

HEMINGWAY'S CAPTAIN

by F. Daniel Somrack

Even now when I envision Cuba, I recall in vivid detail the descriptions of the island offered by Ernest Hemingway in his novels. The fishing boats crisscrossing the deep, dark waters of the Gulf Stream; the whitecaps visible in the salty sea mist. *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Islands in the Stream* evoked a curiosity about Cuba that has stayed with me all of my life.

Recently, having the opportunity to work in Cuba, I was provided with the once-in-a-lifetime chance to come face-to-face with the man who had inspired two of Hemingway's most endearing characters. Both Antonio, from *Islands in the Stream*, and Santiago, from *The Old Man and the Sea*, were modeled after Gregorio Fuentes. Fuentes (right, and below, with Hemingway) had been Hemingway's closest friend, confidant and the captain of his custom-built fishing yacht, *Pilar*, for the last 25 years of the writer's life.

As instructed, I drove six miles east of Havana to the tiny fishing village of Cojimar, where Gregorio Fuentes has lived for almost a century. Cojimar looks much the same today as it did when Hemingway kept his yacht anchored there from the 1930s through the 1950s.

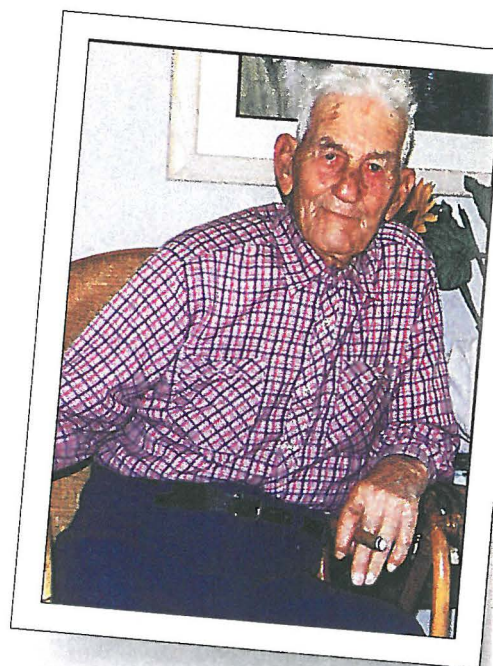
Hemingway would use Cojimar as the backdrop for several stories, including *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Islands in the Stream* and *To Have and Have Not*.

Even the famous bar-restaurant La Terraza,

which was built on a giant rock overlooking the harbor, is still a popular tourist spot and the centerpiece of this small fishing town.

At 209 Pasuela Street, I found Gregorio Fuentes sitting comfortably in the living room of his small, one-story white house that he bought in the 1930s from the salary Hemingway paid him as the captain of *Pilar*. With a cordial yet firm handshake, Fuentes invited me into his house. From the moment you meet Gregorio Fuentes you immediately sense an undeniable aura of inner strength and

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independent spirit. His 99 years of experience are written on his hands and face. With a thin, almost gaunt body, deeply weathered face, and hands with deeply creased scars, he reminded me of Santiago from *The Old Man and the Sea*. Like Santiago, Fuentes' scars are not disfiguring. His scars are scars of honor, emblems of triumph. To paraphrase Hemingway, his eyes are "blue like the sea, and undefeated."

Seated in his rocking chair, wearing a baseball cap that bears the likeness of Hemingway on the front, Gregorio sits framed by the large portrait of Hemingway and himself that hangs on the wall behind him. After customarily clipping away the gold band from his Romeo y Julieta Churchill, he lights it. He still enjoys a daily variety of cigars. Most are gifts brought to him from the famous cigar factories of Havana by visitors and journalists. With cigar in hand, Gregorio leans back and begins to reminisce about his favorite subject: his exploits and adventures with Ernest Hemingway.

Fuentes' first meeting with the future literary giant was an accident and an adventure. The 25-year-old Fuentes, a captain of a fishing vessel that made regular trips between Cuba and the U.S. mainland in the 1920s, was returning from Cuba when he noticed a stranded boat, out of fuel, several miles off the Florida coast. When the occupant of the boat called out for help in Spanish, Fuentes came to the rescue.

"I brought my boat up to them to see if I could help them. As I approached the boat, the man who spoke such beautiful Spanish said that he was American. That was Mr. Hemingway," Fuentes says. "Mr. Hemingway said that he was very hungry because he had been stranded for a long period of time without food. So I shared the onions and wine that we had on board with him. Mr. Hemingway then stated that he was not as sorry for having no fuel as he was for not having food."

Fuentes towed Hemingway and his boat to a lighthouse in the U.S. Dry Tortugas, where Hemingway communicated by phone to officials in Key West, his original destination. The last thing Hemingway said that day to the young Cuban was, "Goodbye, my friend. I'll see you again in Cuba."

That prophecy proved true several years later. At the time, Fuentes was working on a ship owned by the University of Massachusetts. A friend wanted to introduce him to Ernest Hemingway. They met at a cafe and recognized each other immediately. Because of his talent at the helm, Hemingway offered Fuentes a job as captain of his fishing yacht, *Pilar*, named for a Spanish saint, which was being built by Wheeler Shipyard Boat Manufacturers in Brooklyn, New York. Fuentes said yes, and a friendship lasting more than 30 years was forged.

The boat, docked in Cojimar, would be at the ready whenever Hemingway wanted to fish. "He used to come here and drink and then he would walk out and greet all of the fishermen of Cojimar," Fuentes recalls. "They were his friends. Everybody would have a free drink on him. He was like that. Always a great smile, a good hello for everybody, especially the poor ones. He was well protected here. He was the god of this little town."

Hemingway and Fuentes often sailed in search of worthy prey. Once, they encountered a formidable foe on a fishing trip to Cabo Blanco, Peru. Battling for more than three hours, the two men reeled in a 1,000-pound black marlin, a record Fuentes claims remains unbroken to this day. The fish is still on display in Peru. Fuentes and Hemingway had many nautical adventures together. On another occasion, the two men were

docked at Cayo Paraiso, about 50 miles east of Havana, when they noticed an old man and a young boy wrestling with a large swordfish. They offered to help the fishermen but were gruffly turned down. This incident inspired Hemingway to write *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The sea has played an integral part in Fuentes' life. He was born on July 11, 1897, on the Canary Islands. His mother, Sebastiana Betancourt, was a housewife, his father, Pedro, a laborer on a cargo ship. The younger Fuentes' first adventure at sea, at the tender age of six, had tragic consequences. While on a voyage with his father from the Canary Islands to the West Indies to deliver potato seeds, the elder Fuentes was crushed to death by a falling mast. Pedro Fuentes was buried off the coast of Africa in full Spanish pomp and circumstance. Although his mother and 11 siblings still lived on the Canary Islands, Fuentes opted to stay on board to become a seaman, like his father before him. Although his adoptive father, Don Raul Mediavilla, initially scoffed at him, he soon taught the young but serious Fuentes the tricks of the trade. Fuentes joined a cargo sailing company in Cuba and has lived there ever since, marrying Dolores Perez in 1922 (she died in 1990) and raising four daughters.

But he often returns to his native land. For his 98th birthday, Fuentes was invited by the Spanish government to celebrate in Spain. He accepted, and the Spaniards rolled out the red carpet for him.

Now 99, Fuentes reflects on a long and rich life. He has many interests, many of which he shared with Hemingway. But one which Papa Hemingway never shared was Fuentes' love of cigars. Hemingway never smoked them because, as a fervent hunter, he believed that animals could pick up the scent of tobacco, lit or not. Fuentes, however, is an avid cigar smoker who began smoking cigars at a very early age. He started smoking \$2 bundles in Africa and now smokes five to six cigars a day. He is partial to large Cuban cigars such as the Partagas Churchill, the Hoyo de Monterrey Double Corona and the Romeo y Julieta Churchill.

Fuentes saw his friend for the last time in 1961. Hemingway visited him in Cuba before journeying to Spain, where he intended to take a sabbatical from writing. The writer fell ill while in Spain, returned to the United States and checked himself into the Mayo Clinic, where he was diagnosed with leukemia. He committed suicide soon after.

When Hemingway died, it was almost as if a piece of Fuentes died as well. Hemingway's wife, Mary, sent Fuentes a telegram informing him of the tragedy. "I felt that when he died, someone in my family had died. And I still feel the same way today," he recalls. "It was because of the kind of a man that he was, the kind of person he was. I haven't found anyone like my friend since."

Hemingway bequeathed *Pilar* to Fuentes in his will. Fuentes eventually turned the boat over to Fidel Castro's revolutionary government. Today, the boat is dry-docked at the Hemingway Museum in San Francisco de Paula. *Pilar* has been declared a national monument.

"Upon hearing of the death of my friend Ernest Hemingway, I vowed never to fish again, and I haven't," Fuentes says. "Although many people have asked me over the years, I swore that when Mr. Hemingway died I would never fish upon another yacht. I took *Pilar* to my house so I wouldn't have any responsibility with anybody again. I knew that I could never have a closer friend than Mr. Hemingway, so I decided never to sail again."

The old man lives on, without the sea. ❖

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