Hemingway's PILAR

For a film-double, details help to “get it right”

by Hilary Hemingway

This is the story of two boats named PILAR: novelist Ernest Hemingway’s original 38’ Wheeler Playmate of 1934, and a 34’ Playmate of 1933 that will serve as a credible film-double. Researching the original boat, and keeping in mind a Hemingway note about *The Old Man and the Sea*—“It’s a great story if I can get it right”—linked the two boats together in such a way that the story of one cannot be told without the other.

PILAR is the crown jewel among artifacts preserved at the Finca Vigia Hemingway Museum on a hillside in Cuba. When he lived there, Hemingway used its four-story tower to check Gulf Stream conditions; if no whitecaps showed, he and his captain, Gregorio Fuentes, would head out for an afternoon of fishing. Today, PILAR rests under a canopy in a concrete cradle on a former tennis court, where she is viewed by thousands of Hemingway aficionados and sportfishing enthusiasts every year.

The film-double for PILAR was also built by the Wheeler Yacht Company of Brooklyn, New York (see sidebar, page 56). Launched as ELHANOR, she spent most of her life at Sodus Point, New York. After an 11-month, $250,000 makeover at Moores Marine in Beaufort, North Carolina, it’s doubtful that Norman Vanderbilt, who owned her for 50 years, would recognize her. Transformed in November 2012, ELHANOR, now PILAR, will be used this summer during the filming of *Hemingway & Fuentes* in the Dominican Republic.

“PILAR is iconic,” said Andy Garcia, the film’s director. “She is the most recognized sportfishing boat in the world. So we went into this knowing her film double had to be highly detailed and authentic. The camera
STOP! 

... and manage a key West run (toward Cape Hatteras) to a number of old, well-watered, and well-lived-on seaside resorts. The Narragansett Bay area has some of the choicest and most protected sailing waters, but the Western coast is also dotted with plenty of great harbors. 

The weather is often uncertain, but the water is almost always calm. The wind, on the other hand, can be quite unpredictable. So, be prepared for anything, and enjoy the ride!
The Wheeler Yacht Company, which was founded in 1910 and continued in business until 1965, specialized in finely crafted motoryachts. Known for relatively deep-V hulls and high freeboard that made them seaworthy and safe at sea, the Wheeler Playmates sold by the hundreds during the 1930s.

outfitted with four 75-gallon gasoline tanks feeding the centerline 75-hp Chrysler Crown main engine plus an offset 40-hp Lycoming used for trolling. Despite their different fuel capacities, the film version and the original PILAR have roughly the same range: 500 miles at 8 knots. “I ran her off Key Biscayne at Christmas,” García said of the new boat. “We had a decent chop but still made 16 knots easy. Her sweet spot I felt was at 12 to 14 knots cruising.” Wheeler reported that in sea trials she reached 19 knots. “As I understand it, Ernest preferred to run PILAR at 8 to 10 knots. With displacement hulls, once you go over the design speed you drag your wake with you, and it makes for a wet boat.”

Aboard the new PILAR, what catches the eye—and the camera lens—is her woodwork. From bow to stern, she was sanded, stained, and varnished. Her brightwork gleams. She’s been fitted with new canvas matching the original colors. Her black topsides shine. The original PILAR color that was rejected was her green deck paint, which simply didn’t test well on film.

What set the original PILAR apart from any other Wheeler Playmate was her primitive flying bridge. By the

A Long History—and a New Wheeler

by Wes Wheeler

My great-grandfather, Howard E. Wheeler, founded a small boat-repair company in Brooklyn, New York, in 1910. But the Wheeler Yacht Company grew quickly, and soon turned to yacht construction. Only six years after its founding, as the United States joined the Allies during World War I, the yard secured an order to produce 110’ submarine chasers for the U.S. Navy. Pleasure boats, however, remained the core of the business, and with the Army the company returned to building yachts, with a specialty in powerboats.

The company established a reputation for building custom motoryachts of the very highest quality, using only the finest materials of the day: oak, teak, mahogany, cedar, bronze, and brass. Among these yachts was the Wheeler Playmate line, which my grandfather, Wesley L. Wheeler, designed. He gave the Playmate, like many of his hulls, a “semi-V” bottom to provide a clean entry with minimal roll, coupled with ample freeboard for safety in the open sea. Hundreds of boats like these were built in the 1930s for a discriminating clientele that demanded the finest money could buy. It was Wheeler’s reputation for quality and seaworthiness that led Ernest Hemingway to the company. During his 1933 safari to Africa, he took with him a 1933-34 Wheeler catalog, from which he placed his order for his Wheeler 38’ Playmate, built as hull No. 576 and named PILAR.

All five of Howard Wheeler’s sons—including my grandfather—worked for the company. My grandfather was a graduate of the Pratt Institute’s naval architecture program and became the lead designer for the company. My dad, Wesley D. Wheeler, grew up in this environment, worked in the yard, and became a naval architect himself.

When the Second World War came, the company returned to war production on a massive scale, building 230 vessels, including 83’ cutters for the U.S. Coast Guard and 165’ rescue tugs and 136’ YMS minesweepers for the U.S. Army. The cutters became famous as the so-called “matchbox fleet,” which secured its place in history by rescuing hundreds of soldiers during the Normandy invasion. By the end of the war, Wheeler
The originality of details in ETHANOR, including her wheel.
of one another. "We wanted this boat not just to look like but perform like PILAR," Garcia said.

Most sportfishermen today are equipped with fish-finders, but to be faithful to the original the new PILAR will not have one. "We will find our fish the old-fashioned way, just like Papa," Garcia laughed. "I think the hardest part of this whole film will be finding the fish," Watson said. Papa faced the same dilemma during filming of The Old Man and The Sea: When the production company was unable to catch a 1,000-lb marlin off Cuba, Hemingway had them fish off Peru, where landing a 1,200-lb fish provided dramatic footage—though most of it was out of focus due to heavy seas.

To land a big fish, the new PILAR has the perfect fighting chair, just as Hemingway's boat did. He modified the cockpit after World War II, following Cuban sportfisherman and civil engineer Julio Sanchez's innovation of an amidships swivel-mounted chair, based on a barber's chair. An adjustable footrest and an angled back allowed the fisherman to pump the rod effectively when reeling in. Hemingway liked everything about it, but had a problem: PILAR had a 2,500-lb capacity icebox built into the cockpit amidships, with seats to port and starboard. He modified one of the existing seats, with a foot brace devised by Fuentes, mounted it on a taller pedestal amidships, and installed a separate icebox farther forward, to starboard, to replace the abandoned one.

For the film, finding the right fighting chair was a concern. "We looked at all the historical photos of PILAR's fighting chair, and decided we would probably end up custom-building it," Garcia said. But the Moores crew found a pre-WWII fighting chair nearly identical to PILAR's at a New England marine antique store.

Hemingway also added 15' bamboo outriggers to PILAR, with their heels lashed near the foot of the mast. Later, he replaced them with box-frame telescoping outriggers, believed to be an early design by Tommy Giffords, mounted on the side decks on each side of the wheelhouse. The later outriggers were close to 25' long, with a center pole that extended to 45'. Hemingway rigged them to be raised and lowered from the flying bridge. The film PILAR will match the later outriggers in design but will be made of bamboo.

"This boat is more than just a working prop," Watson said. "When you step on board, even if you are not an actor, you feel transported back in time. In films, some actors need to put on a costume to get into character, but when you step aboard PILAR, it really feels like you're in a different time and place. It's as if you've just stepped into a Hemingway novel. You could be a risk-taking, Tommie-gun-toting U-boat hunter, or a barrel-chested fisherman hooked up to the world's biggest marlin. It's a tangible magic aboard. It's where adventure happens."

Hilary Hemingway, Ernest Hemingway's niece, has worked as a writer of books, documentaries, television news, and feature film since 1984. Her background for this article comes from her love of boating, her book Hemingway in Cuba, her PBS documentary Literary Explorer: Hemingway's Cuba, and her latest screenplay Hemingway & Fuentes, co-written with Andy Garcia.

We Wheeler, author of the sidebar on the Wheeler Yacht Company also contributed to this article.
Flamingos are the bird’s life in that
Pillar’s Life at the Fincas

Remember to get the weather in your daybook—weather is very important.
meant using heavier and stronger woods. The Cuban shipwrights spent five years meticulously rebuilding PILAR, re-framing where necessary from the inside in order to preserve her original shape. They worked to preserve as much original material as possible, as is common in classic boat and ship restorations in museums throughout the world.

Wes Wheeler and I had a chance to see PILAR when we traveled to Cuba in March 2012. “I had seen plenty of photographs of PILAR in Cuba,” he wrote, “but it was different when I caught a glimpse of her as I walked down the pathway from the house.

“I was overwhelmed with a sense of pride and family history. Then it hit me: Hilary and I were going to board PILAR, an honor few people are afforded, and for two hours we were allowed to look, study, and measure everything to see how years of restorations might have changed PILAR’s dimensions compared to my grandfather’s original design. But PILAR’s measurements match perfectly, with one exception—the cockpit roof was 2” shorter, 73” instead of 75”. We would later see that in the 1989 restoration, the Cubans had rebuilt the cockpit roof, which explains this minor discrepancy.

“I had read that PILAR was missing her small, square builder’s identification plate with No. 576. In the restoration photos, we saw where it had been. It was removed for safekeeping, just as Moores Marine had done for ELHANOR during her yearlong remodel. The plate may be lost or just misplaced within the Finca. I checked for other signs of Wheeler authenticity by inspecting the windows, doors, galley, and the binnacle’s throttle mechanism and steering gear. They all were authentically Wheeler. I put my hands on the wheel and ran my finger over the engraved letters that read Wheeler Shipyard Company. The reality hit: This was the helm Papa himself had wrestled. I then reached down and opened the engine hatch. The museum’s curator gave me a shocked look, but I couldn’t stop myself. I saw the original Chrysler 75-hp still there, intact. So were the four 75-gallon fuel tanks, the steering gear, and two heavy old batteries. Aft of the Chrysler was a strange wooden box. It was braced with gussets fastened to the frames and stringers, so clearly it held something heavy, but neither Hilary nor I knew what it was. We wouldn’t know until we saw photos of the cockpit with the hatch blown off that this was for the famous 2,500-lb icebox Hemingway had originally ordered.”

As far as we could see, only one thing was missing from the engineroom: the auxiliary motor. We asked Ada Rosa what had happened to PILAR’s second engine. She shook her head and said, “This is how PILAR came to us.” Photos taken when PILAR arrived at the museum.