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When the Have Met the Have-Not

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In the spring of 1933, Ernest Hemingway had escaped the Depression on a borrowed boat to Cuba, where he fished, drank and gathered material for his next novel, "To Have and Have Not."

For three weeks, he crawled through bars and bistros with a young Walker Evans, who would soon become known as one of the greatest photographers of the 20th century.

But for decades, the tale of their friendship and influence on one another's work remained hidden away in boxes and crates in the storage room of a Key West bar. Once they were opened, Benjamin "Dink" Bruce discovered 46 original photographs taken by Evans in Havana in 1933. Bruce just didn't know what they were.

But working with the Key West historical society, Bruce unraveled the mystery of the photographs, a \$25 IOU and two Americans working together in the world of a repressive Cuban dictator, Geraldo Machado.

Their story and the photographs are now on display at Key West's Museum of Art & History at the Custom House.

"It was only a short friendship, but if you look at Walker Evans's photographs and read Ernest Hemingway's writing, it's exactly the same style," said Claudia Pennington, executive director of the Key West Art & Historical Society.

Descriptions of Evans's photos -- including one showing a homeless man sleeping against a wall on a Havana street -- appear in "To Have and Have Not," which opens with this line:

"You know how it is there early in the morning in Havana with the bums still asleep against the walls of the buildings; before even the ice wagons come by with ice for the bars?"

Bruce, the son of Hemingway's right-hand man, Toby Bruce, discovered the pictures in boxes his family recovered from a storage room at Sloppy Joe's, a favorite Hemingway watering hole. Hemingway moved his belongings to the bar when he left Key West in 1939 with his soon-to-be third wife; his second wife had told him to clear out his things from their house.

After Hemingway's suicide in 1961, his fourth wife donated many of his belongings at Sloppy Joe's to the Kennedy Library in Boston and the Key West museum. The remaining items, including the photographs, were left in storage, and the boxes were eventually moved to the Bruce family collection.

Among those items -- which included the heads of animals that Hemingway had hunted, fishing gear and hand-written letters -- Bruce took special note of the striking black-and-white photos of Cuba. They included images of people lining up for bread, bodies with slit throats and a marquee of a movie theater playing "A Farewell to Arms."

He took them to Pennington, offering them for display at the museum.

"I said, 'Well, I'd like to get a little more information about them before we just put them up on the wall and say, 'Nice pictures,' " Pennington recalled.

During his research, Bruce came across a book, "Walker Evans: Cuba," published by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. In it were the same images found in Hemingway's collection. He informed Pennington, and they contacted the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which had the negatives and sent a curator to Key West who confirmed the authenticity of the prints.

The one piece still missing from the puzzle, Bruce said, was proof that the photos were printed and exchanged in Cuba. He returned to his collection of Hemingway artifacts -- a storage room packed floor to ceiling -- and found a letter from Evans to Hemingway.

Written on stationery from a Western Union office in Havana and addressed to the hotel where Hemingway was staying in Cuba, the letter said Evans had "some pictures tonight and will have some more tomorrow. Also I will change my mind and take a loan of ten or fifteen dollars if you still feel like that."

On the back of the envelope, Hemingway had written "loaned \$25."

"That, of course, was enough to convince me that there was a connection there," Bruce said.

According to Pennington, the photos likely came into Hemingway's hands because Evans feared his negatives would be confiscated and destroyed by Machado operatives in Cuba, so he asked his friend to ferry the photos back to the United States aboard a boat, the Anita.

When Evans returned to the United States with his negatives unscathed, Hemingway kept the prints. The two men never saw each other again, although each later referred to the time they were together in Cuba.

Hemingway wrote: "We were both working against Machado at the time."

And Evans, who later became famous for his photographs of the Depression in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," said that Hemingway caused him to look at photography with a new intensity and the eye of a journalist.

The photographs and the story of the two men are on display at the Custom House through Dec. 15, and then will go on a national tour through 2007. The letter and other previously unseen items from Bruce's collection, including Hemingway's bloodstained uniform from World War I, are also on display.

This snapshot of a unique moment in history and the chance meeting of two extraordinary Americans extends its message for visitors today.

"You never know who the people are that you'll meet and how they'll influence your life in the future," Bruce said.

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