

## Our Conch Republic Connection: Brewster and Lynn Chamberlin

*ED. NOTE: Your correspondent is one of many Hemingway scholars who has spent an undue amount of time in Key West in the past few years doing "research" on the island's contribution to American literary history. Hemingway Studies owes an invaluable debt to several locals who've given generously of their time to enable our scholarship: Tom Hambright, who manages the Florida Research Room at the Monroe County Library on Fleming Street; the indefatigable Douglas "Dink" Bruce, son of Hemingway friends Toby and Betty Bruce; and the folks at the Key West Art and Historical Society, among many others. For many of us, the key Key West connection has become Brewster and Lynn Chamberlin, hosts extraordinaire and entertainers of all kinds of obscure questions. Last year Brewster published *The Hemingway Log* (University of Kansas Press), which, after several years of quietly circulating online, has now become the standard resource for questions of chronology. Given the importance of this contribution, we decided it was high time to know a little more about Brewster and Lynn.*



Brewster and Lynn Chamberlin

### How did you end up living in Key West?

The notion of spending another winter in the north became something like an albatross around our necks. We both had worked for our employers for seventeen years, and both wanted a change and I wanted to write full time. I [Brewster] applied for a year's fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin to continue research and writing a multi-volume novel about the city. Yes, I know, Berlin is in the north and notorious for its nasty winters. My competition for the award was Susan Sontag. Fortunately, as a backup plan we thought of Key West, where there is no winter and where we'd been several times on holidays. The island has a history of writers living and working here then and now, not only Hemingway and Tennessee Williams, but also Shel Silverstein, Thomas McGuane, Philip Caputo, David Kaufman, Rosalind Brackenbury, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, John Hersey, Richard Wilbur, James Gleick, Harry Mathews, Alison Lurie, Cynthia Crossen, Philip Burton, Marie Chaix, James Leo Herlihy, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Tom Corcoran; I needn't, I think, go on. Key West remains a community sympathetic to writers and other creative people.

### Were you much of a Hemingway fan before you moved to the island?

I've been reading Hemingway's works since the 1950s. For several years I read *The Sun Also Rises* once a year. And at one point I had all his published works and all the biographies in my library. Many of these disappeared somehow, but enough survived and the interlibrary loan system works very well in Key West.

### What in the world inspired you to take on *The Hemingway Log*?

When we moved to Key West from Washington, D. C., I volunteered at the Key West Art and Historical Museum cataloguing some of the collections, including the Hemingway material there and in the Bruce Family Archives, and drafting the texts for wall panels and data cards (identifying titles, creators, dates, etc.) to be used in exhibitions devoted to various aspects of Hemingway's life and work. In order to keep the facts accurate I wrote up a chronology of his time in Key West as a research tool. That was 2002 and over the years it grew in both directions and ended with the publication of the *Log* in 2015. Well, that's not entirely true, is it? No chronology or biography is ever ended; there are always new facts to be discovered. Indeed, I have an expanding list of these to go into a second edition, if there ever is one.

### What would you say is the biggest mistake you uncovered in your research?

There are a multitude of mistakes in the EH literature, some of which I've corrected in the *Log*. In Key West specifically, perhaps the most egregious are those perpetrated by the Hemingway House and Museum: the Hemingways did not own cats during the time EH lived here (as his son Patrick has publicly stated), EH was not surprised when returning for a trip to Spain to find the swimming pool built, paid for by Pauline's trust fund, so outraged he didn't throw down his "last penny" (now ostensibly residing at the pool's edge), besides he and Pauline had discussed the pool for two years preceding its construction; and does anyone who knows anything about Pauline's tastes in matters of social standing and property decoration believe for a minute that she would have allowed a pissoir from Sloppy Joe's to sit in their yard?

### Would you consider taking on *The Tennessee Williams Log* now? Will *TW* ever be as big a draw in KW as *Hemingway*?

No, I've got too many other writing projects to complete before I shuffle off this mortal coil. Tennessee Williams' persona does not lend itself to expropriation by the PR industry as the myths of EH's as a shooter of animals, catcher of large fishes, and an outsized drinker and carouser. For the PR scribes the fact that he is one of the great twentieth-century American writers is a secondary consideration, if considered at all.

### What is the biggest misconception of tourists visiting Key West about Hemingway?

That when he lived here he looked like he is currently portrayed in the annual Hemingway Days, namely as a white-bearded, garrulous old man. He lived in Key West in his thirties. See also numbers 4 and 5 above.

### What's been the biggest change in Key West since you moved there?

Massive over-development of Old Town to accommodate greedy developers who care nothing about the destruction of the island's characteristics which bring people like us, as well as tourists, here in the first place. There are too many people (including thousands of cruise ship passengers almost every day), too many vehicles including huge semis supplying the service industry, and too few public means of transportation. Something like this is happening in many once quiet, creative places; fortunately there is still much to appreciate in Key West, which is why we live here.

### Brewster, you're featured in a fascinating documentary about the Key West writing community called *Writers on Bicycles*. How did that film come about?

You'll have to ask Carey and Jane Winfrey, who made the film. I'm only happy to be in it. [You can read about the documentary by Googling the 2015 Key West Film Festival. Trust your correspondent here: the movie is well worth looking up!]

### Is it possible for a writer or artist who's not independently wealthy to live in KW and work on his/her craft?

If one wishes to live in Old Town and can overcome the housing challenge, and have other sources of income, yes, but it becoming ever more difficult if one isn't wealthy. In New Town and on Stock Island it is easier to find affordable housing.

### Finally, and most importantly, what is your guys' favorite place to eat in KW?

For the quality of the food, service and ambiance, the terrace of Azur on the corner of Fleming and Grinnell Streets where the truffle fries will make your hair stand up and shout, and the Bistro Solé on White Street where the duck confit will curl your toes and send your taste buds heaven-wards.

*We're making reservations as we speak. Thank you for your time!* ■