

WHAT HAVE CHARLIE NELLIGAN AND BARACK OBAMA GOT IN COMMON?

A letter from America - gets a reply 29 years on!

DÓNAL NOLAN

A LETTER that lay hidden for almost 30 years brought Kerry footballing great Charlie Nelligan together with the American woman who traced President Obama's family history - a descendant of Duagh and likely a cousin of the famous baker.

In a story that stunned genealogists in the US this week, historian Megan Smolenyak wrote of how she received a response in recent weeks to a letter she sent way back in 1984!

The article appeared on the hugely-popular US website *The Huffington Post* and captured the imagination of tens of thousands of genealogy buffs across the world. It's being seen as the perfect illustration of the whole ethos behind *The Gathering*.

In it, Megan explained how she wrote to Castleisland baker Daniel Nelligan as a young woman attempting to find out more about her great-great-grandmother Ellen Nelligan from Kerry. However, the letter lay hidden in a drawer for decades and was only discovered

by Daniel's son Charlie in recent weeks.

Charlie - who is big into genealogy himself and one of the organisers of the East Kerry Roots Festival - finally responded to Megan and set out how he discovered her great-great-grandmother Ellen Nelligan's origins in Duagh!

"It's fairly amazing," Charlie said. "She's a very famous genealogist in the US, the woman who discovered Barack Obama's Irish roots and she works on their TV version of *Who Do You Think You Are?*"

"Megan wrote to my father Daniel in 1984 looking to find out more about her great-great-grandmother Ellen, but her letter lay hidden in a tin box for years. My brother TJ gave me the box recently as he thought there might be something of interest in it for the East Kerry Roots Festival!"

Happily for the Roots festival - which takes place in July - it has connected them with one of America's leading genealogists, a woman who was officially recognised by President Obama for her work on his family tree.

It also turned out that Megan

had visited the Castleisland bakery of her ancestral name during a visit ten years ago and saved some of their colourful sliced pan wrapping!

Best of all, Charlie was finally able to provide Megan with some information about her antecedent who, it transpires, was born in Duagh on June 1, 1832, to Maurice Nelligan and Catherine Curtin.

The pair might now be related. "I suppose I'd be like my father, as he always entertained 'cousins' from the States who would make contact with him coming through Castleisland over the years. I'd be the same in entertaining our visitors, and I've spent a lot of time in the graveyard with them over the years!"

"It's an amazing way to establish connections as my daughter stayed in Los Angeles last year with a family of cousins we first met when they came here looking up their roots."

Charlie has now invited Megan to stay in his home in what the US genealogist described as the model of Irish hospitality in a piece that will be read by so many in this year of *The Gathering*.



■ Charlie Nelligan with 29-year-old letter sent to Charlie's late father in 1984 by Megan Smolenyak from the United States enquiring about family links. Ms. Smolenyak - who is a famous genealogist in the US, having traced Barack Obama's family tree - received a reply from Charlie last month.

LEFT: Megan Smolenyak with President Barack Obama at College Green in Dublin, Ireland, May 23, 2011, during his visit to Ireland. Official White House photo by Pete Souza