

THE FINCA VIGIA PRESERVATION PROJECT

By Jenny Phillips

My introduction to Finca Vigia came in early 2001 when I arrived in Cuba with friends. We had come to listen to music and explore Havana and the Cuban countryside.

But we found something quite different. A quick decision made with my husband, Frank, to break away from our group and visit *Finca Vigia* began a journey that has over the last several years put the Hemingway villa in the spotlight at the highest levels in both the U.S. and Cuba. This journey to visit Hemingway's home in Cuba has evolved far beyond us, and brought together many extraordinary people. It has turned into an incredible adventure, one that has broken through political and cultural barriers and allowed Cubans and North Americans to rally around a shared literary icon, Ernest Hemingway.

On that initial visit, after telling one of the *Finca's* curators that Max Perkins, Ernest Hemingway's editor and close friend, was my grandfather, we were given a special tour inside the house. We were captivated by the sense of immediacy and intimacy offered by *Finca Vigia*.

I had recently re-read Scott Berg's biography of my grandfather, Max Perkins: Editor of Genius, and become enchanted by this man whom I had only known through old and often told family tales. With a fresh perspective, I wanted to see if there was any trace of Perkins at the *Finca*. There was more there than I could have imagined.

We asked if the *Finca's* archive held any unpublished letters from Perkins to Hemingway. Much of their correspondence had already appeared in various publications, but I hoped there might be some undiscovered letters. We were told there were a few letters, but they were not available for me to see.

We left intrigued by *Finca Vigia*. We were struck by the tremendous care the Cubans devoted to keeping Hemingway's true spirit alive there.

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During that first visit to *Finca Vigia*, we profoundly felt Hemingway's presence and the central importance of books in his life. There are over 9,000 volumes in his library. They are stacked and placed everywhere, and clearly were much read. The books themselves are a piece of literary history as Hemingway had a habit of underlining favorite passages, railing against passages that he thought were weak or untrue, making notes in the margins, and using manuscript pages as book marks. Hemingway constantly referred to his books for inspiration and source material for his writing.

We knew that among Hemingway's books there would be many that had been sent to him by my grandfather. Max Perkins liked to send books to his authors, carefully selecting each book as if he were a doctor prescribing a medication for a patient with very particular, individual needs. The right book at the opportune time, Perkins felt, could provide a soothing remedy for all kinds of malaise and writing difficulties. Or a book would simply offer pleasure and inspiration to an overtaxed writer needing encouragement.

Perkins and Hemingway had a shared interest in books about war. They loved to read about and discuss great battles. Perkins felt that everyone needed to read *War and Peace* again at least once every year. He thought it was the greatest book ever written and he memorized many of the battle scenes. All of his authors at one time or another received a copy of *War and Peace* from him.

The American Civil War held the greatest interest of all to Perkins, and Hemingway shared this interest. He had written to Hemingway about a trip he took with Scott Fitzgerald to Gettysburg to view that great battleground. At the time, Fitzgerald was a faded, largely forgotten author whose struggle with alcoholism and debilitating self-doubt had left him unable to work. Perkins offered strength and encouragement to Fitzgerald through their day of tramping around the Gettysburg battleground.

So, when we spotted Scribners books about war on Hemingway's library shelves, we immediately assumed that Perkins had sent some of them. Suddenly, we saw a book about the Civil War. Wearing white gloves given to us by the museum staff to protect the house and its objects, we carefully took the book down from the shelf. It was a biography of Confederate General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. We felt quite certain that this book had been sent to Hemingway by Perkins. At this early point in our journey into Cuba, we did not yet fully appreciate the fragility of Hemingway's books or their historical and literary value. The book fell open to a blank page on which Hemingway had clearly penned a page number. With a sense of excitement, feeling as if we had uncovered an important piece of evidence in a mystery, we turned to the page indicated.

What we found on that page was astonishing. Hemingway had underlined a quote from Stonewall Jackson. As Jackson lay dying from gunshot wounds he had accidentally received from one of his own Confederate troops, delirious with fever just before the moment of his death, he had suddenly spoken in a clear voice as if addressing his troops, "Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees".

Here then was the very place in which Hemingway, always an absolute master at finding powerful and meaningful titles for his books, had stumbled upon the title for his novel, largely written at *Finca Vigia*, *Across the River and Into the Trees*. Among the thousands of books there to choose from, we had opened one

with such significance. It was as if the house had revealed a secret to us. Since that day, we have come to appreciate that *Finca Vigia* is a living museum, a vast repository of stories and personal artifacts illuminating Hemingway and his life in Cuba.

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When I was a child, the adventure stories of Perkins and Hemingway were colorful and exciting. Max Perkins, the sensitive, reserved, intellectual New Englander, was drawn into a man of action's world of hunting and blood sport. In trips to the Florida Keys and the rivers of Arkansas, they were like boys pretending to be pirates. When my grandfather returned from a duck hunting trip with Hemingway and reentered the formality of a family dinner, he served fresh duck from the Arkansas woods. My mother remembers how uncomfortable it was to bite down on gunshot pellets left behind by her father inside the duck carcass.

Clearly, Perkins experienced great satisfaction by gracefully stepping into a life style as different from his own as could be imagined. Like Hemingway, he shared a love of great battle scenes, and frequently sent books to him about war and hunting. He had a romantic view of nature, and spent time in the mountains and lakes of Vermont, but most of his adult life was very urban and he rarely got away from the office.

When he received a letter from Hemingway urging him to come down, it gave him an instant escape route to adventure. "Dear Max, Will you come out here and meet me at Memphis on December 15 to shoot ducks for a week from the houseboat Walter Adams-anchored in the Arkansas River at Watkins Ark. If you can't stay a week, stay as long as you can. You don't need to bring anything but some warm clothes. I have everything else and have made the reservation and paid for you in advance. We could talk over everything and have the finest duck shooting in the world". "I know of course that business and your family affairs absolutely forbid it but I need to see you and you need to get away and we will have the sort of shooting our grandfathers and great grandfathers had".

Because his adventures with Hemingway were so very out of character, my grandfather entered into them with wonderful tongue in cheek references to his strength and bravado. In a letter to his friend, Elizabeth Lemmon, he wrote with an air of braggadocio, "I'm off to Key West tonight & I daresay I'll be glad when I get there. I'll like the sunshine and the sea and the company too – Ernest Hemingway and a light- hearted chap named John Hermann. I suppose I'll have to work like a slave at fishing, for Ernest broke his arm last fall and can't use it and he'll want to see other people do it".

How gratifying it must have been for Perkins that Hemingway was actually relying on his urban, intellectual, Yankee skills to do the fishing for him. Perkins in effect shone with some reflected glory from Hemingway's machismo. More importantly, as I have come to realize, Perkins knew that these shared adventures were the very best way to participate in the living experience of being Hemingway's editor as he prepared to write about that which he had lived. Through close involvement with Hemingway's chosen world of hunting and fishing, Max Perkins was in the background guiding and supporting Hemingway's creativity. Perkins appreciated that he needed to leave his office behind when he was invited and join Hemingway wherever he was in order to gain a deeper, fuller understanding of Hemingway as writer. Perkins ended a letter to Hemingway in 1929 with, "Fog and rain here. I wish you would finish a book and tell me that we could not have it unless I came and got it".

There is a wonderful photograph taken by my grandmother of Perkins and Hemingway standing on a fishing pier in Florida with an enormous freshly caught marlin suspended between them. Hemingway has a big, wide grin, rather like a giddy boy. Perkins caught this fish, and the expression on his face is more stunned than self-assured. What is most striking about the photograph is that Perkins is wearing a suit and necktie. Of course, he did not catch the marlin while wearing these clothes, and is only dressed this way because he was about to catch a train back to New York. But somehow the suit seems just right for Perkins, the slight, proper New Englander.

During one fishing trip, Perkins, Hemingway and the rest of their crew were lost at sea in a storm, then stranded in the Dry Tortugas and presumed dead by the world. Low on supplies, they hailed a fishing smack. Boarding the boat, they found a Canary Island native, Gregorio Fuentes, who lent them some Bermuda onions. Hemingway was so impressed with the ship shape order on the boat that he came looking for him several years later when the *Pilar* needed a captain.

When they were discovered, bearded and suntanned, Perkins said that their Robinson Crusoe-like adventure had been the happiest time of his life. "If you'd seen me with a grizzled beard looking as tough as a pirate you could imagine me doing nothing else unless it was murder. They said I looked like a rebel cavalry captain. I couldn't get a look at myself for two weeks and when I did I was horrified. I saw myself entirely anew and found it a shock". In fact, the captain of the rescue boat who found them hesitated to approach Perkins and Hemingway because they appeared so wild and dirty and untamed. When Perkins asked, "How is the stock market", the captain realized who they were.

In November, 2002, US Congressman James P. McGovern of Massachusetts led a team of us to Havana to hammer out the details of a joint agreement with the Ministry of Culture and the Cuban Council on National Patrimony that has allowed North Americans to assist the Cuban efforts to restore the *Finca* and preserve the books, documents, and photographs that had been stored there since Hemingway's death 40 years earlier. We have had the pleasure of working with Minister of Culture Abel Prieto, Dr. Marta Arjona, Gladys Rodriguez, and many others.

On November 11, 2002, at a ceremony at the *Finca*, next to the swimming pool, President Fidel Castro, Congressman McGovern and others signed the Preservation Agreement. The work has been coordinated in the United States by the Social Science Research Council in New York. The Northeast Documentation Conservation Center of Andover, Massachusetts, one of the United States's leading document preservation and conservation organizations, provided the technical expertise and worked with Cuban experts to do the actual restoration and conservation at CenCrem in Old Havana.

With grants from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, and others, the initial phase of the project is now nearing completion. Following their restoration, the original documents will remain at *Finca Vigia*. Digital copies will be sent to the Hemingway Collection at the John F. Kennedy Museum and Library in Boston, Massachusetts.

The second phase of the project – the North American assistance to the Cubans to restore and renovate *Finca Vigia* – has been more complicated. The project became caught up in recent efforts by the U.S. government to sharply curtail transactions between the Cuban and American peoples. A year ago the U.S. government rejected our request for a license for this second phase.

But again the resilience and spirit of Ernest Hemingway prevailed. Several weeks ago, we received official notification that the U.S. government has approved a license application filed jointly last month by the Hemingway Preservation Foundation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the United States's premier preservation organization.

It took a lot of effort and a lot of good people to persuade the American government to reconsider. We were able to put the project into the media spotlight. We made a logical if not impassioned argument about the importance of Hemingway and *Finca Vigia*, one that overrides the political differences that divide our governments, at the top levels of the American State and Treasury Departments. We rallied major political figures in Washington to support our cause, including US Senator John McCain, a longstanding Hemingway fan.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has in recent months taken a strong interest in the *Finca*, and has nominated it for its annual list of most

endangered American historic sites. I am chairman of the board of the Hemingway Preservation Foundation, and Jim McGovern and Sean Hemingway, Ernest's grandson, co-chair the advisory board. Author Russell Banks has pulled together a long list of distinguished writers backing this effort.

The license allows a North American team of architectural and preservation experts to go to Cuba to work jointly with a Cuban team of technical and preservation experts and engineers to construct a set of recommendations for the restoration of the villa, grounds, and Hemingway's fishing boat, *Pilar*.

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Because of *Finca Vigia's* rapidly deteriorating condition including severe water damage from leaks in the roof, the room in which Hemingway wrote is empty and barren. His Royal typewriter and the books that surrounded him when he wrote have been put into storage. The room with the yellow tiled floor where Hemingway stood on a kudu skin and wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Across the River and Into the Trees*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *Islands in the Stream* is the spiritual center of this cultural and literary shrine. It holds a haunted presence of the thousands of hours of intense, creative energy expended within its walls.

Finca Vigía, like Mark Twain's home in Hartford, Connecticut, and William Faulkner's in Oxford, Mississippi, is a vitally important cultural and literary landmark that must be saved for future generations. It celebrates the life of one of the most important authors in the history of the Americas. The *Finca* must be available to future generations of Americans and Cubans – and to readers around the world – so that they can fully appreciate Ernest Hemingway and his unique contribution to American, Cuban, and world literature. Now, in spite of the longstanding political tensions between the U.S. and Cuba, *Finca Vigia* is serving as a unifying symbol of shared cultural heritage.