

By: Riley Love, MD

HEMINGWAY in Key West

He was tiring of the cold and wet Paris apartment life that winter. Celebrated fellow author and friend John Dos Passos recommended the island of Key West to Ernest Hemingway. "A good place for old Hem to dry out his bones." Hemingway arrived from Paris, via Havana on the docks in April 1928 with his pregnant second wife, Paula Pfeiffer and a half-finished draft of *A Farewell to Arms*. Ironically, the island's real name was *Cayo Hueso*, Spanish for "Bone Island." It was rumored to be strewn with skeletons, a communal graveyard for the aboriginal Calusa. Discovered by Ponce de Leon of Spain in 1521, it became a territory of that country. The name had finally become anglicized or mangled to Key West.

Sweating and overdressed, both Ernest and Pauline disapproved of this backwater, its population diminished down from 28,000 to a low of 10,000. The plan was to receive a brand new Ford Model A Roadster, a gift from Pauline's rich Uncle Gus, and drive it to his residence in Arkansas where Pauline would have the baby. The delivery of the car would take another six weeks to the local Ford dealer. They initially rented an apartment over the dealership at the Treu-Mor Hotel at 314 Simonton Street. It is now a residence, the *Casa Antigua* and shop, which is open to the public. It was this fateful six-week delay that would allow Hemingway to fall in love with Key West.

Hemingway's first book, the "lost generation" novel *The Sun Also Rises*, had

been published in 1926. Key West claims credit for the second book, the World War I novel *A Farewell to Arms*, being finished there, although parts were written in Wyoming, Arkansas and Mission Hills, Kansas. It was serialized in Scribner's Magazine in its May through October 1929 issues and published as a book in September 1929. This work, much more than his first would elevate him critically as an author of great standing and make him financially independent. He would not experience this level of acclaim again until the publication of his Spanish civil war novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940.

They would buy the 3,000 square foot West Indian Creole style "Hemingway House" on 907 Whitehead Street, again with the help of wealthy Uncle Gus in

1931 for \$8,000, covering the back taxes owed to the city. It sat on the second highest point in town at an elevation of 16 feet. Originally built in 1851 for affluent shipwreck salvager Asa Tift, it was boarded up and left vacant and in poor repair after Tift's death in 1889. It stolidly persists today because of the limestone material composed from the ancient coral reef from which the Florida Keys are formed. The coral stone was excavated from the site. Next door, the second floor of a carriage house would become Hemingway's writing studio. Here he would, "...sit down at the typewriter and bleed."

It will not retell the tale of the 1934 D copper penny by the swimming pool. The house was opened as a privately owned, for-profit museum in 1964. In 1968 it was designated a United States National Historic Landmark. The house is a symbol for the Hemingway mystique that is intrinsic to the personality, the very soul of Key West today. Pauline lived here until her sudden death in 1951.

Hemingway was given a six-toed cat by a ship's captain. Forty to 50 descendants

of the original polydactyl cats continue to live on the premises. In 2009 they were the subject of federal litigation when a museum visitor expressed concern about their welfare. The United States Department of Agriculture investigated and tried to enforce regulations on the museum. After a 2012 loss in the court of appeals, which ruled that the cats "substantially affect" interstate commerce and are thus protected by the Animal Welfare Act of 1966, which regulates zoo and circus animals. Thus, their care is government regulated. But as before, they are fat, happy and free to lounge about the furniture as they please. They are typically named for famous people such as Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe.

He would call Key West, "A good place to write." He lived in the house from 1931 to 1939. He traveled broadly, in Europe and Africa, but returned for months at a time. This was called his experimental phase and much time was spent as a war correspondent. During this time, in addition to publishing *A Farewell to Arms*, there was his definitive work on bull-

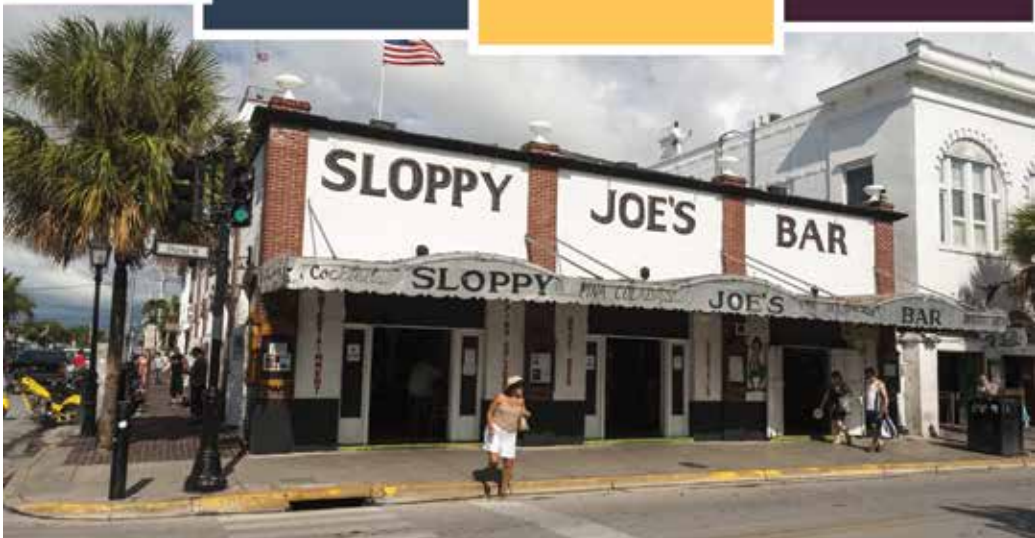
fighting *Death in the Afternoon*, the collection of short stories *Winner Take Nothing*, the nonfiction experiment *Green Hills of Africa*, the only book set in Key West *To Have and Have Not*, a play about the Spanish civil war and his stories *The Fifth Column* and the *First Forty-nine Stories*, and much work on *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (my favorite).

Hemingway's gravity pulled hard on the American psyche from early on. Part of the essential physics involved his love for boxing, which figured prominently in his writing. He became an aficionado and there are many stories to tell from his days on the island. He maintained premises for regular matches, boxing himself with paid sparring partners and also refereed matches at a local saloon. This is now the Blue Heaven restaurant at 769 Thomas Street.

Author Zane Grey has been called the "Babe Ruth" of early sport fishing. Any Florida angler interested in the history of our pastime should investigate his exploits at Long Boat Key. If so, then Ernest Hemingway was our Wilt Chamberlain



CAPTAIN TONY'S VS SLOPPY JOE'S



- eminently larger, more powerful... and more complex. He became an avid hunter and fisherman as a child in Michigan. His first saltwater experience was in Spain in 1921 when he encountered a six-foot Bluefin tuna. It "leapt from the water and fell again with a noise like horses jumping off a dock." He was so impressed with the grandeur of the fish that he said one of them could "enter unabashed into the presence of the very elder gods."

He was introduced to the local Key West fishing by hardware store owner, Charles Thompson who became a life-long friend. They went tarpon fishing in Thompson's 18-foot powerboat the very next day.

Hemingway would write in the mornings and fish in the afternoons. He became renowned as the head of "Hemingway's mob." These were colorful local cronies including "Sleppy Joe" Russel and boat captains who would fish the Marquesas and Dry Tortugas together and prowled the bars at night. Other notable writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, Archibald MacLeish and editor Maxwell Perkins subbed in as out-of-town mobsters arriving on the train to Hemingway's "St. Tropez of the post."

By 1934, with fresh money from writing for *Esquire* magazine, he was desirous of acquiring his own "fishing machine." This was the *Pilar*, a nickname used for his wife Pauline and then the name of his character in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The 38-foot craft was a Wheeler Playmate, built by Wheeler Shipbuilding in Brooklyn, New York. It included specific modifications such as a livewell, and a transom lowered by 12 inches. There was a full-width roller on the back to facilitate landing large fish. It had a 75-horsepower Chrysler engine with a reduction gear to rotate a large slow propeller and a 40-horsepower Lycoming engine for trolling. On calm seas it could make 16 knots. The hull was painted black instead of the usual white.

Other innovations such as the fly bridge and upper stowage were

added later. This was the first of its kind, salvaged from a 1931 Ford automobile in a Key West junkyard. It should be remembered that trolling for tuna or any sport fish as we know it only dates back to 1898, the year before Hemingway's birth via rowing with oars by Charles Holder off Catalina Island, California. The original Tuna Club formed there was the first such sport fishing club and was the model for the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) our largest modern organization and steward of record keeping. Thus, these were truly formative years of the sport we now know. The *Pilar* became the most famous fishing boat in the world and is still on display at the Museo Ernest Hemingway at his home, Finca Vigia, in Cuba.

"Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman, he thought. But that was the only thing I was born for." —*The Old Man and the Sea*

He would set numerous records aboard this boat. In 1935 he won every tournament fished between Key West, Havana and Bimini. IGFA founders S. Kip Farrington and Michael Lerner also competed in these contests, but were bested. In 1938 he set a record catching seven marlin in a single day. He was the first to land a large bluefin tuna intact before it became mauled by sharks. In 1950, the Hemingway Fishing Tournament was born in Cuba where the annual event is held today. Hemingway himself won it the first three years. In 1940, having inspired a public much beyond the fishing commu-

nity, he was made a vice president of the IGFA, holding that office until his death in 1961. In 1998, he was inducted into the IGFA Hall of Fame.

He also carried ichthyologists from the Philadelphia Academy of Natural history aboard the *Pilar*. Together, they successfully reclassified the North Atlantic marlin variants, helping determine the separation of black, blue, striped and white species.

Not only did the author contribute to the development of the sport, but also carefully kept records of the fish and fisheries. He developed the practice of taking a daily ship's log. This included measurements of the fish and observations of their behavior and the tactics needed to catch them. There are ten such logs with other writings at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston.

Penn State University English Professor Linda Patterson Miller wrote of the 1934 *Pilar* log, "Indeed the log assumes an intricate and sustained narrative... complete with a plot, characters, a protagonist [Hemingway], atmospheric coloring and emotional heightening."

Scientists are hoping to obtain his records currently held with his possessions in Cuba. They are felt to be a treasure trove of information about the fisheries, which have subsequently suffered from over fishing. They are yet to be released by the Cuban government.

In 1936, he published an essay in *Esquire* magazine, "On the Blue Water: A Gull Stream Letter," containing a paragraph about an old man who goes far out to sea, alone in a small skiff. He catches a great marlin but loses most of it to sharks.

Although working on several projects, he was many years between novels and then finally published his World War II book, *Across the River and Into the Trees* in 1951. Critics panned the work doubly despite his expectations. Still fuming, he began work on *The Old Man and the Sea*. He finished the novella in just eight weeks pouring his lifeblood as a fisherman.



Hemingway's 38-foot Wheeler Playmate, *Pilar*, on display at his home in Cuba.

launch named the Anita. Fishing together, they recorded catching 54 marlin in 115 days. After Prohibition began in 1920, Russel ran a speakeasy and ran booze in his boat over from Cuba.

When Prohibition ended in 1933 and light entered the world again, he became a legitimate proprietor of The Blind Pig, a bar and restaurant run out of the old city morgue at 428 Greene Street. He leased it for \$3 a week. The name was changed to the Silver Slipper after the dance floor went in. Hemingway's mob was like the house band, and Ernest considered himself a "silent partner."

All the mob had vivid nicknames and Russel's was "Jose Grants." The original "Sloppy Joe's" was in Havana. Jose "Joe" Garcia Rio sold liquor there and iced seafood. The ice was constantly

melting in the Cuban heat and the patrons chided him about the watery, sloppy floor. Hemingway nagged Russel into changing the name.

On May 5th, 1937 Russel became infamously over a rent increase to a staggering \$4 per week. Across the street at the corner of Greene and Duval, Juan Fario's Victoria restaurant took vacant. Russel asked the patrons to make a move and they literally picked up their drinks, as well as the furniture, and sashayed over to the current digs without any real interruption in service. Hemingway grabbed a marble urinal out of the restroom saying, "I've pissed enough of my money into this thing to pay for it." The urinal is at the Hemingway House today out by the pool serving as a fountain waterer for the cats. Joe Russel died of a heart attack in 1941. He was 53 years old.

Hemingway met journalist and war correspondent Martha Gelhorn in the bar in 1936. He would leave Pauline and Key West to pursue her in 1939. She became his third wife from 1941 to 1945. A footnote that should be added: both

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soul of an artist and love of the majestic sea creatures into it. It was published initially in *Life* magazine in 1952 and then in book form. It sold over 5 million copies within 48 hours of its release. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for this work in 1953. He is one of seven Key West authors to hold this distinction.

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This was the last book that he would see published in his lifetime. It is intriguing to reflect how differently it might have been if the Ford Roadster had been delivered on time in 1928. Those subsequent days and nights out in the Gulfstream between Key West and Cuba fashioned a lasting impression in his soul, leaving the mark that was revealed in his literary triumph, so profound that it still bends the current of our culture.

He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954. He took his own life at his home in Ketchum, Idaho in 1961.

He persists today as the most famous writer in the world.

"Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman, he thought. But that was the only thing I was born for." —*The Old Man and the Sea*.

CAPTAIN TONY'S VS SLOPPY JOE'S

Hemingway was seduced into the edgy, artistic, expatriate culture of Key West. It absorbed him and he is part of the culture that evolved into the present form. His larger-than-life character is synonymous with Key West. The apparition is felt on the skin like the languid humidity on the ocean breeze. From the very beginning, alcohol fueled his nights.

"Got tight last night on absinthe and did knife tricks. Great success shooting the knife underhand into the piano."

He hated being alone. He made a solid friendship with Joseph Russel. This was cemented when Russel cashed a \$1,000 royalty check from *A Farewell to Arms* that the bank had refused because Hemingway looked too scruffy.

Russell had a 39-foot ocean going

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the original Havana restaurant and the Key West "Sloppy Joe's" served loose meat sandwiches to their customers, which became the basis for the "Sloppy Joe" we eat today.

Tony Tarracino was beaten and left for dead in a Newark, New Jersey dump. He had dropped out of school in the ninth grade to make and sell whiskey during prohibition. Soon he became involved in gambling. He had figured a way to pick up results on winning horses at the local track by radio before the bookmakers received the information and post last-second winning bets. The Mafiosi who ran the bookies did not find this amusing.

Surviving and resurrected, he hitchhiked to Key West in 1948. He made a living as a gunrunner, shrimp and for 35 years as a charter boat captain. He became the proprietor of "Captain Tony's Saloon," at the original Greene Street address in 1961.

This establishment laid claim to be the "original Sloppy Joe's," and the model for Freddie's bar in *To Have and Have Not*. Captain Tony would become his own Key West legend. He ran and lost three times for mayor, despite campaign management from chief parrothead Jimmy Buffet who played at the joint for tips and beers in the 70's. Finally, he won by 32 votes on his fourth bid in 1989 and sold the bar that year. He was a proponent of keeping developers out of the island and maintaining the special culture and flamboyance of the place. He was a champion for the little guy and became known as "the Conscience of Key West." He continued to be a regular at the bar until his death in 2008 at the tender age of 92. This shows what unfiltered Lucky Strike's, twelve cups of coffee a day and an exclusive diet of pizza, chocolate and beer can do for you.

The current Sloppy Joe's registered its trademark in 1989 and is now Sloppy Joe's Enterprises International Inc. It posts eight-digit annual sales and sued Captain Tony's over their right to claim to be Hemingway's original watering hole in 2005. They settled the suit with Captain Tony's who preserved the right to use the phrase, "original Sloppy Joe's from 1933-37." Captain Tony's removed their original sign from the line of sight of the current establishment.

There are many echoes from the thunders that was Ernest Hemingway in Key West. Annual tournaments, look-alike contests, parody writing competitions - much of the true meaning of things are lost in the special way we Americans keep dead men alive to drive the wheels of money machines. These persistently bang and clang much louder than the voices of ghosts. Although away from the lights of Duval Street, if you have spent a day out in the Gulfstream "fishing truly" then taken your share of drink equally well... you might listen closely for voices in the night air fluttering the palms. There waits the ranger of a mob of free-spirited men bending the laws of philosophy to their wills so that their lives that night might dance like flames. And one voice heard above the others, he that fought and loved and wrote striving to feel the deepest places in his heart and to find in this island of bones, a glimpse of truth. ☺

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