaxes visitors to imagine that the great man might walk in at any moment. Wild game trophies, firearms, and bullfighting posters line the walls, and his daily recording of his weight is handwritten meticulously on the bathroom wall. His glasses and inkwell sit within arm's reach in a study, in a tower overlooking the sea.

The authenticity has come at a price. Hemingway's priceless 9,000-volume library of first editions, translations of his works in Russian, Hungarian, and Braille, and books on war and hunting, not to mention 3,500 photographs, 2,000 newspaper clippings he saved, including his premature obituary, and numerous art works, have spent decades exposed to tropical humidity.

The treasures have been removed from the house and stowed in metal storage containers on the rambling, overgrown property.

A pool, where some say a naked Ava Gardner swam, lies drained. Several acres of fruit trees on the property need taming. The house must be weatherproofed. And all this must be done without trampling on the spirit of its famous occupant.

The visit this week by a US team comes at a crucial moment, after the Cubans have removed the house's rotting roof tiles and have detected damage to the foundation, floor beams, and wall cracks.

Cuban officials concede that their \$270,000 budget is insufficient for a major restoration, and that they could use outside expertise on how to make repairs that will endure time and weather, while remaining authentic to the original landmark. The house was built in 1887 and occupied by Hemingway, his third and fourth wives, and more than 50 cats from 1939 to 1961. The first home he bought, for \$18,500, it was reputedly his most beloved. The Cubans have limited the human wear and tear on Hemingway's home over the years by allowing tourists only to circle the villa and to peer into windows.

But architect Leland D. Cott of Bruner/Cott & Associates in Cambridge, coleader of the visiting team, wonders: "As the house becomes more popular, will they be able to control the crowds? These are the same issues that the US is facing at national parks -- the challenge of how to maintain the property in a dignified way." Enrique Hernandez Castillo, a Cuban architect working on the restoration, says time and the elements have been unkind.

"The house has seen 10 years of severe abuse since its last restoration . . . humidity, weather, uneven elevation, encroaching roots of trees, termites, erosion."

The idea to help restore the home is the brainchild of Jenny Phillips, a granddaughter of a Hemingway editor and friend, Maxwell Perkins. Phillips visited the villa in 2001 and was shown boxes of valuable manuscripts, including the start of a discarded epilogue to "For Whom the Bell Tolls," Hemingway's copy of the screenplay for "The Old Man and the Sea," and fragments of story plots previously unknown to US scholars.

That discovery prompted an archival preservation project with the US Social Science Research Council and the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, which will keep microfilm copies of the papers.

But Phillips, the wife of Frank Phillips, The Boston Globe's State House bureau chief, said she realized the manuscripts, notebooks, and photographs weren't the only things in danger of crumbling.

"Part of the beauty and the curse of the place . . . is the tropical climate, with the windows open to all the belongings as Hemingway left them," said Phillips, who founded the Hemingway Preservation Foundation two years ago to aid the Cuban museum in its restoration efforts.

"If the museum were in the US, I suspect it would have been sealed, which would lose the spiritual quality of the place," she said. "Hemingway is in that house. . . . I could smell him in his war [correspondent] uniform still hanging in the closet."

Last year, the Bush administration rejected Phillips's effort to assist the museum, saying that it would prop up Castro's regime by encouraging tourism. Only this spring, after the Concord foundation joined forces with the National Trust, was a license to offer advice to the Cubans approved by the State Department.

The restoration of the main home will be done by Cuban laborers and is expected to take until the end of this year or early next year, with another year or more needed to landscape the grounds and restore the guest house, pool, and Hemingway's 38-foot wooden boat Pilar.

The license to offer advice to Cuban engineers and architects is valid only until Nov. 30. And Phillips's next project is to lobby for permission to bring building materials, consultants, and funding for the renovation, which could cost a few million dollars, and to raise funds for an endowment to protect the site in the long run.

To those who criticize her for working with a communist regime, Phillips replies:

"This project is not supporting Castroism, we're doing something aligned with North American values. . . . Hemingway opposed totalitarianism and advocated for democracy around the world, and this is an important shrine for people to learn about his values." ■