

The Rebirth of a Legend

BY STEVE DOUGHERTY, MANAGING EDITOR



PHOTO: KENNETH PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM

IMAGINE the year 1934. With rum flowing, locals tell tales of mysterious shadows massive in size casually cruising the blue water just offshore of Key West. Prohibition was over, and Sloppy Joe's was a popular spot to imbibe and harp on giant fish hooked only to steal hundreds of yards of thread line on initial runs that no existing tackle could tame. But times were changing.

Ernest Hemingway, the iconic writer of American fiction, had a profound effect on the burgeoning sportfishing industry and many of his contributions to the advancement of big game fishing occurred aboard his 38-foot Wheeler, *Pilar*.

In the '30s Hemingway was still a few years off from widespread notoriety, and on a return trip from an African safari he made a stop in New

York to visit with Arnold Gingrich, the founding editor of *Esquire* magazine. Papa's first story for Gingrich, *Marlin off the Morro: A Cuban Letter*, was printed in the magazine's inaugural issue, and shortly thereafter he bargained a \$3,000 advance for future editorials. Hemingway went straight to the Wheeler Shipyard Corporation to put a deposit on a new fishing boat.

Arguably the most identifiable and iconic sportfishing vessel of all time, *Pilar* was Ernest Hemingway's true love of his life. He fished her through three wives, and the Nobel Prize, and inspired many new generations of anglers by popularizing modern sportfishing. Marketed by the Wheeler Shipyard Corporation of Brooklyn, New York, as the 38-foot Playmate line, the twin-cab in design with its six-cylinder, 75-hp



PHOTO: KENNETH PRITCHARD. COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM

Ernest Hemingway in the cabin of his famous fishing vessel, *Pilar*, circa 1930 (above). With its matching hull lines, *Legend* is classically inspired down to the smallest details (below).

WHEELER YACHT COMPANY AND BROOKLIN BOAT YARD RETURN HEMINGWAY'S *PILAR* TO KEY WEST.



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"Sloppy Joe" Russell (center) and Ernest Hemingway (right) pose with a blue marlin—the catch of the day in Havana Harbor.



rounding Bimini before moving to Cuba in 1940. His Finca Vigia residence on the outskirts of Havana now acts as a museum and is the final resting place for *Pilar*, which sits on dry land and is in a constant battle against tropical weather and termites eating away at her once lustrous varnish.

That's where Wes Wheeler, the great-grandson of Wheeler Shipyard Corporation's founder Howard E. Wheeler, and Hillary Hemingway, the writer's niece, spent hours taking measurements of the highly romanticized boat in preparation of building an exact replica—a living legend of *Pilar*.

Marking the rebirth of the brand, the formation of Wheeler Yacht Company started the next chapter in the legacy, more than 80 years since Hemingway took *Pilar* from Miami to Key West, and more than 50 years after the Wheeler Shipyard Corporation closed its doors.

With the deadrise confirmed and bow curve radius approximated, the modern hull would be designed by Bruce Marek of Wilmington, North Carolina, with Bill Prince Yacht Design spearheading the styling and engineering.

Taking design cues from the classic *Pilar* and advancing



Bristling with technology, but on-brand for Hemingway, Legend is an authentic re-creation supervised by the original builder's great-grandson.

the concept while still preserving its legacy was a big task to shoulder. "The Wheeler's were very proud of their quality. They built boats to last. Ernest Hemingway himself survived two hurricanes in his boat," says Wes Wheeler. "The idea was to build an old boat with all the modern technology. On the outside, from the waterline up, it looks exactly the same, it is a dimensionally perfect copy of *Pilar*—including the port side helm and starboard bench where Hemingway used to sleep."

Legend's hull form differs slightly from *Pilar* by the addi-



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tion of chines and the absence of a skeg. "The hull took a year to design. One thing we had to change was to make the bottom a planing hull instead of a displacement hull, which forces you to be at 12 or 13 knots. This boat, with twin Yanmar 370-hp turbo diesels, Seakeeper 3 and Zipwake system weighs 20,600 pounds and can do 30 knots. So, when people recognize it as an old boat, but see it going fast, it makes it very unusual," says Wes Wheeler.

The Rebirth of a Legend

Wes' vision to build a modern wooden boat led him to Steve White, owner of Brooklin Boat Yard in Brooklin, Maine. White is another distinguished son of the wooden boatbuilding tradition. Wheeler met him in the Florida Keys at the Ocean Reef Club's Vintage Weekend.

"I've been working at the yard now full-time since 1978. It is where I grew up," White says. "My father had a different vision of the yard and when I started, we only had 7 people working for us. We've grown to about 65 people now and I'm very proud I was chosen for the *Legend* project."

Capturing the famous silhouette with classic lines from a bygone era, *Legend* is a thoroughly modern and exciting vessel. "We went with a cold-molded hull," says White. "It is Af-

rican mahogany from two trees, multiple layers of 3/4-inch marine plywood, laid double diagonal and with an outer sheathing of fiberglass laminated with a West System epoxy, all vacuum bagged. The rest of the boat as you see it now is more traditionally built, except that everything is glued together with epoxy. When they were built in the day, they were sawn and fastened together with mechanical fasteners only, they were not glued. This provides a great advantage to us for strength, rigidity, and stiffness."

Legend is a well-researched reproduction of the classic Downeast-style yacht with Hemingway's famous, black-painted hull harkening back to the days of prohibition and attempts to sneak up on German U-boats under the cloak of darkness. Comprising an elegant, varnished mahogany pilothouse and cabin sides, the modernized helm features a Garmin MFD, but also delivers a period-correct compass, and a new steering wheel that was cast from an original 1934 Wheeler Playmate.

Inside, however, it is very different. Hemingway would not recognize the interior of this boat, but I think he would thoroughly enjoy it. *Pilar* had forward bunks, an alcohol stove, an icebox in the galley, and a very simple format.

"We worked with Martha Coolidge in designing the interior," says Wes' wife Marianne. "What we needed was storage and the feeling down below of what Hemingway would want today to entertain his friends. The concept of the cushions and colors and things was based on a 1930s men's suit. So, you see the windowpane plaid, and the leather mixed with some softness as well."

It's a masculine and retro look with the interior featuring two armchairs along the starboard side facing an L-shaped settee and pedestal table with the Wheeler marquee branded in mahogany. A TV that looks like framed art, a stainless galley with a Sub-Zero fridge, a walk-in head, and a queen berth rather than bunks give *Legend* modern comforts that counter the utilitarian layout Hemingway was accustomed to.

Slashed in 2020, *Legend* has almost 6,000 miles under her cold-molded hull. After the lengthy design and engineering process, it took

Brooklin Boat Yard about a year and over 17,000 man-hours to build hull No. 1.

"We've taken her from Maine to Key West," says Wheeler. "She lives in Hilton Head, South Carolina, and at some point we are going to Bimini, where Hemingway grew a great passion for fishing and rum, and then Havana when the time is right. We've met the commodore at the Hemingway Marina, and he's invited us back. It would be the first time in 80 years or more that a boat that looked like *Pilar* had entered Havana Harbor." FS



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KEY WEST

Find the spirit of Hemingway at the Papa's Pilar rum distillery on the corner of Greene and Simonton streets.



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"Pilar was Ernest Hemingway's true love of his life. He fished her through three wives, the Nobel Prize, and inspired many new generations of anglers by popularizing modern sportfishing." p30



Main photo by Steve Dougherty; insert courtesy John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

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COVER: This Osceola gobbler was taken by a patient young hunter in Southwest Florida. Photo by Ian Nance

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Sneak season is open on both coasts in March. Find out how to catch them!