The Day

Hemingway Project Sailing Along Smoothly

Watercraft Expert Says Cubans Doing Good Job Of Preserving The Pilar

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Mystic

When Dana Hewson traveled to Ernest Hemingway's former estate in Cuba last week, he was pleasantly surprised by what he found.

As Hewson, vice president for watercraft preservation and programs at Mystic Seaport, toured the grounds of Finca Vigia, he found that Cuban officials had implemented recommendations he had made three years ago and had begun to preserve Hemingway's 40-foot fishing boat, Pilar.

It was aboard Pilar that Hemingway conceived such novels as “The Old Man and the Sea” and “Islands in the Stream,” hunted for German submarines during World War II and hooked world-class game fish.

Hewson said Monday that the Cuban government is funding the restoration of the boat, which is expected to be finished in about three months. He hopes to return to Cuba before the work is completed.

by Dana Newson

• Preservation work is under way in Cuba on the Pilar, the 40-foot fishing boat on which Ernest Hemingway conceived such novels as “The Old Man and the Sea” and “Islands in the Stream.”

“We had a lot of discussions about the scope of the work and what they were planning to do. They have a good, sound plan in place,” said Hewson, who took numerous photos of the boat.

Hewson traveled to Cuba with representatives of the Hemingway Preservation Foundation Inc., which is working with Cuban officials to restore the boat and Hemingway's deteriorating house at Finca Vigia.

Hewson and Mary Jo Adams, the foundation's executive director, said Monday that the Cubans also have begun the restoration of the house, where the celebrated author lived for the last 20 years of his life. Thousands of Hemingway drafts, manuscripts, letters, photographs and books are stored in the house and its basement.

The inside of the house remains the same as the day Hemingway left it, and includes such personal items as his typewriter, shoes and big-game trophies. Even his liquor bottles and bar tabs are there. Hemingway wrote “A Moveable Feast” and “For Whom the Bell Tolls” while living in the house.

Adams said members of her group, which included architects and other experts, including Hewson, were enthused about the progress that has been made on both the boat and the house since their last visit in November.

“We were wonderfully impressed with the ongoing preservation effort. Things are being done very well,” she said. “There's lots of work going on. The activity was tremendous, which was so great to see.”

Hewson added that the Cubans take great pride in Finca Vigia, which is a national museum, and have worked hard to preserve it over the years.

Adams and Hewson stressed that the Cubans and the American team have been working as partners to come up with a plan to preserve Finca Vigia, which the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed on its 2005 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. The foundation was concerned about how the project would be financed but learned upon its arrival last week that the Cuban government will fund it.

“I think there will be enough money to complete the work,” Adams said.

Still, she said, her group needs to raise about $300,000 to cover travel and legal expenses as well as the hiring of experts.

Upon his arrival in Cuba, Hewson learned that the boat had been surveyed and that a group had been hired to do the work.

Hewson said the boat will be kept at Finca Vigia and will not be put back in the water. The black-hulled Pilar now sits under a metal roof on a former tennis court at Finca Vigia, which is nine miles from the ocean.

He said the canvas over the cabin house and steering station needs to be replaced, as do sections of the deck that have sustained insect damage. He said it also needs a “real sprucing up” with new paint and varnish.

Hewson said the work that is needed is similar to what Mystic Seaport did when it restored Franklin D. Roosevelt's sailboat, which is now on display at the museum but not in the water.

Hewson said he will research old books, yachting magazines and photographs to gain more information about exactly how the Pilar looked in its heyday and will pass that information on to the Cuban team doing the work.

In addition to providing technical expertise, Adams said the foundation is working to preserve the books, manuscripts, maps and many other paper items in the house.

She said the foundation is providing the Cubans with materials and training to do the conservation work. She said the Cubans will keep the original items but that digital images will be taken and made available at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston “so scholars have access to this treasure trove of materials.”

Adams said the foundation has provided the Cubans with equipment that will be used to monitor the temperature and humidity levels in the house so adjustments can be made to best preserve the materials.

Hemingway bought the Pilar, a Wheeler Playmate, in 1934 from a shipyard in Brooklyn, N.Y., and sailed it when he lived in Cuba from 1939 to 1960, a year before his suicide in Idaho. In his will, he left the Pilar to his boatman, who gave it to the Cuban government.

In 1954, while living in Cuba, Hemingway received the Nobel Prize for literature, which he gave to the Cuban people.

www.hemingwaypreservationfoundation.org ■