

Racing against time to preserve Hemingway

Rare US-Cuba alliance works to save Papa's papers

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | October 8, 2006

Some books are warped. The ink on notes is fading, and many pages are torn.

This is the state of a large portion of Ernest Hemingway's papers and books left at his home in Cuba, Finca Vigia. For about 46 years, this grand collection of Hemingway-scribed documents, books, letters, and manuscripts has sat quietly at his former retreat, weathering hurricanes, humidity, and time.

Now, a rare collaboration between American nonprofit groups and the Cuban government may preserve Papa's papers at Finca Vigia, which has been transformed into a museum. That collaboration even brought efforts closer to home.

Last week, Rosalba Diaz, curator of the Hemingway Museum just outside of Havana, was in Andover picking up tips from the Northeast Document Conservation Center. In the quiet Andover offices, Diaz observed advanced techniques on how to repair damaged pages and restore papers and book covers. She watched how others have repaired torn pages and saw how the center protected aging documents.

"We're working on preserving all the materials we have at the museum," Diaz said in Spanish. "We have books, we have maps, photos, and documents with his writings that need to be protected."

The techniques she is picking up are important, said Diaz. Hemingway's former home is filled with 9,000 books with notes written in the margins, thousands of letters exchanged with famous people of the time, and original rough drafts of some of his well-known works, she said.

To the surprise of many, the US State Department granted Diaz a rare visa for her studies, further highlighting the unique efforts to try to preserve the termite-ridden villa of one of America's greatest Modernist writers.

Finca Vigia, or Lookout Farm, was Hemingway's home from 1939 to 1960. There, Hemingway crafted some of his greatest works, including "A Moveable Feast" and "The Old Man and the Sea." The villa was also a spot where Hemingway entertained such celebrities as Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner. According to the Hemingway Preservation Foundation, Papa was in Cuba when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. It was a prize he would later donate to his adopted home.

Hemingway committed suicide in July 1961, a year before the United States imposed a trade embargo against the island. Since then, the impoverished Cuban government has overseen the deteriorating villa 12 miles from Havana, making it a tourist attraction.

For months now, American nonprofit groups and the Cuban government have tried to work around the red tape and the nearly five-decade embargo, all for the cause of saving Hemingway's home. The effort has been played out around the political drama surrounding the embargo, with a small but vocal Cuban-American exile community pressuring the US Treasury Department to fight any contact with Cuba and an even smaller group of American writers just wanting to preserve Hemingway's legacy.

The Treasury Department, which administers embargo rules, has banned American financial help to the site because it is a Cuban tourist attraction. But that has not prevented Americans from offering other kinds of help. It also has not prevented the Treasury Department from being a little flexible.

Last year, the department granted travel licenses to the Winchester-based Hemingway Preservation Foundation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to develop a comprehensive plan for Finca Vigia with architects, engineers, and curators. Since then, the US team has visited the site five times.

According to Mary-Jo Adams, executive director of the Hemingway Preservation Foundation, the US team serves only as an advisory body and cannot offer any financial help. "The Cuban architects and engineers are pretty much doing all of the work themselves," said Adams.

Preserving Hemingway's documents posed a different challenge, said Adams, which is why groups like the New York-based Social Science Research Council and the Ford Foundation helped raised money to make the documents digitally accessible at the John F. Kennedy Museum and Library in Boston.

That's where Diaz comes in.

The 42-year-old curator lives close to the museum and is familiar with the state of Hemingway's papers. So far, about half of the document conservation work is complete, and Diaz said more work needs to be done.

Once complete, the original documents will stay in Cuba but digital copies will be sent to the Kennedy Museum and Library, Adams said.

For Diaz, Andover could not be a more different place than tropical Havana. Instead of cars from the 1950s and old buildings, surrounding her were modern SUVs and strip malls. Billboards she saw were not espousing Cuban Revolution slogans, rather how much money people can save by switching cell phone service.

Like everyone else involved in the restoration project, Diaz avoided talk about politics or US-Cuba relations. She just wanted to get more training and enjoy her brief experience in New England.

"It's so different here," said Diaz. "And it's cold."

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